

## Demystifying composition: part II

By Brett Barker

In the Spring issue of the SAQA *Journal*, I talked about several ideas regarding composition, specifically how to begin a composition for an art quilt. In this issue, we will take a look at rhythm, harmony, and texture. These three elements can be worked out right from the start; however, they can also come into play partway or even towards the end of making an art quilt.

For example, it is often only after I've begun a piece that I notice I'm using the same shade of yellow repeatedly, or I'm using the same blanket stitch in a variety of areas. As I notice this, I stop immediately. I step back (3-4 feet is best) and start looking for a rhythm. What is repeating itself, and how is it doing so?

Rhythm is created by repeating visual elements — usually lines, shapes, colors, or values. The primary mistake I notice among artists is that they confuse rhythm with literal repetition. Rhythm must have some variation to keep the viewer interested. For example, think about the beauty of a hand stitch vs. a machine stitch. Sometimes the subtle variations in the hand-stitched element will keep us interested for a very long time. This is not to advocate hand stitching over machine stitching, for with both you must ask yourself as you go, "How can I vary this machine (or hand) stitch so that it evolves from repetition into rhythm?"

I recently went to Chaco Canyon and saw superlative examples of rhythm. The way the rectangular elements (the cut stone "bricks") repeat endlessly, yet not without significant variation, was truly stunning. I can't imagine the same effect could ever be achieved using machine-created, perfectly identical bricks.

Start analyzing your elements in terms of rhythm. For example, do you see a rhythm in your horizontal

elements moving across the quilt? If you don't, perhaps you need more elements, or perhaps you can add a rhythm with a repetitive top stitch or embellishment.

Harmony is one of the most difficult artistic concepts to define. Basically, it means that somehow your quilt composition has become a pleasing or coherent whole. The best advice I can give any quilter in regard

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to harmony is to not lose sight of why you wanted to make the quilt in the first place. If your intention is evident, harmony will result. Don't let the "ooh, aah" factor overtake you ("ooh, I love this yummy fabric! It doesn't really work with the piece, but I'll *make* it work!"). Make sure that you are moving, either consciously or intuitively, toward your intention and your piece will have harmony.

Texture in an art quilt can be either literal or implied. The most common mistake quilters make in terms of texture is to ignore it. If you are using any fabric other than a plain solid, you are adding texture to your quilt.

This can be a beautiful thing! However, I must caution quilters here: your fabric must, eventually, create a harmonious whole. Use patterns that offer subtle variations to the overall color or value of the fabric and you'll be on your way to creating effective texture.

For example, the implied texture of a black fabric with huge, multi-colored cowgirls all over it is going to be tougher to integrate than the texture of a brown fabric with earth-toned cowgirl images. And don't forget, literal texture made by quilting and/or embellishments will add significantly to the visual texture you have created with your fabrics.

I often begin with the "less is more" rule. I start subtly, because I can always add more texture as the piece dictates. Often, we don't require as much texture as we thought we would. Go easy! You'll be thrilled with the results.

Finally, there is no substitute for learning by doing. Make a few mock-ups (maybe several) until you see your intention shining through. Mock-ups (or fabric sketches) seem tedious, but they actually allow you a significant amount of freedom in composition. You won't have to worry about using your most expensive, precious fabrics if you've thought out and visualized your final piece through the mock-up. Trust yourself and go a little crazy in the mock-ups. This is the time to really let go. Then pick the one you like the best (notice I say *you*, not your husband, wife, or dog) and go for it. Feel free to e-mail me — I'd love to see the results. ▼

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