



ON TRACK!

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Shooting Stars pieced and quilted by Birgit Schueller
Solitaire winner at MQS® 2009

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Interview With a Winner

Solitaire Winner Birgit Schueller Shares Tips and Insight

Interviewed By Martha S. Heimbaugh
Photographs by Marilyn Karper

Birgit Schueller of Riegelsberg Germany really knows how to think “outside the box”. In the past her work has made dramatic visual impacts with her audiences by showing off uneven edges or leaving planned holes in the quilt. This time, Birgit made her creative statement with color, design, and shiny jewels. Her quilt *Shooting Stars* (which was specifically designed for the 2009 MQS “Fire & Ice” Theme Category) won the prestigious 2009 MQS Solitaire Award. I recently had an opportunity to interview Birgit about her winning quilt and also about her particular approach to quilting. Her answers were both engaging and enlightening. Read on to get advice from an expert who continues to grow in her creative abilities.

Q: Was this a paper pieced quilt or how did you go about piecing it with such great accuracy?

A: The star in the quilt consists of eight identical foundation-pieced sections. Rather than using paper to piece my quilt portions on, I prefer to use very lightweight, see through (but still sturdy) interfacing. I have found that I prefer ordinary diaper lining (!) better than any of the high-end commercial products available. I drew one master copy of my star pattern on paper and then traced it onto the interfacing eight times and built my sections in exactly the same way as I do when paper-piecing. After the entire quilt top had been assembled, I tore away the interfacing and discarded it.

Q: I liked the way you used multiple colors of red fabric to give added depth to the quilt design. Can you share



with our readers how you went about choosing the fabrics for this quilt? Do you have a particular approach you take when choosing fabrics and do you work from a fabric stash or do you buy what you need when you need it?

A: After I was satisfied with the star design, I worked on the color placement and played with different shades and values. I like to work with the illusion of light and shadow to add movement to a quilt. As from the very beginning my intention was to capture the WOW moment of exploding fireworks, I dug deep into my extensive stash of batik fabrics which I tend to use only for those

very special quilts...With a vast selection of fabrics available in the yellow-orange-red segment of my batik treasure chest, I tried to find three yellow to orange-golden fabrics for the light side and three peach-orange to pinkish-red fabrics for the shadow side. I was looking for the gradation in shades that felt best to me. Also, I wanted the light/shadow color pairs to blend into each other – despite the different colors! Rather than using any scientific approach in my fabric selection, the whole process involves a lot of gut feeling.

Finding suitable fabrics for the

background was a bit more complicated as I was looking for a gradation from black-ish blue to blue-ish black – and I did not have a lot of choice here! So, the background contains the only non-batik fabric in the entire quilt. Since the color was just what I was missing, I didn't care and used it.

Q: Did you use a stitch regulator throughout the quilting of this quilt?

A: When quilting this quilt, I used my stitch regulator a lot. For the pebble work and the tiny micro stippling in the background, however, I switched to manual mode.

Q: Why did you choose to use a wool batting? Do you like working with wool for any particular reason(s)?

A: In fact, this was the first quilt I used wool batting in. I frequently had read about wool batting not having a "crease memory" like polyester batting has. And since I'm located in Germany which means that any quilt I want to enter in a show in the USA needs to be folded, packaged, and shipped frequently, and over quite some distances, the prospect of being able to avoid those ugly permanent creases in the most unsuitable portions of a show quilt by just using wool batting rather than polyester batting was a very convincing factor. Thus, I gave it a try and I must say, this batting quilted up wonderfully, the quilt has a great feel to it and when it hung at MQS 2009 there were no ugly creases to distract from the design. Another aspect I like about wool batting is that it is as lightweight as polyester – another factor that needs to be considered when a lot of shipping is involved – and drapes beautifully.

Q: Did you use the same color of thread on the top as you did on the bottom of the quilt? Did you encounter any problems with the thread color changes?

A: In a quilt like *Shooting Stars*, I like to use the same thread on top and in the bobbin. For me it is fascinating to be able to turn the quilt over and view the quilting on the back – just as the front, yet undisturbed by the pieced design. It's kind of like using a two-way mirror! There are quite a few thread changes in

this quilt. My thread stash with nicely gradating colors came in handy here, too. You can never own enough thread for a project like this, can you?

