

Packing It In: Tips for Shipping Your Quilt

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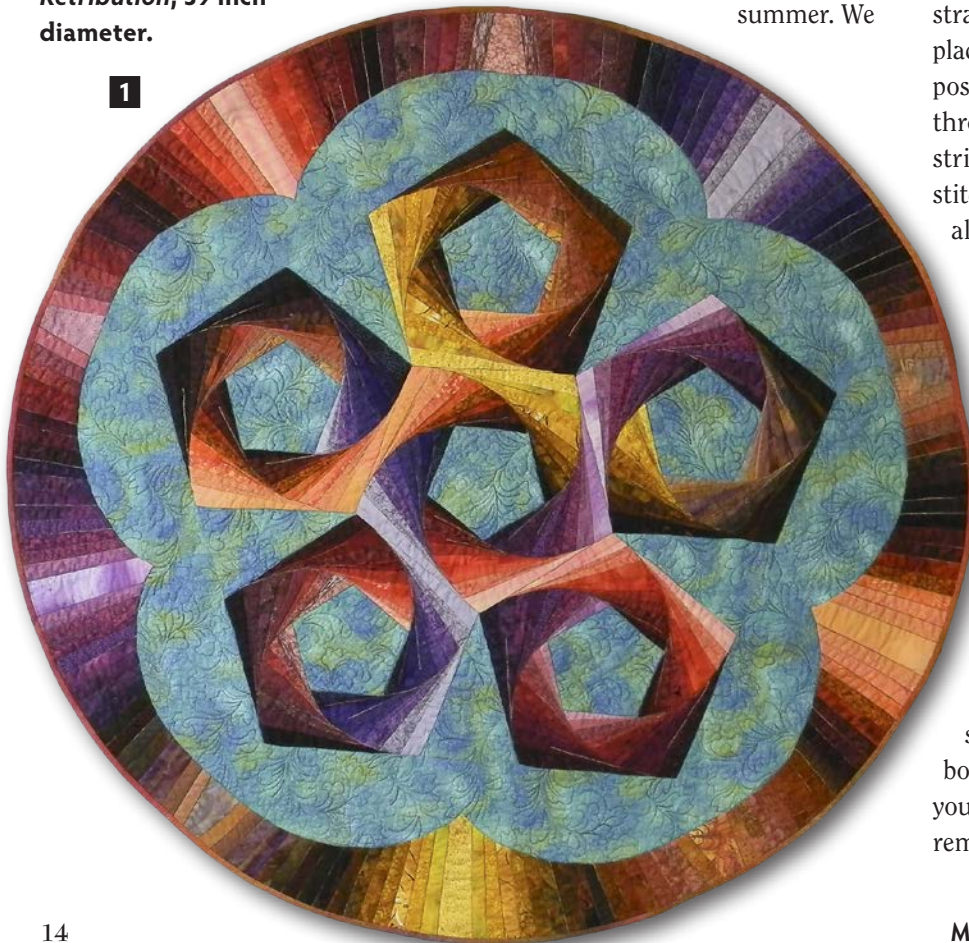
I recently sent two quilts off to hang in special exhibits. I always feel that shipping these cherished works out into the world is much like sending a small child off to wilderness camp.

If you are a parent, you know that all kinds of possibilities can be vividly imagined. Will my child be well behaved? Will her counselor like her? Will she play well with others? Will she be lost in the woods only to be eaten by ferocious, wild animals? It is no different for quilters. The scary thoughts of what might happen to our quilts are only fueled more by tales of shipping mishaps and missing quilts sites online.

I have a new appreciation for the receiving end of shipping after working on the Sacred Threads 2011 exhibit last summer. We

Retribution, 39 inch diameter.

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received boxes of all shapes and sizes from all over the country with quilts folded and packed in all sorts of ways. I saw packing methods that worked well and a few I would not recommend. Here are the choices I make to ship my quilts, and some of the lessons I have learned.

