

# The Quilt Journal

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## Quilt Judges and Juries: Hard Questions

by Carol Jessen

*Judging (juring) art of any kind is an art; guidelines are vague and subject to endless exceptions. Judging quilt quality is particularly complicated as there are a number of separate spheres of work, each with its own criteria. Carol Jessen explores the state of the judging art for contemporary quilts and offers some specific suggestions for improving the discipline.*

—Editors' Note

Most quilting judges and jurors agree that judging others' artwork is a task best approached with humility: it calls into question one's opinions and tastes and the right to be a taste maker for quiltmaking as a whole. Ironically, however, one of the most frequent complaints about judging is that those who do it are too arrogant, convinced of the superiority of their particular approach to quiltmaking. There is indeed a thin line between humility and arrogance that a judge or juror must tread. But there are other more complex issues affecting his or her decisions. Is it fair, for instance, to pit quilts with differing purposes against each other in competition? At what point does an amateur cross-over to professional ranks? Which should be given more weight: aesthetics or craftsmanship?

Before judging can begin, however, there are always selection issues which need to be addressed. First is the purpose of the exhibition: to survey the breadth of quiltmaking or to focus on a specific theme? Second is professional status: will entrants be those who quilt as a vocation or avocation? Third is the exhibition's goal to entertain or educate?

These factors are often resolved by the exhibition's venue and its size limitations. There are more subjective issues, however, that perplex on a philosophical level. As more

exhibitions are juried, the issue of judging and jurying standards becomes acute. Some sorting out is essential if quilt exhibitions are to avoid a reputation for quixotic arbitrariness in their selection.

Much of the controversy in juried and judged exhibitions derives from the differences between traditional quilts and what are now called "art quilts." In 1993 Michael James estimated that traditional patterns were the foundation for ninety percent of contemporary quiltmaking; these quilts are made by avocationists who find pleasure in the craft. Art quilts, in his opinion, are made by people who consider themselves professional artists, working in an aesthetic medium. This bifurcation is quite divisive, though there is an enormous middle

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ground of quilters committed to improvement and innovation in their quilting. As Jonathan Holstein remarks, there are "many quilts informed by the past but very much updated: savvy interpretations of the inheritance."

The effort to bring quilting into the category of the Fine Arts has been resisted within and without the quilt world. Within, many practitioners do not wish to see quilting's special role as a democratic, domestic activity changed to compete in what is perceived as an elitist, public arena. Without, other art professionals do not consider the aesthetic foundations of quilting rigorous enough for serious consideration. They say quilting has no role in academic art history, that it is a footnote only. But what is Art History if not the study of aesthetic practices over time, and how they have been rewritten, reformulated, and challenged? Have quilting's challenges to the establishment justified its inclusion in the pantheon of Art History? How do studio art quilts gain acceptance as Fine Art? And what are the implications of this for judging and jurying practices in contemporary quilt exhibitions?

The easiest, and therefore most common, way to judge quilts is by those technical features apparent in the finished product: stitch length and regularity, straightness of borders and edges, absence of puckers, flat seams, sharp corners, etc. Judging by such artistic factors as design, color usage, subject matter, etc., is problematic because there are no objective absolutes. Additionally, there is the influence of prevailing taste and the judgments of individual judges and jurors—subjective at best, arbitrary at worst. Bringing quilting into the Fine Arts might logically be done by bringing the Fine Arts into quilt judging. This would mean recruiting as judges art historians, curators, authors, editors, news media critics, museum staff, college art professors, lecturers, art council staff, grant program professionals, art school faculty, and others who are typically left out of contemporary quilt judging in favor of popular quilters, quilt teachers, and writers of colorful instructional books. As was remarked by Patricia Malarcher, there is a sort of incest in quilt exhibitions: they are managed by, produced for, and selected from the quilters themselves, with little cross-fertilization from other arts and crafts or occupations. This results in a self-reinforcing, insular image of contemporary quilting. Cross-fertilization with other disciplines, however, exposes quilting to new influences and directions which are perhaps uncomfortable for traditionalists. There is a certain amount of dogma in any discipline, but quilting tends to have more than its share because of rigid judging standards that rely too heavily on technical factors and too little on the artistic. According to Susan Louise Moyer, "setting guidelines for technical perfection can be very tricky. It has been my experience that the creative person, once technically empowered, will break