Q: Can you share with our readers how you accomplished your quilting designs? Did you plan it all out ahead of time? Did you mark your quilt patterns? How did you accomplish the wonderful quilted star designs?

A: Before I started working on this top, I pieced a small test piece to make sure that my foundation-pieced star design works. This sample consisted of just one star panel and was auctioned off during the Audacious Auction at MQS 2009. I used this sample piece not only to test-drive my design but also to



play with a couple of quilting options. I had wanted to use different styles of feather quilting in the pieced star portions and was very pleased to find out that this worked. The background was a completely different story but I was confident that I would come up with something suitable while working on the quilt. It felt good to know what I wanted to do in the pieced star – and so I started there. When I'm engaged in the quilting process of a given quilt I feel some kind of a conversation establishing between the top and myself. This is weird to describe but it almost feels as if the top tells me what to do – and the more intensively I work on and "with" a top, the more apparent its message becomes.

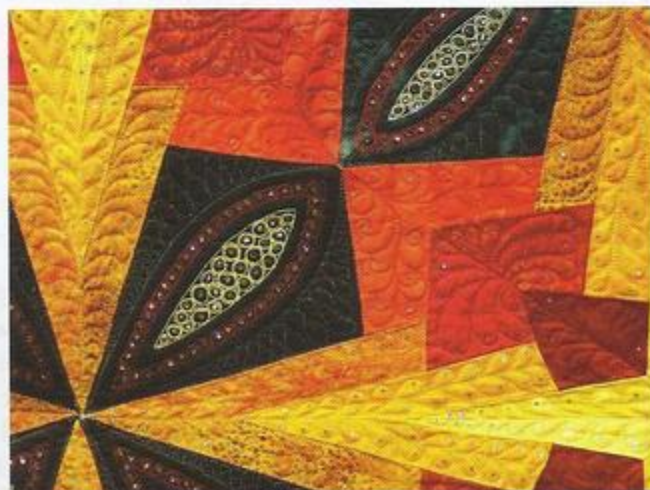
After the pieced star had been quilted, I needed an idea for the rather large background portions. I wanted to soften the geometric shapes and make the different background fabrics blend into each other. As this quilt is absolutely geometrical, I

had four identical background portions and four others being the exact mirror images. Just a little while ago, I had followed a discussion on one of the online chat groups that I'm a member of about how someone made her own stencils by drawing a design onto a clear plastic sheet and then sewing on the design lines with an un-threaded sewing machine needle, punching holes into the plastic sheet. Using a chalk pounce pad, the new stencil was ready for use in no time.

With this stencil-making method in mind, I sketched out the small stars and the feather garland in one of the eight identical sections. Then I pieced some plastic sheets together big enough to cover the entire area. Next, I traced the chalked-on stars and the feather's vein onto the plastic and off I went to my sewing machine for the hole punching part. Using this stencil, I marked all eight background sections using a chalk pounce pad and quilted them one at a time.

Q: When you plan your quilting for a particular quilt, what is the thought process you go through to ensure that the quilting fits the character of the quilt itself?

A: On the one hand, I'm a longarm quilter, but on the other hand I'm an avid piecer, too. With every quilt top I quilt – and I don't differentiate between my own and my customers' tops – my primary goal is to enhance the piecing. It is my understanding that the piecer has put his or her best ability and skills to work when piecing a given top. To make this



top into a quilt needs quilting – but the piecing mustn't be covered up in thread!

So before I start quilting a top, I need to know how the finished quilt will be used: A wall hanging can be much more densely quilted than a lap or cuddly quilt, for example. Then I try to determine what and how much quilting the top needs and which areas need to be emphasized. I like to pick up a theme from the printed fabrics in the top and to apply them to my quilting patterns. Most tops carry a message – open or hidden in the fabrics or blocks used – that I try to consider in my quilting. As I said before, when dealing with a top on my frame, most of the times I have the feeling that it is talking to me telling me what to do... Obviously this quilt was created to fit the theme category of the 2009 MQS.

Q: When you decide to make a quilt like this, that is your own special project, how do work out the time to get the job done. Do you specifically plan time to work on your quilt or do you just wing it, working on it whenever you can? What did you do for this quilt—did you just work on it exclusively until it was finished?

