



QUILTED BY ANITA SHACKELFORD WITH A GAMMILL OPTIMUM/STATLER STITCHER

ONE JUDGE'S LOOK AT Computerized Quilting

BY ANITA SHACKELFORD

Many longarm machines, and now some home sewing machines, give quilters the option of quilting with a stitch regulator. Some machines can also stitch a completely computer-controlled pattern. "Wonderful," you might say, "but how does quilting like that compare to traditional quilting? The technology's amazing, but is it fair?" You'll hear these questions being asked at almost every quilt show these days. As a quilter and a judge, I can easily put myself on both sides of the issue.

I've quilted by hand for 40 years. For me, it's relaxing, and it's the most beautiful work I can think of doing. I've been quilting with my sewing machine for about 15 years. It's faster, it's sturdy enough for my grandchildren to use, and it gives me hope that I might finally be able to use up some of my fabric stash. During the past two years, I've been quilting on a Gammill with a Statler Stitcher—to me, it's a miracle of modern quilting.

Working first on the computer, I can select a quilting design and make it any size I want, limited only by the working space between the rollers on the Gammill's frame. I can set a pattern to fill a block of every dimension, to follow a vertical or horizontal line, or to rotate at any angle. The computer will repeat patterns to fill a calculated space so that borders or pantographs come out even. I can choose from hundreds of available designs or use a computer-aided drafting (CAD) program to create my own. And yes, my machine has a stitch regulator for free-motion quilting, so I can work that way if I choose to.

The debate about whether it is fair to have computer-guided quilting in the same category as other methods of quilting is a familiar—and often heated—one. It is the same discussion that hand quilters have had with machine quilters and home-sewing-machine quilters have had with longarm quilters.

Computerized machines are amazing, but can they do the quilting all by themselves? I have invited several people to try my machine. If I

say, "Go ahead and quilt whatever you like," of course they say that they don't know how. So why would anyone think that using a machine of any kind will guarantee perfect results? I've had my Statler Stitcher for two years and still learn new things every day. Knowledge, practice, and experience in any technique are necessary to help every quilter improve. And when a quilter reaches a point of excellence, that's when ribbons are awarded.

I am surprised to find myself defending computerized longarm quilting when it is as far away from my traditional hand-quilting roots as anything could be. But as a judge it is my responsibility to separate myself from my own style of work and look for the best of the best, regardless of how the quilting was done.

When judges evaluate quilting, what do they look for? Balanced tension, clean starts and stops, good design, no distortion in the quilt top or back, straight lines, and smooth curves are on the list. Can these things be done well with computerized quilting? That depends on the skill and knowledge of the quilter. I believe quiltmakers and quilt show organizers need to accept computerized quilting just as they have accepted other forms of quilting. Judges need to do their jobs, looking beyond "how" a quilt was made and focusing on "how well."

Instead of fair or not, the question in a judged competition should be "Is the quilting done well or not?"

Award-winning quiltmaker Anita Shackelford is a judge, a teacher, and lecturer who is known for her fine applique and hand- and machine-quilting skills. ♦