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Lake Oswego's
Ann Johnston
elevates quilting
into high art
— and an
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A STORY IN EVERY STITCH

Ann Johnston's diversion from isolation has opened up a world of writing, teaching and international travel

STORY BY SARAH HUNSBERGER SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

LAKE OSWEGO —

Ann Johnston's business card says "quilt-maker," but when she steps into her home studio in Lake Oswego, she says she feels like a princess.

For three decades, the former schoolteacher has explored fabrics, dyes and threads to create fine-art quilts more akin to paintings than bedspreads.

What began as a creative outlet for an isolated young mother living in southern Oregon has grown into an international career of teaching, writing and touring.

Johnston, 61, has written or co-written half a dozen books and had solo exhibitions in museums and galleries up and down the West Coast. She has exhibited her quilts from Switzerland to New Zealand.

"Creative is such a generic term," said Geri Grasvik, owner of The Pine Needle quilt shop in Lake Oswego. "There's a lot of creative people in the industry. But Ann is above all that. Her work communicates messages into fiber art."

This year, with her latest book freshly released and her calendar filled with teaching engagements across the globe, Johnston still can't keep up with all of her ideas. She'll sign copies of her new book and dis-



BILL BACHHUBER/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"Writing Uphill" is among the quilts featured in the book "Speaking in Cloth: 6 Quilters, 6 Voices." The book, which Johnston co-wrote, grew from quilt exhibitions at the Coos Art Museum. It received an award from the Oregon Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

play some of her work Friday and Saturday at The Pine Needle.

"I feel lucky and powerful," Johnston said. "I feel like I can do whatever I want to do ... and I've got more ideas, and I'm learning every day, and I'm just overflowing."

"Not necessarily that what I'm doing is good," she added. "But ... I'm making progress."

Conveying a message

The daughter of a painter and

granddaughter of a seamstress — two art forms that merge in her work — Johnston was trained as a teacher. She left the junior high classroom after a few years to stay home with her two children. Living at the end of a half-mile-long driveway in Cave Junction, she took up quilting as an outlet for creativity and to cope with isolation while her husband, also a teacher, was at work.

Gradually, she began experimenting with dyeing her own fabrics and learning ways to color silks and cottons so they remained washable and usable. She played with stamping, brushing, soaking, pouring and printing. She developed her own techniques and began sharing them with others. Soon, she was back in the classroom, teaching what she had learned.

She drew on her background as an English major to begin writing. Her latest book, "The Quilter's Book

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A collection of old iron objects rusts in the rain outside Johnston's home studio in Lake Oswego. Her mother collected many of the objects, which Johnston uses to dye fabrics for quilts.



SARAH HUNSBERGER SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN



SARAH HUNSBERGER/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Ann Johnston says she mostly quilts by machine these days, because all the years she spent hand-stitching have left her with tendinitis and rotator cuff problems.

Ann Johnston

Age: 61

Home: Lake Oswego

Family: Husband, Jim, a retired Gladstone School District teacher; two adult children

Education: Bachelor's degree in English from Stanford University; master's degree in

geography from University of Oregon

Résumé: Taught new math as a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru; taught middle school in southern Oregon. After leaving teaching to become a mother, she gradually began focusing on quilting; writing books,

teaching workshops around the world and creating her own pieces. Her latest exhibition opens this month at College of the Ozarks in Missouri.

On her work: "I decided a long time ago that I wouldn't worry whether people liked it."

RIGHT | Johnston (center, black apron) teaches a workshop in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2004. She's already scheduling classes for 2010 because her calendar is filling up this year.

COURTESY OF ANN JOHNSTON





ABOVE | Johnston's quilt "Diminishing," hand-printed and painted on cotton sateen, will be on tour for the next two years.

LEFT | Johnston often uses silk in her quilts, such as "False Pockets," which she completed in 2007.

BILL BACHHUBER
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BILL BACHMEIER/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"Golden Bridge" was a wedding gift for one of Ann Johnston's relatives. She designed, dyed, pieced and applied the quilt top, then passed it along to the Oswego Quilters to add the hand-stitched quilting, according to Johnston's markings, in time for the wedding. The long-standing Oswego Quilters group meets weekly and earns money by hand-quilting for others.

Quilts: Spontaneity springs from hand dyeing

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of Design," includes a broad sampling of her work, from the subtle interplay of light and shadow on a lifelike merry-go-round horse to the abstract shapes and subtle color variations in some of her latest quilts, dyed with rusty metal objects. She found many of the objects—keys, tools, springs—when she returned, after her mother's recent death, to the home where she grew up in California's Silicon Valley.

Johnston said each of the roughly 400 quilts she has completed conveys a message. Often, she begins a quilt not knowing how it will end, following the shapes and colors that emerge with each new batch of dye.

"Each piece of cloth contains the moment I made it," Johnston wrote in one of her books.

Stitching plays an integral role in the stories she tells. She writes in one of her books that she stitches "to create a textural

Book signing

What: Lake Oswego quilt maker Ann Johnston will sign her new book, "The Quilter's Book of Design," and display some of her work. Books will be for sale.

Where: The Pine Needle, 429 First St., Lake Oswego

When: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Information: 503-635-1353

Online: annjohnston.net/index.html

composition overlaying the colors and pieces below, always in an attempt to add meaning."

One of her pieces is included in a Coos Bay show on art quilts.

Steven Brooks, executive director of the Coos Art Museum, said Johnston's work has a free-hand quality and an expressiveness. Its spontaneous quality comes from the hand-dyed fabrics, he said, "then, when she's doing the stitching, it anchors it into a more planned and controlled image."

Ticket to travel

To Johnston, a pale area in the rust-dyed fabric of one small quilt called "In Between" looks like a cloud. She emphasizes its shape by adding long, angled stitches in varie-

gated threads. The area catches the light a whole new way, and the look of the entire quilt is changed.

In another rust-dyed quilt pinned to the wall in her home studio, two vertical streaks of reddish brown run down the left and right sides, while a light area stands out in the center. Johnston uses thread to add flowing horizontal bands of stitches to the center area, and the image becomes an abstract, muscular human torso.

A former Peace Corps volunteer who holds a master's degree in geography, Johnston has made quilts her ticket to travel the world. She teaches classes and has led workshops in South Africa, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, China and Spain. In return, her travels appear in her quilts. Spoons she bought in an iron market in Spain dye one quilt. Other quilts depict the striped arches of the Mezquita of Cordoba, Spain.

Despite her international reputation and her career of teaching and writing, Johnston has sold few quilts. Many are on display in museums and galleries. Some are in storage, making appearances at classes and in books. She gives away the rest to relatives and friends.

"If I wanted to get rich, I could make designer hot pads," she said. "I mostly have fun."