

Understand variety to improve your compositions

by Ann Johnston

The importance of variety—also called contrast—applies to all the elements of design. A composition may use contrast of line, shape, value, color, pattern, and/or texture to highlight a particular part of the design. Within the element of shape, for example, a design may have variety of scale or placement to create a sense of depth. An element of contrasting pattern might be used to create a focal point, and several could make the eye move around the composition. A tiny bit of variety of color might help unify a piece or unbalance it. A change

in line style might suggest movement, express a mood, or even create a shape.

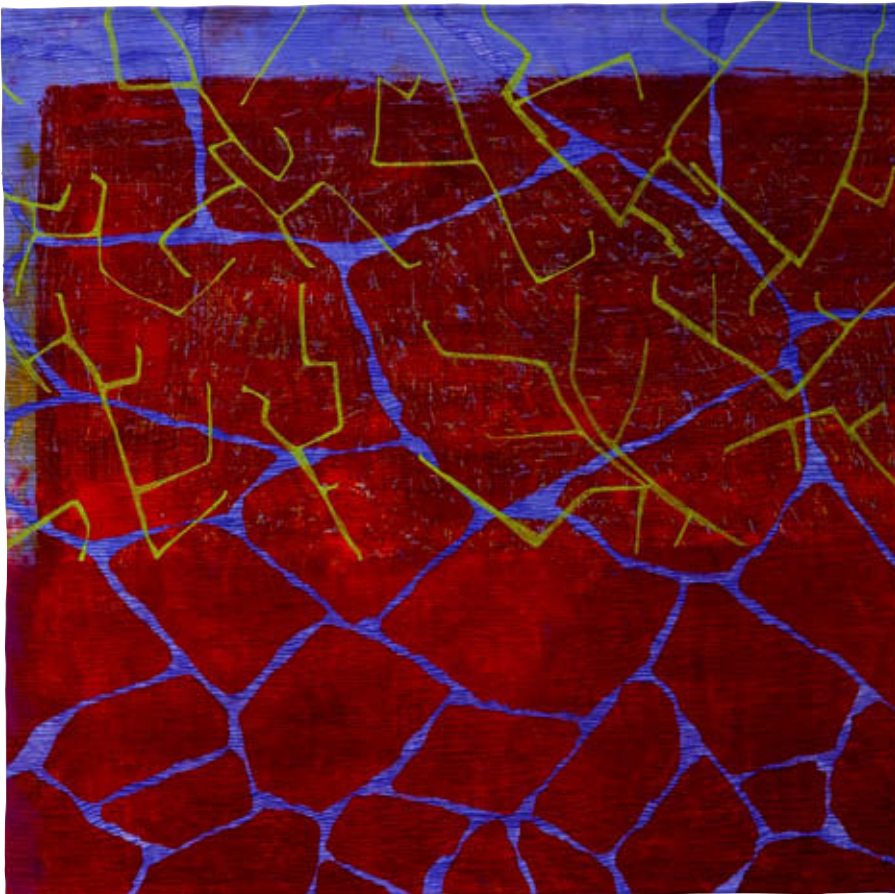
A composition may be high in contrast or low in contrast, and this in itself should contribute to the overall impact of the quilt. As I work, and even after a piece is “finished,” I like to check to see if the parts add up as I had intended. I can look at the elements that have contrast and see what they do to the design and make changes accordingly, either to that piece or to one that follows.

Your tastes may or may not lean to high contrast, but whether or not you

know it, you are using contrast all the time. The following is a simplified example using the element of color and imagining two right triangles of the same size. When they are the identical color and you place the long sides together, your visual result is a quadrangle. When you place that quadrangle on the same color ground, it disappears. If you vary the color slightly in one of the triangles, then your visual result is a shape made up of two triangles. If you place these on a ground that matches one of the triangles, then your visual

Diminishing 51 x 51 inches ©2008 Ann Johnston

Contrast is used to give a sense of depth and dimension.



Line: The style of the light green lines contrasts strongly with the rest of the composition, and their placement emphasizes a division between the upper and lower parts.

Shape: The size of the shapes decreases from top down in the overall design.

Value: Light blue against dark red makes the shapes pop out and the subtle use of darker red, just below center, adds a horizon. Darker quilting thread slightly increases this contrast.