Preparing Your Quilt

Many elements factor into a successful showing, and prepping your quilt for display is one of the most important. Most quilt shows use a matrix of metal poles to hang the quilts on exhibit. Each quilt is usually required to have a four-inch sleeve attached on the back to slide a pole through to support the weight of the quilt across the width without bunching. These sleeves are easy to make and apply, and need not be a permanent part of your quilt. Cut a nine-inch strip of fabric as long as your quilt is wide. Finish each end by folding the fabric toward the right side and running a straight stitch along the edge of the hem. By placing the fold on the outside of your sleeve, the possibility of it snagging on the pole as it feeds through the sleeve will be eliminated. Fold the strip in half lengthwise with right sides out and stitch along the cut edge using a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch seam allowance and a medium stitch length. Run another stitching line about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in from the fold using a very long basting stitch.

(Photo 2) Press the sleeve flat, positioning the seams near the center, and press the raw-edge seam open and the fold to one side. **(Photo 3)** Position your sleeve at the top of your quilt, but rather than aligning it with the top edge, measure up from the bottom edge. **(Photo 4)** Mark the placement line with a length of painter's tape. Any variation in your quilt length will be suspended above the sleeve and your quilt will hang more evenly. Slip-stitch the sleeve in place by following the tape line at the bottom. Smooth the sleeve toward the top of your quilt and finish stitching it in place. Finally, remove the basting stitches from the length of



the sleeve. The extra play will allow for the bulk of the pole without deforming the quilt.

Some quilts that are circular or arched require special treatment. **(Photo 1)** It is not enough to simply run a sleeve across the width without providing some structure to the quilt to maintain its shape. The round quilts I have made use a series of tabs stitched into place at regular intervals.

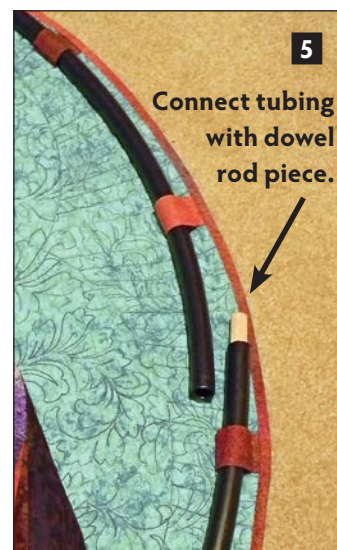
(Photo 5) A piece of flexible irrigation tubing, cut to the circumference of the quilt, slides easily through each of these tabs. The ends are joined with a length of dowel rod inserted inside both ends. The frame it provides is inexpensive and lightweight. It is easy to unpack and reassemble once it is time to hang the quilt. **(Photo 6)**

The quilt still needs a hanging sleeve attached one quarter of the way from the top in order to accommodate a hanging rod, but it is not dependent on the sleeve to maintain its shape, as you can see with my quilt, *Retribution*. Supply easy to follow directions along with your quilt to be sure

it is displayed as you planned. An arched quilt will require much the same treatment with a few exceptions. Rather than completing the circle, the first tab on each side should have deeper pockets where the tubing can rest, much like a garden arbor.

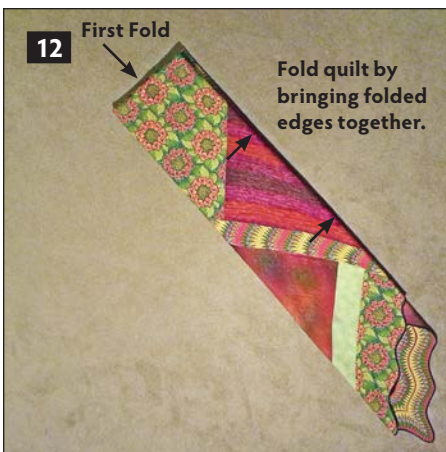
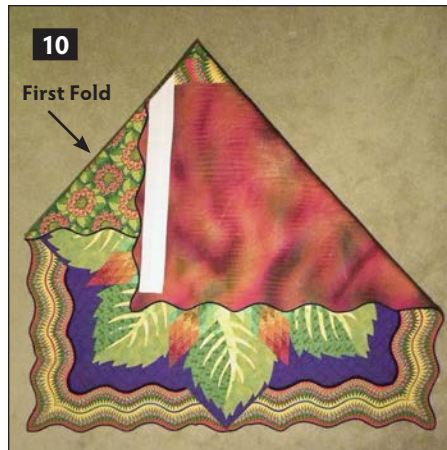
Document Your Quilt

Every quilt, whether it is travelling or not, should have a label attached to it somewhere, containing information for generations of future historians. Your label should include not just your name and the title of the quilt, but when and where the quilt was made and its intended purpose, for example, a gift for Aunt Martha. If you wish, you can make this label an integral part of your quilt by applying it before you quilt, making it nearly impossible to remove. Some competitions ask for the maker's name to be covered during judging. It is simple to baste a cover over your name that can be removed at a later date.