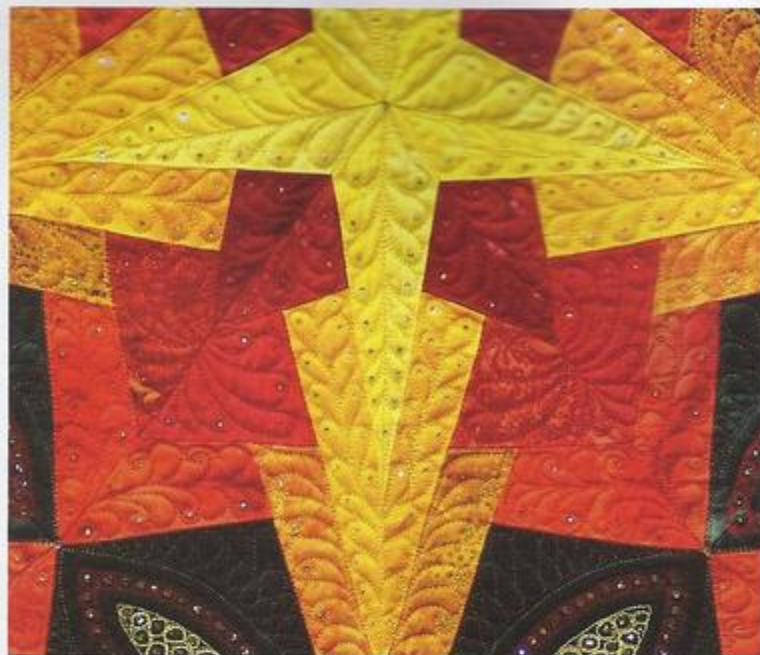
A: *Shooting Stars* was explicitly designed for the MQS 2009 theme *Fire & Ice*. Making a quilt to fit a specific theme is something I love and hate to do at the same time. When I'm exposed to a theme, I either know immediately which quilt I want to make – or I never will! I simply cannot toss around a theme for weeks and months trying to come up with something suitable. It doesn't work for me this way. If I don't know it immediately, I'm lost. Once the idea is there, I try to sketch it down on paper as soon as possible. Figuring out dimensions and details comes next, together with any wild new ideas, which usually means working out new procedures. When it's time to start sewing on my new top, I like to make a small sample of any tricky sections first. As I prefer to work on these special projects with as little interruptions as possible, I try to schedule fixed batches of time to do so. As you all know, this can be interesting during times when a lot of customer quilts are in the pipeline.

For a couple of years now, I have booked the weeks from mid-January to late February exclusively for quilting my show items of the year. I have explained this to my customers and they understand. In fact, they are more than cooperative – now I get the tops they want to show in the spring as early as October! *Shooting Stars*, for example, was mounted on my frame for a good three weeks. I stitched down the binding by hand in the evenings during our skiing vacation in February and had it spread out on my large dining room table for about a week to apply all those hotfix crystals. This was evening work, however, and did not interfere with my customer quilting.

Q: Can you tell our readers a little bit about the process of adding the jewels to your quilt? Was this an expensive thing to undertake and why did you decide to do it? Once you got started with adding the jewels, was it easy to figure out where to put them?

A: I must admit, those Swarovski Hot Fix crystals are fashionable, addictive, and dangerous! They add sparkle to many quilts – just perfect for the *Fire & Ice* theme. However, I don't want to think of them as that last bit that every quilt needs. I can imagine a lot of quilt styles that simply wouldn't look right if crystals were applied...Also, I think that there is a certain balance to consider of how much sparkle is suitable for a quilt. The danger is in not being able to see when you're going overboard with the crystal embellishment.

Hot fix crystals have a thin layer of thermo glue on their back. Every single crystal is picked up with an electric wand, which melts the glue. The crystal is then positioned on the desired spot on the quilt. BUT, it cannot be removed



again without leaving a glue spot on the fabric! What does this mean? Well, once you've started, there is no backing out! I like to use crystals with different colors and sizes on a quilt like *Shooting Stars*. I also try to embellish repeated areas (e.g. the eight feather garland) in one run rather than to work my way from edge to edge. In the same way that I'm trying not to overpower the piecing by the quilting, I try not to overpower the quilting by the crystal embellishment.

