



# The Wonderful World of the Journal Quilt

by Joanna O'Neill

Walk into almost any quilt show and you will see that a 'quilt' no longer has to be an expanse of exquisite piecing or stitching that will cover a double bed. Nowadays, as much exhibition space is given to wall hangings as to bed quilts. Many quilters – myself among them – never make quilts for beds but prefer to work on smaller pieces and some of us make not just small-ish wall hangings but really tiddly quilts – not 'quilts' at all really but quiltlets, or quiltlings perhaps. These are not strictly speaking 'miniature quilts', which have a respected tradition in competitions and should be exactly as described – a quilt in miniature, such that in a photograph without anything added to show the scale they should be indistinguishable from a full-sized quilt. The skill required to make one of these is immense, and many quilters wishing to work small prefer more forgiving requirements. Enter the Journal Quilt!

These seem almost ubiquitous now. The Contemporary Quilt Group, one of the specialist groups of The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, regularly has a display of members' Journal Quilts at the Festival of Quilts and many other shows. Each year the Grosvenor Shows include a competition for a pair of themed Journal Quilts. Individual quilt makers and textile artists blog on the internet about Journal Quilts, provide tuition in making Journal Quilts and offer Journal Quilts for sale. Search for 'Journal Quilts' online and you will be presented with hundreds, if not thousands, of images of these littlest of quilts.

But where did the idea originate and who first thought of the name? In the late 1990s, American textile artist Jeanne Williamson found herself wondering how she could give herself more time to 'play'. In the foreword she later wrote to a book I'll come to shortly, she says she decided to make one small quilt (10" by 8") every week throughout 1999 and that the purpose would be to experiment rather than to make beautiful pieces of art. She kept to her commitment and more, and seven years later she shared her project, still ongoing, with members of an internet forum who had been discussing journals.



**Monoprint**

After some debate the forum members agreed that they would each make one small quilt every month and because the project was developed from the idea of creating journals, they set the size at 8½" by 11" – the size of US typing paper. They called them 'Quilt Pages', as if they were quilted versions of pages from a journal book.

Collectively, these Quilt Pages formed what came to be known as The Journal Quilt Project and in 2006 a beautifully illustrated book called 'Creative Quilting: The Journal Quilt Project' was published by Interweave. Written by Karey Patterson Bresenhan, the book included the foreword by Jeanne Williamson. By then over 900 artists had taken part in the project, over 9,000 little quiltlets had been made and there had been exhibitions at many quilt festivals across the world.

And of course as with all brilliant ideas, other people picked up the idea and ran with it. In 2007 The QGBI's Contemporary Quilt Group jumped in, using A4 as the required size and inviting members to commit to a year at a time of making a Journal Quilt each month. Nine years later the challenge is still going strong, with a fresh size requirement each year to keep the creative juices flowing and sometimes an added 'rule' thrown into the mix. Whenever these little quilts are shown in public they draw plenty of attention and, best of all, they encourage people who admire from afar but dare not embark on 'making a quilt' to have a go after all. I have helped at some of these exhibitions and heard members of the public say, 'I could never make a quilt... but I think I could do this.' And when you love your craft and want to spread the word, what could be better?



**Hand embroidered felt appliqué journal quilts**



*Joanna's journal quilts from 2011*



*Painted stars*

From the very beginning of Journal Quilts, the idea has been that they should be fun. Journal Quilts ('JQs' to those of us in the know) can be perfectly finished small art works or simply creative play; an experiment into new techniques and materials or trials for a planned large-scale work. And they are brilliant! Full-size textile work, whether bed quilts or wall hangings, can be daunting to begin – an imperfect plan or a dodgy design might cause you to waste expensive fabrics and threads, not to mention your time. Then, once finished, what do you do with it? How much empty wall space do you have? How many beds needing covers? How many friends, children, aunts or dogs wanting your beautifully handmade quilts? ('Dogs' was a joke, but I have met people who have turned their surplus patchwork quilts over to dog beds!). But when you are working on this scale there is little commitment either of time or money and if it all goes pear-shaped, so what? Throw it away – or, much better, keep it as a lesson learned – and start again on something new.

While underway, JQs are so easy to manage. If you hand sew, a JQ is lightweight and comfortable on your lap and if you use your machine it is easy to slide under the needle. JQs are simple to take out and about too; fitting into all

but the daintiest of handbags. I wish I'd known about them twenty years ago when I was taking my children to piano lessons! Finished JQs are so easy to keep. There are any number of storage systems designed for A4-sized material; from plastic envelope pages in lever-arch files through box files and clip-lid boxes to filing cabinets. You can flip through your collection ('Look, I've made all these!'), and if you like to work in series then JQs are perfect as you can think through your ideas quickly while the inspiration is still fresh. Then later you can lay them all out and review them together.

