

Putting it together

Anne Williams talks to two exhibiting groups

FRIENDSHIP, SHARING AND learning are reasons many of us belong to a quilting group. But some makers also wish to exhibit their work and so might start, or join, a smaller group for that purpose. Showing work as a group has several advantages over exhibiting as a solo artist, not least being the significant body of work required for a one-person show. And like all artistic pursuits, behind the scenes there are a lot of practical considerations and tasks to be done in putting on an exhibition, which are less onerous when they can be shared out.

A group environment can also be a catalyst for innovation, learning and developing skills, and exchanging ideas. Support and feedback on work-in-progress can also provide inspiration and encouragement if a creative 'block' is reached. And not letting the side down is a great motivator for not giving up and getting work finished.

We asked two groups about their experiences of exhibiting their work.

New Horizons

Hertfordshire-based group New Horizons was set up in 1993.

What were the reasons for setting up the group?

We had all just completed our City & Guilds (C&G) Patchwork and Quilting Part II (now called the Diploma), and some of us decided that we wanted to continue to meet up to further our knowledge in textiles.

How many members do you have?

Group membership has fluctuated over the years, being as high as twenty and as low as eleven. The average is somewhere in between – we currently have fifteen members. We don't have a lower limit but we try not to let the group get too large. Two of the original members are still part of the group.



Above:
The View from Here,
group quilt by New
Horizons

Was it always the intention that the group would exhibit?

Showing work wasn't the reason for setting up the group but we have developed into an exhibiting group. We have often been asked to present exhibitions alongside work shown in museums, and we were delighted to have a display at the Quilt Museum and Gallery in York. We've also exhibited twice at The Festival of Quilts.

What are the aims of your exhibitions?

Exhibitions keep us sharp with techniques, construction and achieving a high standard of work. They stop us getting stale, making sure we are moving forward with our textiles. It also gives us the opportunity to show and share our work – we want to encourage others to see that art textiles can be exciting.

How often do you exhibit work?

We usually have a new exhibition every other year. This wasn't planned but has just evolved as a workable interval, as most members have other commitments which mean they can't work full-time on textiles.

How do you select the themes for the exhibitions?

The selection process starts with a brainstorming session at one of our meetings. We are always pre-warned so lots of ideas are brought in to share and digest. Various possible ideas are discussed and gradually the choices are narrowed down until we have a vote for the final decision. We all find the excitement of a new theme stimulating.

Do you have 'rules' about what members can make for the exhibitions?

For our main exhibition theme we generally don't have rules about size, but occasionally our venue might make this necessary. But we do take into account the problems of transporting the pieces. If a member is unsure about the suitability of their design then this can be discussed at one of our



meetings as a solution can often be found to technical problems.

Is there something you do that makes your exhibitions unusual/unique?

It has become tradition that one of our members sets a challenge for the other members of the group. Rules are given which must be adhered to when making the challenge piece in which we each use our current or specialist technique. Our members often travel to interesting places bringing back fabric to share with the group and sometimes this is part of the challenge. For our latest exhibition the challenge fabric came from Malawi; each member was presented with three pieces which had to be incorporated into a three-dimensional item.

Where do you like to exhibit – or do you like to vary the type of venue?

We find the most important requirement is somewhere the public can easily find us. We've had many exhibitions in museums where we are usually able to display work for some weeks, it also has the advantage of disabled access and free access to all ages. But we are happy to take advantage of any venue where we can share our work with others.

Do the exhibitions go 'on tour'?

Our exhibitions often travel to more than one venue. We usually plan the exhibition for a particular venue. But we aim to make it flexible enough that the display can be adjusted so it can be shown elsewhere. It's rare that we show 'old' work but we did once have a retrospective exhibition. It was great to get old work out but hard to choose our favourite pieces.

What are the advantages of belonging to a group?

Working with like-minded textile artists is invaluable. Support is always there and from each other we get ideas, encouragement and constructive critique. And we gain a huge amount from the stimulation of seeing each other's work. It's exhilarating to see how the other members of the group translate their designs into a finished piece of work; this inspires everyone to do more.

