

FIRST IMPRESSIONS...DESIGNING AN EYE CATCHING SHOW QUILT

Why do you and I make quilts? We make quilts for happy reasons: to celebrate a wedding or welcome a new baby into the world. We make quilts for our community: to comfort those who are ill, to raise money for worthy causes or to thank those who serve our nation. We make quilts to express ourselves: some quilters honor tradition while others break new ground. It's a fact of life, however, that all quilts are **not** created equal.

When we enter our quilts in a show, our desire is to share our handiwork with others. When we choose to have our quilts judged, we do so to compete for ribbons and to receive feedback we can use in the future to make our quilts better. This October, when you submit your entry into the 2011 show, you can choose whether or not your quilt(s) will be judged.

At the annual Tucson Quilt Fiesta, 'judged' quilts are reviewed by a pair of trained judges who have less than 4 minutes to critique each entry. They award ribbons based on two major factors: the creative aspects of the quilt's design & appearance and also the technical aspects of workmanship that have gone into the construction of the quilt. Next month's column will address the many aspects of workmanship which are evaluated by the judges. For now, let's take a look at the other, more subjective criteria which often determine where a quilt places in its category.

We ask the NQA (National Quilt Association) certified professionals who judge our show to rate each quilt on its visual impact, quilting pattern and general appearance. The judges first observe each competition quilt from a distance (as a whole) to evaluate its composition and to assess the skill level required to execute it (degree of difficulty). The judges consider the individual design elements and determine if they have been successfully used to create an interesting, balanced and well-proportioned design.

Quilts with strong VISUAL IMPACT are the ones which stop us in our tracks...the ones with the WOW factor. You may not have a degree in art or be knowledgeable about all the textbook aspects of good design (things like line, shape, color, value, texture, repetition and balance) but you know what you like. You may not always agree entirely with the judges' choices but I'll bet you instinctively recognize and remember the quilts that are well designed.

If you want to create more visual impact in your quilts, try becoming more analytical about the quilt that grabs you from across the room. Take a moment to study the quilt and ask yourself "What is it about this quilt that is working so well?" Often the quilter has used value to create drama. What is value? It's the lightness or darkness of the fabrics selected. When a quilt contains very light fabrics and very dark fabrics, the design becomes more dynamic. That's why many quilt teachers remind us "Color gets all the credit but value does all the work".

Value is so important to the success of a show quilt that a special ribbon has been added this year. Judges will award a ribbon for BEST USE OF COLOR as they have in years past but in 2011 there will also be a special ribbon awarded for BEST USE OF VALUE.

Working on a design wall can be very helpful. It enables us to better evaluate the proportion and balance of our quilt design. Here's an example: prominent judge Joen Wolfrom suggests that "The primary purpose of a border is similar to that of a picture frame: it stops the eye and moves the viewer's focus back to the quilt's design. The border should never be allowed to upstage the design. A border that becomes so powerful that it competes with the quilt's design is a major design flaw that is totally avoidable."

Another aspect of design which is reviewed by the judges is QUILTING PATTERN. According to the NQA, "The quilting design is a very important component of the overall design of a quilt. It should complement and continue to unify the fabric design, color, surface textures and embellishments...If there are a variety of designs do they work together to add interest and enhance the total design? Do the quilting designs create movement and texture? Are the designs simple or are they complex? Is the size of the design appropriate for the size of the quilt and the pieced or applique designs?"

If you are working with a professional quilter, you can rely on their expertise but be sure you discuss the approach that he or she will take when choosing the quilting designs for your quilt top. To recognize the important contribution made by professional quilters, the Guild will do something different at the 2011 Quilt Fiesta: the first place quilt in each of the COLLABORATIVE categories (A1 – A6) will be awarded TWO blue ribbons...one for the maker of the quilt top and another for the professional quilter.

Our judges are also expected to evaluate each quilt for GENERAL APPEARANCE. This includes the condition of the quilt: it should be neat and clean without visible markings, lint, soil, pet hair, odor or stains. It should hang straight...no obvious distortion or sewing problems should be immediately apparent.

As I mentioned earlier, the judges have very little time to study and appreciate all the hard work we've invested in our quilt's design and construction. In the course of two days, the judges will provide written feedback on as many as 230 quilts. Approximately 80 of those quilts will receive ribbons. Are all quilts wonderful? In my book, the answer is yes, whether they win prizes or not. Our quilts, both traditional and original, express our feelings. Even better, the complexity of our craft allows us unlimited potential to challenge ourselves and to grow. We learn valuable lessons from each project that we complete...we even learn important lessons from the quilts we do **not** complete.

Next month watch for THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS which should further demystify the judging process by explaining the various aspects of workmanship which can improve our quilts and impress the judges.

Submitted by Nancy Arseneault July 2010