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WONDERING ABOUT VELOUR AND VELVET?

Rather frequently, we are asked the difference between velvet and velour. On that note, I thought I'd offer an explanation, along with information on how theatrical velour is made.

Velour vs Velvet

Velvet usually refers to an apparel (lighter) weight fabric. It is a woven napped (cut pile) fabric that historically was made from silk, but today can be made from a variety of fibers, usually cotton or synthetic fibers (such as polyester or nylon). Some velvets are used for theatrical drapery, most notably Crushed Velvet. Apparel velvet is typically not flame retardant, but velvets intended for theatrical use often are treated for flame retardancy.

Theatrical velour (sometimes referred to as theatrical velvet), also a napped (cut pile) woven fabric, has a similar feel and appearance to velvet, but it is typically of a heavier weight, usually ranging from 16oz up to 32oz per linear yard. Cotton velour has been the standard in theatrical drapery for many years, but recently synthetic velours are being used more frequently, due to the inherent flame retardancy and greater durability of the synthetic fabric.

Knit velour, typically made from cotton, is often used in apparel (remember that velour lounging suit you had in the '70s). At first glance, knit velour may appear similiar to velvet or theatrical velour, as it has a soft nap feel. However, it is actually quite different. As a knit fabric (rather than a woven fabric), it is soft but has a great deal of stretch, making it comfortable to wear but not generally appropriate for use in theatrical drapery.

How Theatrical Velour is Made

Cotton theatrical velour is made of yarns that are woven together. One set of yarns, running lengthwise, is called the warp, while the other set, running crosswise (perpendicular to the warp), is called the weft. In the weaving process, the warp yarns are lifted (called "shedding"), and then the weft yarn is inserted (or "picked"). So, "picks per inch" refers to how many times the weft yarn has been inserted into the warp.

The nap of cotton velour is achieved through a specific method of weaving called "pile weaving." In pile weaving, the warp ends are looped over metal rods or wires during the weaving process. These yarns are called "pile ends," so "pile ends per inch" describes how many times the warp ends were looped in a linear inch of the fabric.

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When the metal rods or wires are removed, the surface of the fabric is a series of yarn loops. If left uncut, the finished fabric would be described as having a "loop pile" (picture the loops on the pile of a Berber carpet), but when these pile ends are cut, the final fabric has a "cut pile" (imagine a regular plush carpet). These cut pile ends are called "pile tufts" – essentially, the "nap" in velour or velvet (imagine a regular plush carpet). So, "pile tufts per square inch" refers to how many cut tufts of yarn make up the nap of a single square inch of the fabric.

This is a very basic explanation (for more details, here is a still basic but more complete source), but I hope it helps you understand velour and velvet a little bit more, especially when you read the construction specifications on the back of a sample card!

The Advent of Synthetic Velour

Over the last ten years or so, synthetic theatrical velour has become more and more popular. Depending on the specific synthetic velour, it may have a definite napped pile, similar to cotton theatrical velour, or it may have a more brushed texture. Synthetic velours tend to be more durable than cotton velours, as the synthetic fibers typically do not break down over time in the way that natural fibers may. This means that synthetic velour tends to be more durable and long-lasting, but also may be more costly.

Alternatives to Theatrical Velour

A number of fabrics are available that are similar in appearance to theatrical velour, but may be more appropriate and/or cost-effective for certain drapery applications than traditional theatrical velours. Typically, these alternatives are not napped, but have a brushed or mottled surface, and may be lighter in weight. Examples of velour alternatives include Super Vel and Commando Cloth.