Color: The warm blue recedes behind red shapes. Using the complementary lime green over the red increases their impact.

Texture: Free-motion zigzag embroidery (in lime green) contrasts with the undulating horizontal quilting lines. The textural contrast of raw edge, reverse appliqué emphasizes the spaces between the shapes.

Pattern: The overall pattern of the red ground contrasts with the pattern created by the green lines in the foreground.

All photos by Bill Bachhuber

result is one triangle. Contrast has created the shape we see, and the impact of the triangle in the whole design is determined by whether it is high or low contrast to the background color.

That example is obvious, but in more complicated compositions, it can be harder to actually achieve the visual results you want. Again,

using the example of color, subtle differences occur when you use the same color but vary the temperatures from warm to cool. Stronger color contrast is achieved using complementary colors—opposites on the color wheel—than using colors that are more closely related to each other. That strong contrast of complements is lessened if the colors are not the

same saturation or purity, one bright and clear and the other toned down and slightly more neutral. Generally, warmer, lighter, clearer colors tend to come forward in the design, and that can create a focal point that was unintended. Or you may choose a warm color so that it will come forward, but if it's a highly unsaturated warm color, it may disappear. Choosing a color by

Countless 34 x 56 inches ©2009 Ann Johnston

Contrast is used to give a sense of movement and to create a subject.



Line: Long, thin, reverse appliqué lines become part of the background and contrast with short, thick, surface appliqué lines (that have become shapes) in the foreground.

Shape: The white shapes are all very similar and they loosely create a larger foreground shape which is very high in contrast to the background. Its placement off center allows the low contrast shape in the quilting to show up.

Value: Low value contrast of horizontal lines in the background minimizes their impact. Very light linear shapes stand out more in the foreground. Other light areas are all small and all at the upper edge of the composition adding to the sense of looking up.

Color: The red in the background impacts the mood of the whole piece, and the light gray suggests what the falling shapes may be—they are a very cold contrast to the other colors.

Pattern: The undefined pattern of the colors in the background suggests a setting and contrasts with the fine-detailed pattern in the gray shapes. The quilting pattern is interrupted by the shapes in the foreground adding a subtle emphasis to them.

Texture: The pyramidal shape in the background is created by a change in the real texture of the quilting.

a rule or formula won't help you make the right decision; you need to see it in context, next to its neighbors, and observe if it has contrast or not and whether it accomplishes what you wanted in the design.

My work is often high in contrast because that is what I like. High contrast works to draw the eye and adds emphasis to that portion of the

design that I think is important. A lot of the variety I use is less obvious. Some of the contrasting elements simply add visual interest—more complexity— and some of them soften the differences in the parts of the composition. Hopefully, I have made choices that do not detract or distract from the idea I have. I want to be purposeful in my quilt making,

and variety, or contrast, is one of the important concepts that I can use to that end. ▼

*Ann Johnston is a professional member of SAQA. View her artwork and schedule of workshops on her website: www.AnnJohnston.net. Her book, *The Quilter's Book of Design, 2nd Edition*, contains the kernels of her approach to design concepts and gives examples using her work in cloth to illustrate them.*

Line: The varying width of the lines gives a sense of depth and moves the eye around the composition. The similarity in line style ties the three figures together.

Shape: The shapes vary greatly in size, but have a similarity in freeform curved movement.

Value: Dark blue over pale yellow-green ground makes it a high-contrast composition. Less obviously, the lower border area is a lighter value than the upper border area. Also, small, darker pieces occur in more or less even distribution in border areas, adding pattern and interest.

Color: The royal blue also contrasts in temperature and saturation with the background. The lower border

yellow-green is more saturated than the yellow-green of the upper border area.

Pattern: The blue lines have no pattern to distinguish them from each other, tying them together. Some of the yellow-green pieces have a large scale pattern and others have medium, small scale, or no pattern. Some of the larger scale patterns move the eye away from the main figures of the composition.

Texture: Upon close inspection, the texture varies because the quilting pattern changes to a distinctly different pattern in the blue figures. The quilting of the border varies slightly from the quilting of the center background, creating another different texture.



Balance 32 49 x 93 inches ©2010 Ann Johnston
Contrast is used to give a sense of balance and of scale.