the rules to create their own unique style and innovative techniques." Following strict rules produces a static adherence to conventional stylization: works tend to be derivative of one another. An art medium evolves with the diversity of the artists using it. Evolution comes from change and challenge. And yet a total disregard of rules, or an ignorance of them, leads to mere chaos. What is needed is a balance between a regard for convention and a desire for innovation.

The quest for balance has been a dialectic in the arts and crafts movement for decades. The debate is usually couched in terms of virtuosity versus expressiveness. As Bruce Metcalf writes, "What is the value of mastery of a craft? In the Fine Arts world, virtuosity has been regarded with intense suspicion ever since Manet intentionally employed rough painting to criticize the mindless polish of academic styles. Today, critics continue to...applaud sloppiness for its 'authenticity' [and] attack fine craftsmanship as an end in itself that distracts the artist from becoming more creative and original..." But "... in the Crafts world, fine workmanship is regarded either as a known quantity to be manipulated like a tool or as a worthy and self-rewarding goal... that fine craft has intrinsic value."<sup>3</sup> Metcalf remarks that an Art-Craft approach would give merit for skill in relation to other aspects such as the artistic creativity or expression which informs the making of the object.

Not every quilt is either a reflection of traditional values or a trendsetting novelty. In fact, the best quilts preserve past traditions while creating new and personalized idioms representing their makers. As Jonathan Holstein queries, where are the continuities and discontinuities? "What links with the past are contemporary quilters maintaining? Where are complete breaks into a new aesthetic occurring? Are old and new quilts judged successfully by the same aesthetic criteria? And the perpetual question, what about taste and judgment?" These questions seriously affect the approach to judging and jurying, and are encountered again and again by participants in workshops on the subject. Achieving finite answers may not be as important as the questioning. One problem is that limited answers — articulating defined parameters for judging and jurying — are reductive just when expansiveness is called for. Codification is always reductive, and creating a "level playing field" is a sure road to mediocrity. Neither does codification provide a context for the item being judged. It is easy to count stitches, measure corners, add scores, and find arbitrary cut-off points for inclusion or exclusion, but it is very difficult to discuss whether a particular quilt has a *joie de vivre*, or soul, or personal idiom, or fantasy, or communication with its audience - the things that make viewing quilts so pleasurable. Codification is too simplistic, and ironically, most codifying systems are fully as subjective as the judg-

ing techniques they are formed to replace. To derive a score for color usage based on a scale of one to ten is just as subjective as to make a judgment of "good" or "bad." Codification also demands an adherence to rules and standards, though it is widely acknowledged that the fresh and spontaneous creation of art comes through breaking rules, and combining elements in new ways.

Quilt judge and juror training and certification programs usually become, by default, training in technical factors accomplished in short-term, two-day or three-day workshops. Of all the facets of a quilt, however, craftsmanship is the most superficial. As David Hornung says, a quilt is a multi-leveled artifact that is a combination of its complex visual form, the materials used, and its cultural legacy. For judges and jurors to consider all of those factors, they must perceive an education in quilts as an ongoing revelatory process that cannot be distilled into a simple text. Being a good judge or juror of quilts requires a lifetime commitment to considering art in all its forms.

