

All Obsessed Together

When my fiancé (now husband) Bob and I were choosing tableware, we quickly agreed on dishes and glasses. Then we ventured into silverware. He picked a pattern right out—one with little flowers and curlicues on its slightly scalloped end. Trying not to grimace, I asked why he liked that pattern. He answered, “I don’t know—that’s what I grew up with. It’s just what silverware is supposed to look like.”

Well, right or wrong I have a strong knee-jerk reaction to the words “should,” “supposed to,” and “must,” as well as “can’t,” “shouldn’t,” and “don’t.”

Throughout my quilting life I have heard a lot of “shoulds,” “musts,” and “don’ts” bandied about. I have come to appreciate a few of the rules, like “press, don’t scrub” and “you should use quarter-inch seam allowances pressed to one side,” but have found none for which I can’t imagine an exception.

Years ago a friend was told that really good quilters only use one color of thread for their quilting. She was standing by her most recent work and her first submission to a quilt show, a large double Irish chain embellished with intricate two-color hand-quilted Celtic knots. Instead of appreciating the time, effort, and creative juices she had lavished on her quilt, the critic spouted a baseless rule that made him feel comfortable and superior.

If you understand the “why” of a rule you can decide when to break it. For example, if quilting threads cross in a hand-quilted piece, the threads wear on each other as the quilt shifts. However, many of the most spectacular contemporary machine quilting designs require dense, layered stitching that creates a very stable quilt. So, the long-standing rule not to cross quilting threads is valid, but only sometimes. The rules must evolve as quilting does.

My knee once gave a mighty jerk while watching a quilting show on TV. A quilt appraiser and judge told an audience that the very first thing she does when judging a quilt is to check it for “square.” Are you kidding me? I agree that technical proficiency is important if you want to win a contest, but what about the first impression, the artistic statement of a quilt? Technical skill does not equal creativity or beauty or inspiration. That takes artistry. Take the quilts of Gee’s Bend. Square? No. Artistic? Absolutely.

The subject of mitered corners makes me twitchy, too. The quilting world seems to be obsessed with mitered corners, and they are great . . . unless you are a beginner . . . unless they are done poorly . . . unless they do not conform to the aesthetic of the quilt. Other corner treatments, done well, can be every bit as effective and durable as mitered corners, which I sometimes think are the quilter's equivalent to silverware with little flowers, curlicues, and a slightly scalloped edge.

Thirteen years ago I told Bob it didn't matter what we'd had before—we were making a new life together and could make our own decision about what silverware should be. We thought about it and chose a pattern that worked for us. It's not the same silverware our families or friends have. It's ours and it suits us.

Let's do the same in our quilting lives by making choices that suit us and allowing others to do the same. Then we can encourage rather than judge one another and enjoy the diversity around us. Because whether you prefer country or cutting-edge, hand or machine, projects or the process, we are all obsessed together.

©2005 Cindi Huss

This article, edited for space, appeared in the April 2006 issue of *Quilter's Newsletter*.