Hot fix crystals are expensive, too. Up front, I try to define an amount that I'd be willing to spend on the crystals. However, I have found that I'm extremely bad at estimating how many crystals I will need for a project – of course, my supplier surely thinks differently of this, considering the number of additional orders I have to place! And last but not least, when used in hundreds and thousands, these tiny little sparkling beauties considerably add to the weight of a quilt – which is a factor to consider when you have to ship it internationally!


Q: Did you learn anything while making this quilt that you would like to share with our readers? Or was there anything you would do different if you had the chance to do it all over again?

A: I don't think that I've every made a quilt without learning a little something

in the process. As I mentioned before, in this particular quilt I used wool batting for the very first time and have loved to use it ever since. As I try to never duplicate my work, the question of whether I'd do something differently if I had the chance to do so never occurs. Once finished, I don't reconsider any aspect of my quilts. When they are finished, they are done. Period. However during the "making-of" process, with each and every one of my quilts I get to a point where I don't like what I'm doing. My husband has defined this point as the moment when the light at the end of the tunnels comes into view – but it could still be a train coming towards you!

Q: Do you have anything else you would like to share with our readers about your quilt or the process of specifically creating a quilt to enter in a quilt show?

A: As I'm very busy quilting for customers and with my family

obligations, in recent years, my show quilts tend to be the only quilts I'm piecing. I have been known for some unusual ideas (like incorporating holes in a quilt as done in *Chocolate* in 2008) and for finishing off my quilts with irregular edges. The ideas always are there first – and it is only during the quilt-making process that I figure out ways to put the theory into practice. I seem to challenge myself with every new top I'm piecing – and I like to think of the current quilt as representing the best work I can provide at that time. Due to this point of view, I never return to an older quilt in an effort to improve it – by adding more quilting or embellishing it with crystals, for example. Each of my show quilts illustrates the status quo of my piecing and quilting skills at the time of the quilt's making. When examined in their entirety, they show the creative development that I have been going through. 

President's Corner

Continued from page 3

- Web Site Business Listing
- Regional Group Networking
- Discount Card – teamed with JoAnn Fabrics & Crafts

Thank you to all of our IMQA members who make this organization strong and vibrant. I hope you will take the time to enjoy the wonderful quilt shows throughout this fall season.

Keep quilting,

Mary E Hibbs

Mary E. Hibbs
President, IMQA



STORYBOWLS

By Martha S. Heimbaugh

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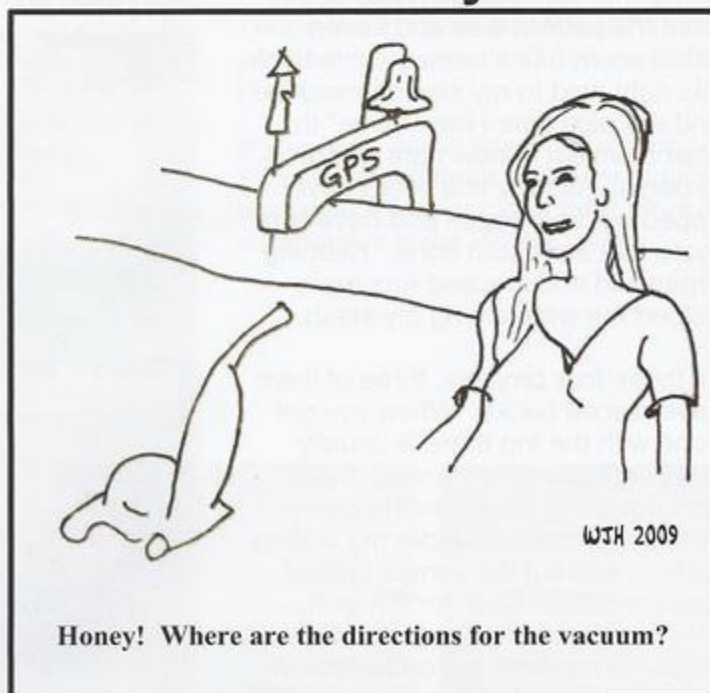
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Just Another Day



WJH 2009

Honey! Where are the directions for the vacuum?