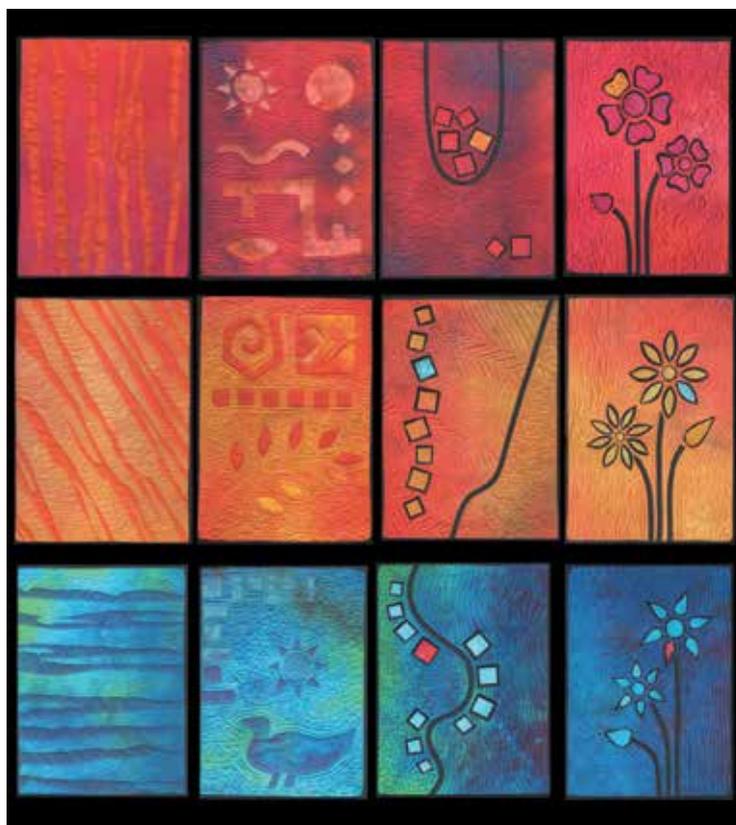
If you want to hang the best on your wall, the very small size of JQs makes them perfect for inexpensive mounting and framing. Photographing small work is often easier than large pieces too, and if you have access to a flat-bed scanner nothing could be simpler.

JQs are also really good as teaching aids in all sorts of areas and at present three of the specialist groups of The QGBI run 'Suitcase Collections' (The Miniature Quilt Group calls theirs a 'Handbag Collection'). Members volunteer to make a small quilt each to a theme. These are then collected, packed into a suitcase and offered for loan at a small fee. The collections have been hired by quilt groups, Embroiderers' Guild branches, schools and colleges, either to examine, analyse and discuss (and admire!) or to use for exercises – for example, to practise selecting work for an exhibition and then arranging the order of hanging.

It must be plain by now that I am very fond of Journal Quilts and have gained enormous pleasure from making mine. But I am a fair woman and there is one more question to be asked.

What are the disadvantages of working small?

I have considered this long and hard and my conclusion is...you won't have a big thing at the end of it. That's about it!



*Joanna's 2012 journal quilts*

### So how to get started?

If you can make a larger quilt you can definitely make a small one, but here are some things to bear in mind.

- If you are making your Journal Quilt as part of a challenge or competition, make sure you comply with the requirements. If rules state that you must use three layers with stitching through all of them, then do so. However, if there is no such requirement you might prefer to make your tiny quilt lighter and more flexible. You can drop down to just two layers, using commercial felt behind your top; this provides a little loft so that the quilting stitches show nicely and also forms a tidy backing.
- Binding the edges of your JQ is good but not essential. On such a small piece you might try finishing the edges with ribbon or couched cord, or use decorative machine stitches such as satin stitch or scallops. If you like to sew by hand, blanket stitch will do the job too and if you don't feel precious about the piece then running round with a close zig-zag will secure the layers perfectly well.
- Unlike a miniature quilt which requires miniature stitching, the stitches on a Journal Quilt need not be smaller than usual and 'big stitch' techniques like sashiko and kantha can work really well. If you enjoy hand stitching, or want to improve, a Journal Quilt is an easy and friendly place to start.
- Journal Quilts can use traditional techniques such as piecing or needleturn appliqué but are also a fun way to explore surface decoration like fabric paints, printing and bonded appliqué, or the OTT world of beads and buttons, sequins and shisha. Designing is easy on ordinary A4 paper – no need to scale up later!
- If entering a show or exhibition, you will probably need to provide your Journal Quilt with a hanging sleeve; these are usually less wide than full-size quilts, but the organisers will stipulate the width they want. If you are mounting your quiltlets for display at home, I find a strip of Velcro works well to fix the piece to mount board to be framed or direct to an artist's stretched canvas.
- Finally, every Journal Quilt deserves its own label! Just as you would name and date a larger quilt, name and date your JQ. You will be making so many of them, you'll be glad you did!

### Contact

Joanna O'Neill is available for talks and workshops. For more information visit her website at [www.joannaoneilltextiles.co.uk](http://www.joannaoneilltextiles.co.uk).