New Horizons
You can find out more about the group at: www.newhorizontextilegroup.com

'Journeys'
 2–5 June
 New exhibition at Thaxted Guild Hall, Watling Street, Thaxted, Essex CM6 2PH

Above left:
 A selection of the Malawi Fabric Challenge items by New Horizons for 'Journeys'

Above right:
Temples, Temples, Temples by Stephanie Pettengell: 'Journeys', New Horizons

By Design

By Design was set up in 2000; members are geographically widespread, but several are based along or near to the south coast of England.

What were the reasons for setting up the group?

Members met at masterclasses hosted by Romsey Quilters in Hampshire in the late 1990s. One of the participants, Penny Bicknell, invited some of those attending to form a group with the purpose of exhibiting their work together. The group formed in 2000 and held its first exhibition 'As Nature Intended?' at The Festival of Quilts 2003. Exhibiting remains at the core of the group's activities.

How many members do you have?

Of the twelve members who signed up, ten are still members. One moved abroad soon after we formed and one member died two years ago. We have recently invited two new members to join us, so are now twelve. We don't want more members than this as we wish to remain a tight-knit group.

What are the aims of your exhibitions?

Exhibitions are an opportunity to share our work with others and to promote textile arts more generally. Producing work to show also



provides an impetus to continue developing our design and making skills to keep our work fresh.

How often do you exhibit work?

We aim to have a new exhibition every two or three years. But as our exhibitions go on tour we often have one or two different exhibitions showing in a given year.

How do you select the themes for the exhibitions?

We start by having a brainstorming session, often by coming up with phrases that are added to a list which can end up covering several pages. We then make a shortlist of around a dozen and then vote until we get down to the last one. We try to come up with ideas that are intriguing and not too specific so that makers have wide scope for interpretation.

Do you have 'rules' about what members can make for the exhibitions?

We've become well known for the working method we've adopted for our exhibition pieces, which we think gives the shows an unusual 'twist', and is something visitors seem to engage with and enjoy.

What is that method?

Having decided on how they will interpret the exhibition's theme, each member makes two similar

starter pieces. One starter piece is retained to be worked on as the maker chooses – there are no rules for this. The other starter becomes a 'travelling' piece to be worked on by three other members of the group; it is then returned to the original maker for completion. The second, third and fourth makers in the group pieces can respond freely to the original maker's idea, but they are not allowed to discard anything. The originator is not allowed to see the piece until it's returned to them for finishing, but other group members do get to see works-in-progress. Originators might be delighted or shocked by their travelling piece when it comes back to them, so completing it to their satisfaction can sometimes prove a challenge, and like the other participants they cannot throw anything away. The originator's solo and group pieces are displayed as a pair. Sometimes pairs are quite similar, but others might be radically different, providing an interesting counterpoint as to how individuals have interpreted the same initial idea. As well as their individual and group pieces, each member also works on three other group pieces. The key is not to get too close to the travelling pieces worked on – you do your bit and then let it go – and to have confidence in fellow group members' work.

Above left:

Northern Lights, a group piece started by Lyn Lambert and worked on by Janet McCallum, Christine Restall and Grace Meijer: 'Smoke and Mirrors', By Design

Above:

Aurora Borealis by Lyn Lambert: 'Smoke and Mirrors', By Design

Where do you like to exhibit?

We've exhibited in a wide range of venues and at many different events, both in the UK and overseas. We were thrilled to have an exhibition at the Quilt Museum and Gallery in York, and we've had galleries at several major shows, such as The Festival of Quilts and the Knitting & Stitching Shows. We also take part in local Arts Festivals, and have shown our work in Romsey Abbey and other non-quilting venues.

What are the advantages of belonging to a group?

On a practical level, it's easier to exhibit work as a group. But we all gain so much more than just showing our work. As well as friendship and comradery, we can bounce ideas off each other, offer technical support, and inspire and motivate each other to keep pushing our work forward.

INTERVIEWS BY ANNE WILLIAMS

By Design

You can find out more about the group at: www.bydesigntextiles.co.uk

'Smoke and Mirrors'

Tues 5 to Mon 11 July, 10–4

Exhibition launch at Lympington Arts Festival, St Thomas Church, High Street, Lympington SO41 9ND

A full-colour 48-page catalogue is available for £10 (plus P&P): grace@gracequilts.com