It is not my purpose here to trash all judge and juror certification and training programs that attempt to codify and objectify judging and jurying. But I believe there is an important need to deal more completely with the subjective side of judging and jurying, perhaps by expanding our ideas of competency and relevancy. What I feel we need is an aesthetic context for contemporary quiltmaking, one that must develop from Art History, Art Theory, a study of traditional values and individual artists' oeuvres, comparative analysis between quiltmaking and mainstream arts and fine crafts, academically-based and community-based arts programs, and curatorships and stewardships of all types. Broadening knowledge and experience is as important as codifying it. How will a juror, except through a broad base of larger art issues and history, know the difference between dilettantism and ground-breaking aesthetic advances, self-gratification and the search for intrinsic meaning, or flamboyance and true self-expression? Shelly Zegart is an avid proponent of an expansionist idea of judging and jurying because she has the foresight to understand that it helps to open doors, rather than keeping them shut.

The National Quilting Association maintains a judge's certification program for its members, a three day workshop (in conjunction with the association's annual quilt exhibition and conference) that is used to supplement on ongoing, in-depth judge's candidacy program. Recognizing that a three-day workshop is not an adequate foundation for certification, the NQA states that completion of a session does not automatically lead to certification.<sup>6</sup> Rather, certification depends upon completion within (renewable) three-year time periods of a comprehensive set of 32 "what-if" situational questions to which there are no definitively right or wrong answers. Each question presents a judging

scenario and asks the candidate to defend his or her answer, working from a list of bibliographical resources, and explaining his or her interpretations of current quiltmaking standards. During this process, the candidate is encouraged to develop a resume of experiences. The only shortcoming of such a program is that the panels that rate the candidate's responses to the questions are themselves a dynasty of previous candidates, leading to the same inbred quality that plagues quiltmaking in general. However, this is a defensible program which addresses the subjective nature of the judging process and tries to produce judges who approach judging scenarios neither too arbitrarily nor too rigidly.

Given the creation of an ample supply of highly motivated and competently trained professionals, what would be the ideal jury? The first quality that comes to my mind is "diverse personnel" and a panel would seem at first the best way to achieve that. As is true for most things, however, the obvious answer is often too facile. If the purpose of the quilt exhibition is to be an art show with a distinct frame of reference and internal consistency, a single juror may be appropriate. As Michael James, sole juror for the 1994 Visions exhibition, declared, such a role allowed him to present a show undiluted by compromise.<sup>7</sup> Such an arrangement depends, of course, on total trust in that single judgment. The strength of such a show is clarity of vision, its major potential flaw is unidimensionality, and its biggest risk is alienating viewers not in tune with a single viewpoint. A show with only two jurors may be polarized and achieve an off-putting dissonance, whereas a jury show with four or more members may become so bogged in compromise that it loses all identity and achieves only mediocrity. So, by default, the three-person panel is by far the most prevalent. Flexible enough to accommodate a variety of tastes and small enough to use such dialogue in the selection process, the three-person panel is most useful when composed of individuals with complementary skills and preferences. As the jurors for Quilt National '91 remarked in their jurors' statement, "our differences strengthened our collective judgment."<sup>8</sup> For a survey-type exhibition which attempts to show the "state of the art," this jury composition is most advantageous. The strength of the biennial Quilt National exhibitions at the Dairy Barn Arts Center in Athens, Ohio, has been their incorporation of non-quiltmaker art professionals on the jury panels. People such as Ann Batchelder (editor of *Fiberarts Magazine*), Rebecca Stevens (Consultant for Contemporary Textiles at The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.), Michael Monroe (Curator of the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution), and Gerhardt Knodel (Director of the Fiber Department at the Cranbrook Academy of the Arts) have lent their considerable wealth of knowledge during the past decade to help create a more expansive definition of the "art quilt."

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Local quilt groups that wish to reach beyond the similarity of the typical guild show can do so. Although they will not have the financial or personnel resources Quilt National enjoys in jurying its exhibitions, each community has sources which can be tapped. Local museums, community arts programs, galleries, and schools have knowledgeable art professionals whose help can be sought in jurying. Achieving a balance among credentialed judges, popular quilters/teachers and mainstream art professionals on quilt juries would give them a broader creative perspective than homogeneous panels from an inbred quilting fraternity. The exhibitions which would result, achieved with a wider participation and aesthetic view, would ultimately foster more community understanding and appreciation of quilting.

