

STEPS TO Creativity

Inspiration for quilt designs is everywhere!
Use these creativity exercises to think about and try
new ways to approach the design process.

by Ann Johnston

Photos by Ann Johnston unless otherwise noted.

Lots of Ideas

I always have lots of ideas for quilts, so many that I have to choose among them when I am ready to start a new project. As soon as I come across or generate an idea, it goes up on an "idea wall" in my workroom.

Once I decide to use one of my ideas, I can choose several approaches to make this idea into a quilt.

To help stimulate creativity and analyze my own design work, I've

created some exercises that may help you approach design in a different way. I've also developed a list of questions that can help you understand your own approach to design.

I invite you to try out the exercises and answer the questions about your design process. The photos and sketches illustrate some of my own inspiration sources and the quilts I made in response to them.

Photos I take in my travels are an important source of inspiration for my quilts. A photo leads to a sketch and, eventually, to a quilt.



Museum Stairway: Photos of this spiral stairway taken from several angles helped me decide how I might design a spiral stair in fabric.



Castle Stairway: I liked the spiral effect of this stone ramp in a castle in Germany, so I added it to my wall of ideas for the quilt I was planning.

Exercise #1: Choose a Subject

Pick three or more subjects from the following list, or write three subjects of your own, making them as specific as possible:

- Thorny red roses
- Triangles in motion
- Mountains with snow
- Friendship that ends
- Fear of heights
- Dead ferns
- Sand dunes
- Bats hanging upside down
- Apartment houses
- Wedding cake
- Speeding cars
- Cloud forest
- Anger at loss

Exercise #2: Pick a Starting Place

Decide how you would approach the subjects you chose to begin a quilt. For each subject you have chosen from Exercise #1, choose a starting place from the list below. Feel free to add options to the list.

- Make a small drawing—to scale.
- Make a large drawing—full-size.
- Cut without a plan, with or without rulers, with fabric already chosen.
- Look for a traditional pattern in your quilt resources.
- Use your computer and quilt software.
- Choose a photograph from your collection to use as a design.
- Paint on paper.
- Paint on fabric.
- Sort all your fabric, looking for a piece that goes with the subject.
- Look in your idea notebooks or on your bulletin board of ideas.

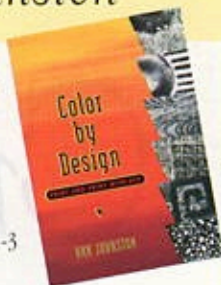
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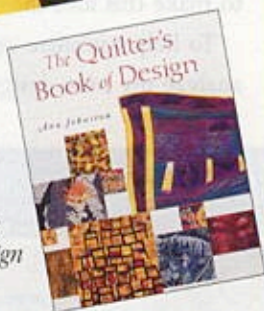
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Exercise #3:

Analyze Your Choices

Think about your choices. Consider the relationships between the ideas you selected and the approaches you used. Ask yourself:

- ? Does the subject have anything to do with my starting place?
- ? Are all the starting places the same?
- ? What is my favorite way to start?
- ? Do I want to try new ways to start?

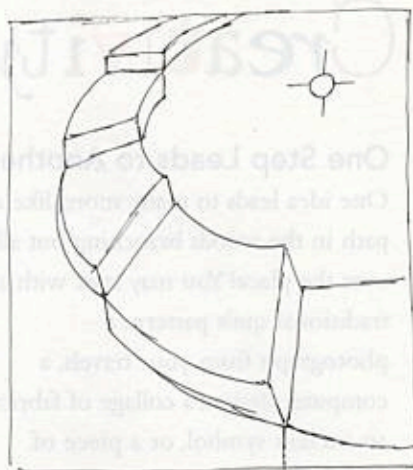
Design Questions

Here are some additional questions to think about in relation to the design process. Being aware of how you start making a new quilt can help you become a better designer.

