

# What a Professional Certified Judge Looks For

Certified Judges are often asked what makes an award-winning quilt.

Typically, quilts are judged 50% on design and 50% on workmanship. For art quilts, emphasis is placed on the design and look more for a 60% design and 40% workmanship critique.

Below is a general idea of what is looked for based upon the most common issues usually found. It is certainly not all inclusive but should provide a good check list prior to entering the show.

There is always a rule of thumb for entering a judged competition - "**If you can see it, the judge can see it,**" so take care of it before you enter.

**Design:** Look for originality, something no one else has seen before. It may be an interpretation of something seen before, but it reflects the designer's vision, personality, creativity, and/or innovation. It may be a time-honored block design, but it is presented in a new way by its setting, block alteration, or fabric choices. Quilt kits and blocks of the month do not reflect the entrants' own decisions and, therefore, are judged on their merit. Though the design choices were made by another is also taken into consideration.

**Workmanship:** Judges usually approach judging workmanship as a quilter would design and construct a quilt. That would reflect the following:

## **Design:**

- Fabric choices should have sufficient color and value contrast to fully visualize the design. Put your quilt top up on a design wall, step back and make sure you can see every design element of the quilt, nothing should fade away. If it does, consider replacing the area with a higher contrast fabric.
- Quilting threads should match or blend and complement the top. For example, avoid white quilting thread on a beautiful fall theme, jewel toned quilt.
- All over designs should have a place for the eye to reset, meaning if all the blocks are identical, judges would welcome one block that contains an accent color so the eye can rest.
- Does the design grab your attention, invite you in and encourage further exploration? Judges are always looking for those quilts that encourage a second look and consideration for ribbons.

## **General Appearance:**

- Corners should be square, edges should be straight, Lay your quilt out on a table or on the floor. Stand at one end and look down the edge, is it straight and free of distortion? If the answer is no, repair it before the show, if possible.
- The quilt should lie flat and hang straight.
- The quilt should be free of odors, pet hair, bleeding, holes, or other damage.
- All marking lines should be removed.
- The entry should meet the show's defined rules and category requirements.
- Is it in "show ready" condition?

## **Piecing:**

- Pieced block elements should be accurately cut and pressed to minimize distortion.
- Piecing thread should be invisible in the seam lines, seams should be secure and seam lines should be straight, horizontally, vertically, and diagonally.
- Curved piecing should be free of distortion and points should be sharp, free of bulk and extend to the seam line, if so intended.
- Sashing should be consistent in width and perfectly align to cornerstones.
- Quilt top should be free of shadowing where dark fabrics are visible under lighter fabrics.
- Pieced block intersections should align and be free of bulk.
- Loose threads should be clipped.
- Border designs should turn the corners well and be in proportion and scale to the overall quilt. Is the absence of a border and effective design choice?
- Border miters should be 45 degrees.

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## Applique:

- Curved edges should be smooth, points should be sharp and free of bulk and circles perfectly round.
- Satin stitches should reflect smooth and consistent coverage that aligns to applique edge.
- Blanket stitches should be consistent in size, maintain a consistent angle, be evenly spaced, align to applique edge and turn corners perpendicularly.
- Top stitches should be a consistent distance from edge.
- Quilting on applique for emphasis and to add a sense of realism is always appreciated.
- Applique should be in proportion and scale to the blocks, borders, or overall quilt.
- Applique elements should be secure and free of any evidence of glue, fusible web product, or paper.
- Narrow strips should be consistent in width.
- All applique elements should be free of fraying.

## Surface Design:

- Surface design elements should be well integrated into the design and not appear as an afterthought.
- Beads and embellishments should be in proportion and scale to their intended areas.
- All beads and embellishments should be securely attached.
- Surface design techniques such as painting and inking should be contained in their intended areas, and be free of flaking, cracking, or bleeding.

## Quilting:

- Quilting designs should complement the mood, style, or theme of the quilt.
- Curved lines should be smooth, points sharp and lines straight.
- Quilting designs should fill their intended spaces well (meaning a 1" motif in a 3" border or sashing will receive this comment).
- Background quilting should not encroach onto applique designs.
- Outline quilting should consistently follow the applique edge and echo quilting should be consistently spaced.
- Quilting motifs intended to be identical should be consistent in their execution.
- Parallel and grid lines should be straight, consistently spaced and intersect precisely at corners.
- Change in thread colors shows good attention to detail.
- Stitch in the ditch should be in the ditch.
- There should be even and consistent density of quilting across the quilt surface. The need for additional quilting will be noted.
- Meandering or stippling should be consistent in density across quilt surface.
- Feathers should align to the feather spine and be free of excessive build-up.
- Back-tracking should be precise.
- Pantograph designs should smoothly transition onto and off the quilt edge and be free of any gaps.
- Pantograph designs should be evenly spaced and properly aligned if interlocking designs.
- Quilting starts and stops within pantograph designs should be minimized and not distracting.
- Starts and stops should be secure and knots buried.
- Quilt should be free of any distortion from quilting.
- Back should be free of pleats or puckers.
- Stitch in the ditch to secure blocks and block elements to stabilize and minimize distortion is always encouraged.
- Hand quilting stitches should be consistent in length, straight, and evenly spaced. Hand quilting stitches should penetrate the three layers and be free of skipped, missed, or traveling stitches on back.

