

Parsing the Artist's Statement

by Nanette Mathe

I had the opportunity a few months ago to judge a competition for Administrative Assistant of the Year at the company that I work for. It turned out that I knew no one in the competition – I haven't been there long enough, I guess. I thought, "this is great - I don't have to put aside my impressions or opinions of anyone, I simply can look at the attributes of each nominee and choose the best one!" However, as I was reading the complex questionnaire that each person nominating the Administrative Assistant wrote, I realized that, in truth, I was not judging the Administrative Assistant, but was judging the writing of the nominator. Interesting!

It started me thinking about Artist's Statements. As a judge, what is it about Artist's Statements that helps me understand what the artist is trying to do with the piece? Hmm . . . what do I need to know from the artist to help me understand?

What do I need to know? Well, I need to know about the design. If the piece is an adaptation or an interpretation of something in nature, or a building, or a person, I'd like to know where the inspiration came from. I ask myself, "what about the subject made the artist want to interpret it in needlework? Where were the challenges and how did the artist meet the challenges? What, if anything about the design should I know?"

If the artist has stitched someone else's design, did the stitcher change it? Did he or she add elements? Delete elements? Somehow make it his or her own?

Next, I need to know about the color choices. What made the artist choose the colors? Are they the colors found in the inspiration piece? Are they the artist's favorite colors? Are they colors that match the room the piece will live in? What, if anything about the colors chosen should I know?

Again, if the artist has stitched someone else's design, did he or she change the colors? If so, why? If I know that they've been changed I will understand that the artist has changed a piece to fit her or his personality . . . if I know.

Sometimes I need to know about the stitches that were chosen. I wonder why the stitcher chose that particular stitch. If the artist's statement talks about the stitches I can understand the reasons. If the artist changes the direction of the stitches, was it intentional or haphazardly done? If it's stated in the artist's statement I will know that it was intentional and can judge from there. Otherwise, I may assume that it was haphazard - not always such a good thing!

Artist's Statement continued

A judge looks at "form following function." If the piece is a beautiful piece of Japanese Embroidery, yet placed on the back of a jacket or vest, is it practical? Does the form of the piece really follow the function of the piece? I have seen this done, putting a piece of Japanese Embroidery on the back of a jacket - it was a beautiful addition to her wardrobe, but the person who was wearing it admitted that she never sat back so the chair would never rub on the silk and metal stitching. She also admitted that she kept her back away from drinks, plates of food, and cigarettes in fear that she would end up with a damaged piece that she could never repair. Sounds to me like this would be a real "downer" when wearing this piece to a social event, but this artist knew the drawbacks of this function and chose to do it anyway. If I looked at it without the artist's statement I might decide that the form certainly didn't follow the function and give it less points when I judge it.

A judge looks at the finishing of the piece and decides if the finishing is done well. If the finishing is different from the normal finishing, it needs to be explained. I did an extremely complicated Hardanger piece one time and submitted it for a correspondence course I was taking. I wanted to frame this piece after I got it back and had no intention of using it on a table or on the back of a couch. The instructor commented that it would certainly pull out of shape and would wear poorly because of its intricate work and many holes! When I told her what the purpose of the piece was, she wrote back that framing would work well as that would preserve the work. It would have helped if I had told her how I wanted to use the piece. A judge needs to know the purpose of the finishing.

Recently I judged a major show. If the artist's statement explained the above, it helped me understand. Things that didn't help me understand were:

- a list of the stitches used - names really don't matter, what counts is whether the stitches used were a good choice,
- a list of the threads used - again, names really don't matter, what counts is whether the texture of the threads produced the artist's chosen effect, and
- statements like, "I really liked stitching this piece" or "this is my favorite technique" etc.

While I'm glad that you enjoyed the experience, this kind of statement really doesn't help me make decisions about the work.

Artist's statements should not be more than one page. Anything longer and it becomes cumbersome to read. Many times the judge just doesn't have the time to read pages of explanations. I know I will skim the first few paragraphs and then stop because it becomes overwhelming. Some exhibits may even limit the number of words the artist can use. This can cause a lot of frustration when trying to explain what you were thinking and trying to achieve, so decisions must be made in order to give enough information. It may not be easy, but it is worth the effort.

--- *continued bottom of p. 9*

Kathleen Mackie Establishes Judging Scholarship

Kathleen Mackie established the NAN Judges' Certification Program in 1986 because she was committed to the exhibiting of needlework and sharing it with one's fellow needleworkers, and with the public. She felt professional judges, well versed in all forms of needlework and color and design principles, would elevate the discipline, and make it more valid to the art community.

Now Kathleen has funded a scholarship for those interested in judging, but for whom the tuition might be an undue burden. She hopes that others will contribute to the judge's certification scholarship fund so that it may continue to support those interested in becoming professional needlework judges.

Kathleen not only established NAN's Judges' Certification program but also founded one at the American Needlepoint Guild. She earned her Teachers' Certification from Valentine (now NAN) in 1981 and received the NAN Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004 for her extensive contributions to the needlework world.

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Artist's Statement continued

Finally, a word to those who choose not to write an artist's statement. What may be obvious to you, is not obvious to someone not in your head! You may think that everyone will understand the excitement you feel when you look at the piece, but they will not. An artist's statement will always help educate the judge and the observing public who can then make a better decision about your piece. Remember, the judge is looking at many, many pieces. You will do better in the judging process if you let the judge know what to look for and pay attention to!