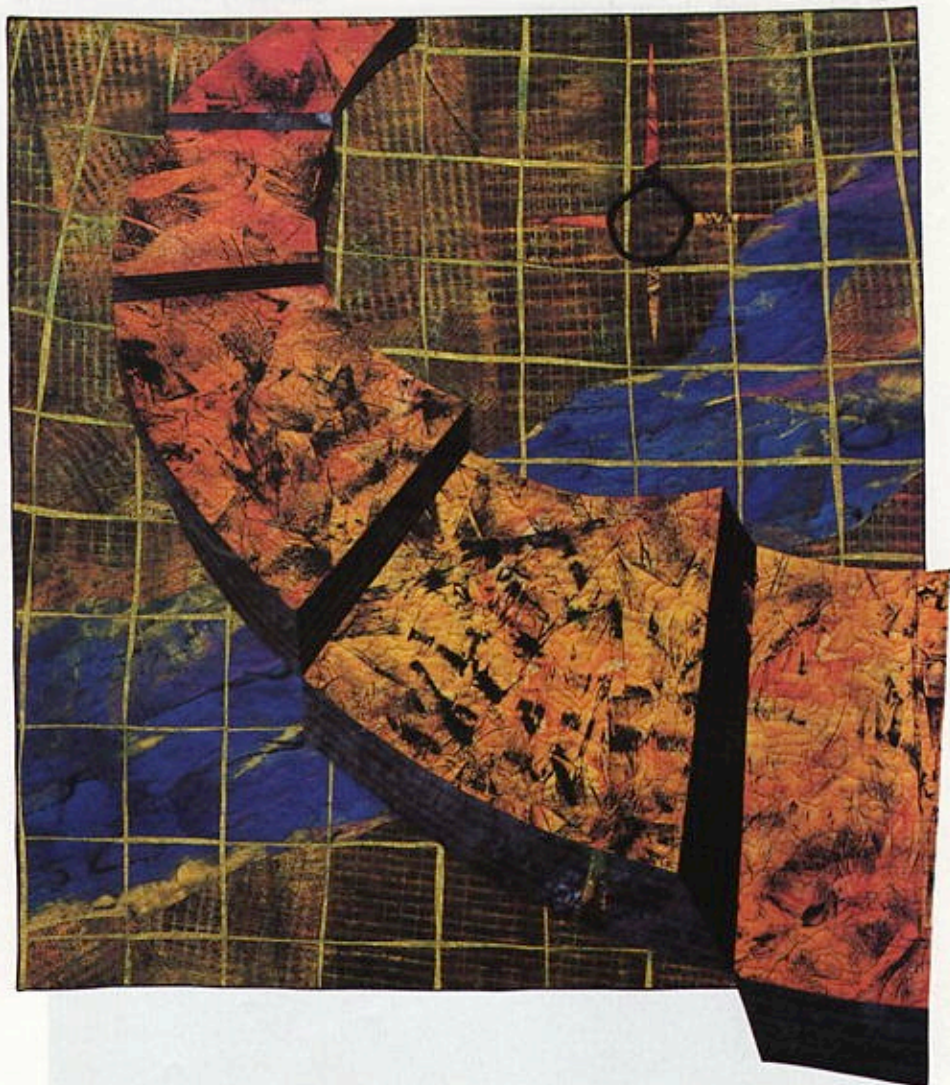
- ? Do you try several ways of designing before you really start?
- ? Do you determine how the quilt will look before you start?
- ? Do you know how you will construct the quilt before you start?
- ? Do you ever change your mind about the design of the quilt after you start?
- ? Do you ever seek out information about a technique you have never tried in order to make a certain quilt?
- ? Do you pick all the fabric for a quilt before you start?



Double Stair Sketch: This is a quick sketch I made so I would remember my idea for a spiral stair quilt.



Single Stair Sketch: This is the sketch I made to plan the simplified quilt idea.



An Idea Becomes A Quilt: Here is my quilt, titled North is Up. (Photo by Bill Bachhuber.)

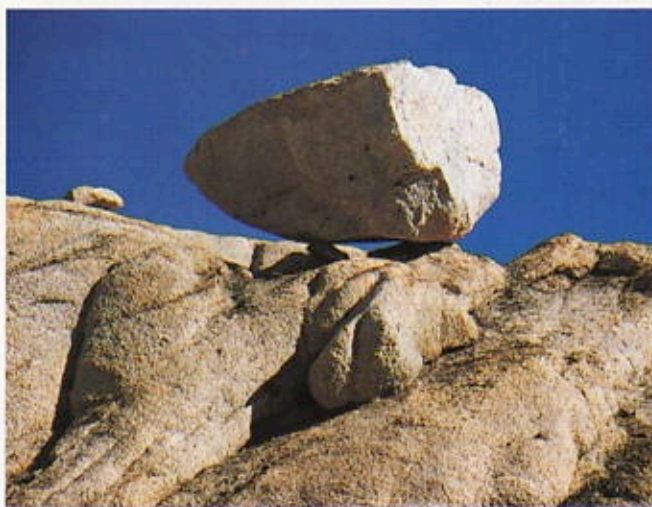
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One Step Leads to Another

One idea leads to many more, like a path in the woods branching out all over the place! You may start with a traditional quilt pattern, a photograph from your travels, a computer design, a collage of fabrics, an ancient symbol, or a piece of fabric. You may start a new design based on the last quilt you made.

The most important thing to start with is an idea. The idea may be a question rather than an answer, but it will help you with design decisions as you are making your quilt.

Note: Information in this article was first published in *The Quilter's Book of Design* by Ann Johnston.



Glacial Deposit:
A photo I took of huge, precariously-perched rocks was part of the inspiration for one of my quilts.

An Idea Becomes A Quilt:

*Below is my quilt, titled **Balancing Act 8**. I used machine embroidery to add dimension to the rocks, and I machine quilted with metallic thread to add lines and shapes in the background that would suggest water in motion. See detail right.
(Photo by Bill Bachhuber.)*



Author Profile

Ann Johnston has been making quilts and putting dye on fabric for over 25 years. Her years of experimentation have led to mountains of hand-dyed fabric and quilts, thousands of miles of travel, numerous exhibitions and articles, and four books. For more information about Ann or to see excerpts and order her books, visit www.annjohnston.net. ✪