

## #1 • First Impressions: Designing an Eye-catching Show Quilt

by Nancy Arseneault

*Here is the first of seven excellent articles, written by Nancy Arseneault for our 2018 Quilt Fiesta, explaining the process of entry and judging for quilts in the Quilt Fiesta. We hope all Guild members will find the information as helpful now as when they were first published.*



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 a worthy cause 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 to make our quilts better.

When we submit our entries into the biennial Quilt Fiesta, we can choose whether or not our quilts will be judged. Judged quilts are reviewed prior to the show by a trained individual who has only 3-4 minutes to critique each entry. Ribbons are awarded based on two major factors: the creative aspects of the quilt's design and appearance and also the technical aspects of workmanship that have gone into the quilt's construction. In the upcoming months, we'll address the many aspects of workmanship that are evaluated by judges. For now, let's take a look at the other, more subjective criteria that often determine where a quilt places in its category.

The professionals who judge our show use a form provided by the Guild to score each quilt on its visual impact, quilting pattern and general appearance (condition). The judge will first observe each entry from a distance (as a whole) to evaluate its composition and to assess the skill level required to execute it (degree of difficulty). The judge considers individual design elements to determine if they have been used successfully to create an interesting, balanced and well-executed design.

Quilts with strong visual impact are the ones that 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 judge's 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 own 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".

Working on a design wall can be very helpful to a quilter. From a distance and on a vertical plane, we can better evaluate the proportion and balance of our quilt design. Here's an example: prominent author 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". That upstaging border might have been more easily detected if the quilter had taken the opportunity to study the quilt-in-progress on a design wall before assembly. Some quilters also rely on photos of their work in progress to provide a different perspective on the overall design.

Quilts are frequently defined as three layers that are stitched together. The quilting stitches constitute a major component in quilt construction. One aspect of design that is reviewed by judges is quilting pattern. A national quilting organization has suggested: "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 well 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 appliqué designs?" Consider these factors when you quilt your own entry. If you work with a professional quilter, be sure to discuss the approach he or she will take when selecting the quilting designs for your quilt top.

Judges also 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 distortions or sewing problems should be immediately apparent. When you choose to enter your work in a show, make sure that it will show at its best. Steps you can take will be addressed in a future installment about readying your quilt for the show.

Are all quilts wonderful? In my opinion, 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. Having a judge's comments can provide another perspective on what we can do to make future quilts better.

Pictured: "Time to Do It" by Nancy Arseneault 2010.

*"Bought the pattern ten years before I had the courage to piece it. Doubled the border and left the corners round."*