

Quilt Rule Police vs. the Modern Quilter

By Brian Powers, HeartSong Quilts

Thanks to all of you who responded to our informal survey pertaining to machine binding vs. hand binding. Everyone agreed that if hand binding wasn't in the rules, it should not have been used as a criterion to disqualify a quilt from consideration for the grand prize. Most of you had a story recounting a similar experience which was highly annoying. Most of you also believed that it didn't matter whether the binding was done by hand or by machine.

In reviewing your responses, it occurred to me that this type of issue is one of the reasons behind the "modern quilt" movement.

Smarter people than me have been studying this phenomenon of "modern quilting." The Modern Quilt Guild website lays out the reasoning for its existence and many people have weighed in on its site with their own reasons for being "modern" quilters. I even read a doctoral thesis posted online which explored the reasons for the modern quilting movement. (Click here to read the thesis) Luckily, I'm not writing a thesis, so I can express my opinions and conclusions freely without the need for rigorous academic research standards (kind of like a "modern" researcher or blogger or . . . wait, I *am* a blogger! Oh my, I didn't realize I was getting into such deep matters of modern culture).

In my opinion, the vast majority of the people considering themselves modern quilters (or who would be considered "modern quilters" whether they call themselves that or not) because of their attitude rather than because of their design sensibilities. "Modern" quilts might have a certain look, color scheme, simplicity, minimalism, or design criteria. In fact, it appears that the term was adopted as a result of the book entitled "Modern Quilt Workshop" by Weeks Ringle and Bill Kerr. Ironically, their books do contain quilts having very specific design elements and patterns. Their "modern" quilts emphasize a certain design and color sensibility. The modern quilting movement, while in some respect incorporating their sensibility, is much more based upon the "attitude" aspect of freedom from the "same old same old."

Here's how the Modern Quilt Guild website puts it: "Modern quilters are a diverse group of woman and men, young and old, experienced and novice, yet each of us feels the need to differentiate ourselves as modern quilters by how we work, the fabrics we choose, and the aesthetic of our quilts. We create in a way that supports our individual creative needs and our lifestyle preferences. Modern quilters resist the imposition of hard and fast rules for making a quilt. We pick and choose traditional techniques and methods that work for us and at the same time feel free to redefine or reinvent what is possible and allowable in making quilts."

To me, the "modern" quilts on the MQG website being used for Quiltcon promotions (themodernquiltguild.com) bear a striking resemblance to Gee's Bend quilts. Admittedly, I am no artist and have no training in this type of thing, but I know what I see and I can tell what it looks like, and it seems to me that this "minimalist" trend started by necessity with the gals making these "Gee's Bend"

quilts this way because it's all they had to work with. This design continues now with people trying to simplify things in an ever increasingly complex world that overloads us with information, ideas, media, designs, etc. It exhausts us, and we are looking for a simpler, less exhausting alternative.

One of the stated casualties of modern quilting is the "rulebook" of quilt making. Modern quilters revel in saying that the only rules are that there are no rules. In fact, no matter whether it is traditional or modern, a quilt is fabric sewed together in pieces, then three layers (top, batting, back) are connected by stitching or tying on top (the so-called "quilting) and the edges are bound with other fabric that is sewn in such a way to keep it from fraying and to keep it all together. You can put paper in the quilt, but that certainly reduces its utility, and maybe lets it be considered "art." You can use different types of "nontraditional" fabrics which makes it cool and unusual. You can use just two large pieces of fabric, one on the front and one on the back, and it's a quilt—so long as there's some "quilting" done to hold it all together.

Now, one of the problems with quilting these days is that new and sometimes experienced quilters find that the old rules and the people guarding the rules tend to take the fun out of quilting. Incidents like the machine binding snafu we described in our newsletter make people say that they don't want stupid nonsensical rules (especially those known only to insiders) to interfere with their fun in quilting. The wholesale discarding of rules, though, gives rise to anarchy. Some anarchy might be a good thing, but in fact, we all need some rules and guidelines within which to operate. It's comforting. It's why we tell our kids they can't cross the street when they're 5 years old, or they must do their homework before they watch TV. They need to learn safety and responsibility (eat your spinach before desert).

Not exact analogies to quilting, I admit, but there are certain rules we must learn in quilting, nonetheless. Like, how to operate your sewing machine (because it breaks otherwise), a quarter inch seam is necessary because the top falls apart if you don't have it (which I found out the hard way when my wife grew weary with my constant complaining as I was learning how to quilt and I questioned the need for an exact quarter inch seam and she said "then, go ahead and make it with whatever seam you want. I don't care. See what happens." Yes, I'm a bit of an anarchist myself). You get the point.

So, it's not "the only rule is that there are no rules." It's actually "we're tired of stupid nonsensical rules that suck the fun out of quilting. We just want to get together and have fun and make beautiful things and try new stuff and see how it comes out and if it doesn't come out, we'll unsew it and try something different, and don't tell us 'you're not doing it right!' because we don't care that you don't think we're doing it right—we like what we're doing and we're having fun and it looks good to us." And this describes a good number of quilters we know both young and old(ish, if you count us).

Oh, and if we're entering a competition, we'll follow the rules, but make sure they're set out clearly—like binding must be finished by hand. Don't assume that we know all these unwritten "that's how it's always been done" rules.

Are you a "modern quilter?" Or, like me, do you hate being pigeonholed into some category because someone has "discovered" some new trend or attitude which you knew about all along? Last year at the International Quilt Market, I attended a workshop run by a fabric manufacturer gal from New York who

gushed about having “discovered” through her use of community eating establishments by single women in Manhattan that women are crying out for relationship these days, and that quilting guilds and quilt shops satisfy that need! Well, really . . . We out here in real American didn’t need someone to tell us about that “discovery” because we knew it all along. Likewise, we don’t need to be told we’re “modern” quilters because we keep trying cool ideas. We’ve always done what is fun in our craft/art and loved sharing it with other people who love it, too.

Having said all that, Ann and I plan to attend Quiltcon, the Modern Quilt Guild’s first convention in Austin, Texas in February. Since we are clearly a shop that doesn’t deal in the “same old same old” and since Ann’s never met a pattern or been taught a technique that she doesn’t question or throw out the window, I guess it’s right up our alley. We’ll keep you posted. Meanwhile, keep doing things differently. Maybe we’ll even set up a Modern Quilt Guild here in the Black Hills. What do you think?