**CarolAnnJessen**

April 28, 1950-September 17, 1995

*It is our sad duty to record that Carol Jessen, who wrote "Quilt Judges and Juries: Hard Questions" for this issue of The Quilt Journal, has died after an illness courageously battled. Ms. Jessen's contributions to the quilt world were as artist (she had a textile arts studio), writer, and curator. Carol considered herself a critic, in the sense of thoughtful commentator, of the contemporary quilt movement. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford University with a B.A. in Psychology and did graduate work in anthropology at the University of New Mexico. She had written about contemporary quilts and quilting since injuries interrupted her own quilting in 1991. During her years as an active quilter she refined a technique called "hard-edge appliqué."*

*Her writing covered all aspects of the contemporary quilt movement, and has included exhibition and book reviews, articles on textile and fiber arts techniques, individual contemporary quilters, the contemporary quilt movement and quilt aesthetics. Among her many articles, reviews, and reporting, noted here to demonstrate her the range of interests, were "Contemporary Quilts: Moving Beyond the Art vs. Craft Debate" (Surface Design Journal, Fall 1991), for which she received the Betty Park Critical Writing Award for 1991; "Quilts as Women's Art: A Quilt Poetics" (Review of a book by Radka Donnell in Fiberarts Magazine, Mar/Apr, 1994); "New Directions: Quilts for the 21st Century" (a review of an exhibition at the Bedford Gallery for Art/Quilt Magazine's premier issue, Autumn, 1994; and "From Powder to Picture," an article about the techniques for using laser toner images on fabric in Surface Design Journal, Spring, 1995.*

*Two other articles, "Searching for an Authentic Voice: Two Case Studies," a profile of the work of Virginia Harris and Kitty Pippen, and "Julie Berner: The Visible and the Invisible," will appear in All American Crafts this fall. I have mentioned these*

*two because, sadly, they will be, with the article in this Journal, her last writing for the field.*

*Carol never gave up. She became a writer about quilts when injury prevented her from making them. Now, seeing the end of her struggle approaching, she was determined to finish the work she thought important, and she did. We are grateful that she gave us the honor of publishing her intelligent consideration of a difficult subject. May this good and thoughtful person rest in peace.*

—The Editors

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup>Jonathan Holstein (Juror's Statement), *VISIONS: Quilts of a New Decade*, ed. by Deborah Bird Timby for Quilt San Diego (Lafayette, CA: C&T Publishing, 1990), p. 8.
- <sup>2</sup>Susan Louise Moyer, "Technical Perfection," *Surface Design Journal*, Spring 1993, p. 6.
- <sup>3</sup>Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," *American Craft*, Feb/Mar 1993, p. 46.
- <sup>4</sup>Jonathan Holstein (Juror's Statement), *VISIONS: Quilts of a New Decade*, ed. by Deborah Bird Timby for Quilt San Diego (Lafayette, CA: C&T Publishing, 1990), p. 8.
- <sup>5</sup>David Hornung (Juror's Statement), *QUILTS: The State of an Art* (Exton, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1985), p. 6.
- <sup>6</sup>Certified Quilt Judges Program, National Quilting Association, Inc., P.O. Box 393, Ellicott City, MD 21041-0393.
- <sup>7</sup>Michael James (Juror's Statement), *VISIONS: Quilts: Layers of Excellence*, ed. by Stevii Thompson Graves for Quilt San Diego (Lafayette, CA: C & T Publishing, 1994), p. 11.
- <sup>8</sup>Tafi Brown, Esther Parkhurst, and Rebecca Stevens (Joint Jurors' Statement), *The New Quilt 1: Dairy Barn Quilt National* (Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press, 1991), p. 81.