## Tension:

- Regardless of the type of machine used to quilt the top, the tension should be balanced.
- No bobbin thread should be visible on the top and vice versa.
- Stitches should be well defined, consistent in length and free of bird's nests, loops, eye lashes, gaps and/or noted tension problems.

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## **Edge Finishing:**

- Binding should be consistent in width, full of batting to the edge and securely applied with close, tight, and secure stitches.
- Binding corners should be square and miters stitched closed on the front and back.
- Binding join should be free of bulk,
- Border miters should align to binding miter.
- Binding fabric with a directional, plaid, or other linear design should be accurately cut to minimize distraction or distortion.
- Scalloped edge finishes should be mitered on the concave side.
- Knife edge finishes should be free of backing fabric visible to the front and vice versa.
- The addition of a flange or piping should be consistent in width.
- The judge is indifferent as to the type of binding used. Judges generally consider how well the quilter did what the quilter intended to do.

## ***How awards are chosen:***

Winners for the categories, special awards and Best of Show are chosen based on Complexity of Design and the Degree of Difficulty.

Complexity of Design refers to the number of design decisions the quilter had to make. These decisions may include design decisions relating to the use of the Elements and Principles of design, also choices relating to fabrics, threads, setting, surface design elements and techniques, quilting, applique, borders and edge finishing.

Degree of Difficulty relates to how hard were the techniques that had to be mastered and executed to design and construct this quilt. For example, block piecing is more difficult than strip piecing, curved piecing is more difficult than straight edge piecing, turned edge applique is more difficult than raw edge, beading and embroidery work is more difficult than hot glue crystals, custom quilting is more difficult than a pantograph and mitered binding corners are more difficult than butted binding corners.

When quilts are held for ribbon consideration in their respective category, they are judged "apples to apples." They are each evaluated for their respective design and workmanship excellence and the awards are presented.

However, when the first-place winners for each category are brought together for Best of Show consideration, they become "apples and oranges." This is where the Complexity of Design and Degree of Difficulty becomes so important.

Visualize an art quilt with surface design and dimensional elements, great creativity, and wonderful quilting to add a sense of realism. It won first place in its category and now comes face to face with a Baltimore Album. How many decisions did each quilter have to make, how well was each construction technique executed and can they stand up to the other competition? This process is repeated until the top quilts are closely re-evaluated and ultimately the top quilt is selected for Best of Show.

## **In summary -**

Judges do not have any prejudice, preferences, likes or dislikes when it comes to choosing winners. They know nothing about the quilt or the quilt maker, and all decisions are based solely upon Complexity of Design and Degree of Difficulty.

It is, therefore, the job of a Certified Judge to determine those quilts that reflect the highest standards of design and workmanship for any given show and reward that excellence with a category ribbon, special award ribbon and ultimately the Best in Show.

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## Judges Choice:

For "Judges Choice", judges select a quilt that has a special interest or meaning to the judge, It "speaks to them" and generally reflects their own personalities, likes, or loves. It is not based on workmanship or design, it just reflects them as individuals. Judges also tend to award this ribbon to a non-award-winning quilter. For example, if the judge is a long arm quilter and loves whole cloth quilts and one entry had an incredible design. It was beautifully quilted but had serious tension issues, it would not receive a ribbon. Therefore, the judge may award it Judge's Choice.

## Best of Show

Best of Show Quilts reflect excellence in both design and workmanship. As a Certified Quilt Judge, here are some top tips for a Best of Show Quilt:

- Take a class or classes with particular emphasis on your weaknesses in design or quilting. Practice until you master the design or technique.
- Start with an original design. It can be inspired by, adapted from, or learned from, but it reflects your own creativity, talent and personality.
- Learn about and incorporate the Elements and Principles of Design into your design for a higher degree of difficulty. (For example, the use of color palettes, depth, perspective, creation of luminosity and transparency, repetition, movement, symmetry, balance, and/or proportion and scale).
- Make good design choices for fabrics, threads, embellishments and quilting motifs. Fabrics should contain sufficient contrast in color and value to fully develop the design, Make sure the fabrics provide enough positive and negative space to showcase piecing and quilting.
- Master attention to detail in all aspects of construction. If you can see it, the judge can see it, so fix it before you enter.
- Have your quilt custom quilted, as it complements and unifies all aspects of the quilt, adds visual interest and provides wonderful density across the quilt surface. Done properly, it brings the quilt to life.
- Seek feedback from family, trusted friends, peers and teachers. What do they see that you may not?
- Confirm all entry rules before you start your quilt, especially with references to size, date of completion, no false backs, etc. There have been cases where a possible Best of Show winner was eliminated for failure to comply with the rules.
- Read the category descriptions carefully, if unsure of the category to enter, contact the appropriate show representative.
- Attend quilt shows and focus on the Best of Show winners and other top winners. What makes them stand out from the competition? What have they excelled at? What makes you question, "how did she/he do that"?

The design for Best of Show winners draws you in, invites exploration and has that "Wow" factor, while the excellence of workmanship reflects mastery of all construction elements. It is simply the Best of the Show!