Seymour, 78 × 78 inches, placed flat on carpet.





If your quilt is travelling, it should also have a label with your contact information in case the quilt is somehow separated from its documentation. I use a luggage tag format and include my name, address, phone number and e-mail address. This can be pinned to the back or slipped inside a pocket near the label. **(Photo 7)** I have moved frequently enough to know that I do not want to re-label my quilts multiple times. This temporary format allows me to keep contact information current without having to make a new label.

Bundling Your Quilt

Even if you are able to hand deliver your quilt to its destination, you will need to fold it into a manageable size. There are several approaches, but using a diagonal folding sequence helps minimize the creases left in the quilt. Start with your quilt placed on a flat surface. **(Photo 8)** If you have pets, it might help to spread out a clean sheet first to prevent excess fur transfer. If your quilt has embellishments that could become entangled, cover it with a separate sheet to be folded along with the quilt. Begin by folding one of the top corners toward the center at a diagonal. **(Photo 9)** This bias fold will not crease as heavily as a fold on the straight of the grain, and any remnant of the fold will be pulled out by the weight of the hanging quilt. If your quilt creases easily, use wadded up acid free tissue paper or batting to fill out this fold. Bring the second upper corner in toward the center at a diagonal. **(Photo 10)** Fold up the opposite corner, taking care not to fold over the tip of the corner of the second fold. **(Photo 11)** Make the last fold



by moving one folded edge to meet the other. **(Photo 12)**

The quilt is now ready to be loosely folded or rolled from one end to the other starting with the top corner that was folded first. **(Photo 13)** Plan your folds so that the last corner lies flat in the bundled quilt. **(Photo 14)** Wrap the bundled quilt in a cloth bag or pillow case and once again in a clear plastic bag to protect it should the box become damp in transit. Do *not* use a bag you cannot see through. There are many tales of quilts packed in trash bags that were carelessly tossed into dumpsters by mistake.

There are several other techniques you might consider. One involves scrunching your quilt into a loose ball and nestling it into a box without any planned folds. **(Photo 15)** The jury is out on this method. Depending on your individual quilt, it will either eliminate all folds or create a giant mass of wrinkles. Another popular technique uses foam pool noodles or cardboard tubes to roll quilts without any folds. **(Photo 16)** This method works beautifully for smaller quilts and for local transport, but the long narrow boxes that accommodate these tubes are more subject to damage during shipping. The odd-sized boxes can create handling problems during sorting and freight transfer.

Packaging Your Quilt

Pleated paper, or corrugated cardboard as we know it, was developed by Oliver Long in New York in 1871 to serve as a liner for hat boxes in an effort to protect tall hats from damage. By 1890, it was being used to form shipping boxes that

revolutionized the export market by replacing heavy wooden crates. Today, corrugated boxes are readily available in a wide range of sizes, shapes and strengths. How do you know which one to use?

Close examination of the edge of a piece of corrugated cardboard reveals how the product is made. Sandwiched between two outside layers is a third layer that zigzags from one side to the other. It is glued to the outer layers to form a composite wall that is much stronger than the three layers laid flat. The weight of the cardboard and the frequency of the folds change the strength of the corrugated cardboard. Boxes are rated for strength in two ways: how much weight the box can hold inside, Burst Strength Test (BST), and how it will hold up in stacking, Edge Crush Test (ECT). You can find one of these ratings



stamped on one of the bottom flaps of your box. **(Photo 17)** The higher the number, the sturdier the box. Unless your quilt is extremely heavy, you will be more concerned with the ECT rating. Unlike the boxes stored in your basement or attic, where the light ones are carefully stacked on top, boxes shipped cross-country are often treated as equals. Your lightweight box travelling to a quilt show may well end up on a conveyer belt or stacked in a cargo hold between two boxes of barbells headed to a weightlifting convention. The body builder shipping his custom weights is more concerned with keeping the weights from bursting through the sides of the box, BST, than whether your box will be flattened in the shipping process, ECT. Boxes with a high crush-strength rating can be deceptively light weight, but are specifically engineered for strength. Most boxes only have one of these rating scales marked on them, but a box with a high burst-strength rating can be counted on to withstand the test of shipping if you are unable to locate one marked with a high crush strength.

Above all else, start with a new box. Corrugated cardboard can only hold up for a limited number of shipments. Each time it gets crunched or stacked, the folds in the composite compress slightly. The cardboard loses its stiffness and the box becomes weak. Remember, this box will need to ferry your quilt safely home again.

If you have any doubt if your box will hold up, you can reinforce the side walls with a few extra layers of corrugated cardboard. Slice up a second box or recycle empty fabric bolts from your local quilt shop. Inside each bolt is a pleated layer of cardboard strong enough to keep the fabric standing on the shelf for several years. **(Photo 18)** What better way to reuse one than by letting it stand guard over your quilt?

Use high quality packaging tape and seal all the openings in the box. It is not enough just to tape the flaps down from end to end. Add a length of tape to cover the open slits at each end. **(Photo 19)** This not only seals the box better, it stabilizes it from shifting out of shape. Add extra padding or bubble-wrap to prevent your quilt from shifting inside the box, but do not cram the box full. Add your contact information one last time as well as any special instructions for those who unpack your quilt. Place a thin layer of cardboard on top of your quilt bundle to prevent a



box knife from slipping through and cutting your quilt when it is opened at its destination. Be sure to include any and all paperwork that you were asked to send with the quilt on this side of the box so the workers at the other end do not have to dig to the bottom of your box to find it. Close and seal the box as you did on the other side. I add one last line of tape around the circumference of the box just for good measure. Label which side should be opened so the quilt can be unpacked in the reverse sequence you packed it. Be sure to put both the destination and return address on a clear label on the outside of the box. The shipping labels will repeat this information but in font so small that no one can read it. I like to make it as easy as possible for a delivery driver to get my box where it is going. Big, clear, typed or printed address labels cannot hurt. (Photo 20)

Shipping Your Quilt

There are several companies that can safely get your quilt to where it is going, and everyone seems to have their own preference. Whether you use UPS, FedEx or the US Postal Service, there are steps that you should take to ensure it does not run into trouble, or to lessen the blow if it does.

- ❖ Photograph and document your quilt before you ship it. Should the unthinkable occur, you will need to be able to verify the quilt is truly yours. This includes pictures of it in progress and whatever drawings you made along the way.
- ❖ Use expedited service that requires a signature upon delivery. These boxes are not simply crammed onto a truck bound for nowhere, but routed from one point to another with some level of tracking and accountability.
- ❖ Make your box recognizable by adding colorful tape or stickers. Workers moving your box from point A to point B might remember the box with the hula dancer sticker or Tiki design packaging tape if they ever have to track it down.
- ❖ If you find you have no choice but to ship your quilt in a used box, be sure to remove or cover all bar codes and addresses other than the current one. Errant bar codes can only serve to cause errors as the box moves

through the sorting process. If your quilt is headed to California, the last thing you want is for it to return to Florida where you ordered oranges online.

- ❖ Do *not* under any circumstance let on that there is a quilt inside your box. Make sure the word 'Quilt' is not used anywhere in the address, and declare the contents as linens or textiles rather than a quilt. Labeling it as a quilt simply invites theft.
- ❖ Insure the contents of the box for its full value. Most packages are insured by weight unless you ask for additional coverage. A quilt that is valued at \$1000 may only fetch \$100 in a loss claim without the proper level of insurance.

It all seems so simple, but every small step adds up to ensure a positive outcome. Just as the love you show your children as you pack them off to camp can easily be seen by their counselors, how you choose to handle and present your quilt makes an impression on the staff at the quilt exhibition. A quilt packed with care shows how much you value your work. Whoever unpacks it cannot help but treat it with the same level of respect. Your quilt will stand a much better chance of coming home safely. **MQU**

