

# *Jacob's Winding Ladders*

72" x 74"





Photo by Thilo Schüller

# Finalist Birgit Schieller Riegelsberg, Germany

## Meet Birgit

Coming from a family with lots of creative talents—my mother is a seamstress and my father a dentist with lots of craftsy skills—and having been into knitting and having tried almost any other craft there is, I discovered piecing patchwork and quilting by accident in 2001, when my almost four-year old son had caught chicken pox and I was banned from the office!

I taught myself the do's and don'ts of quilting from books and magazines and immediately started quilting on my domestic sewing machine. From the very beginning, I have tried to come up with my own twist to familiar patterns and, as early as February 2002, I was asked to teach classes at a friend's quilt store.

Since these humble beginnings, I have come a long way. I have been operating my successful longarm quilting business in Germany, Creative BiTS ([www.creativebits.biz/en](http://www.creativebits.biz/en)), with an international customer base since 2005. Over the last six years, I have won numerous awards in major European and international shows. I design, piece, and quilt all of my show quilts and garments myself. My piecing designs are based on traditional patchwork but I challenge myself to take these traditional roots to contemporary levels.

My studio is my hiding place and my comfort zone. Quilting is my fulfillment, my creative outlet, my therapy in all walks of life, and, yes, it also is a source of income for me and my family. I'm self-employed—and sometimes that's the worst aspect; the only person to

blame for any task that needs to be done or any project that has been accepted is me, myself, and I! But I love it this way and wouldn't want to have it any differently!

## Inspiration, Design, and Technique

Confronted with a theme for a quilting challenge, I either have a pretty clear-cut idea about what I want to do right away, or I most likely never will. When I read about Jacob's Ladder being the 2013 theme for The National Quilt Museum's New Quilts from an Old Favorite contest, I first of all looked up the exact wording of the story in the Old Testament. I then knew immediately that I wanted to find a way to express that the original biblical story of the ladder to enlightenment still has a very strong significance in our times and in modern life. I was all excited!

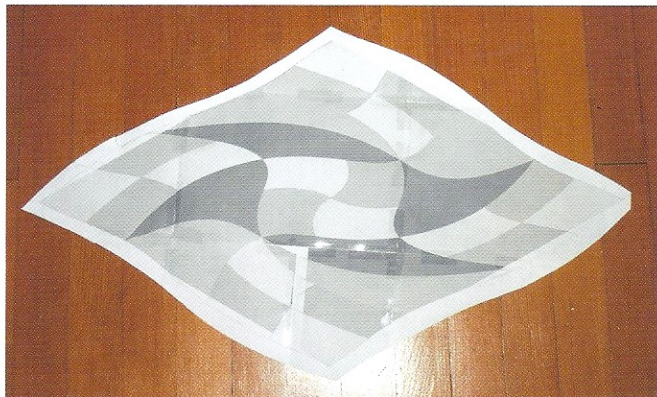
I learned about this contest in November 2011, about 10 months before the deadline, which definitely was far too early to seriously get to work on this project right away. But I began to toy around with my idea.

In order to achieve my vision of a star with wonky lines extending from and/or leading to a bright center, I knew some manipulating had to be done on the computer. I drew a basic Jacob's Ladder block in CorelDRAW® ([www.corel.com](http://www.corel.com)) and stretched it in a way that turned the square block into a 60-degree diamond. Using different distortion tools, I turned the straight lines into curved ones, testing which bends I liked best.



## Jacob's Winding Ladders

When I was satisfied with the result, I printed my diamond master template to size and from this I traced six identical diamonds on the thinnest embroidery stabilizer I could find.



Diamond master template

Then I was stuck.

Next, the holidays came and went, followed by quilt show entry deadlines and other projects, and all of a sudden, my generous 10 months had dissolved into thin air and all that was left before the contest deadline were a few short weeks! This turned out to be my greatest challenge with this project – TIME, or the lack thereof!

I decided to back out of this challenge, but after I had shared this decision on Facebook, two dear quilting friends of mine stepped up. Kimberly Einmo, whom I had shown my draft to half a year ago, insisted that I simply *HAD* to make a quilt from this design and the other, Leona Harden, pointed out that this project needed neither to be a full-size quilt nor to be pieced! These two statements tickled my ambition so that I

got to work right away. Thank you, my dear friends, Kimberly and Leona!

So, on a Friday night exactly two weeks before I had to ship the finished quilt (!), instead of working on the customer quilts piling up high in my studio, I pulled out dozens of batik fabrics from my stash to find the ones that spoke to me. Although I had never been a convinced fan of raw-edge fusible appliqué, I jumped in with both feet and had a blast! What fun it was to cut out the exact size patches, to peel off the paper from the fusible webbing on the back, to arrange the patches on the foundation according to the outlined pattern and to fuse everything in place one patch at a time! I felt as if I was assembling a mosaic. It was a quite different way to “piece” a quilt top; plus it was incredibly FAST!



Assembled diamond

I sincerely am planning to include more fusible appliqué in my work in future projects as this adds quite a bit of spontaneity and surprise to the process.

When the six curvy diamonds that form the star were assembled, I had three choices about how to position them—with all the light yellow tips forming the center (below left), with all the dark golden tips forming the center (below center), or the alternating version (below right).



Choices.....



choices....



choices!



*"Time turned out to be my greatest challenge with this project."*

After some more playing, contemplating, discussing between me, myself, and I, I chose the third option since this setting added the most movement to the piece. The "ladder" bands marking the long axis of the individual diamonds now seemed to alternately extend from and lead toward the center of the star.

With just the six diamonds in place, I thought that there was too strong a focus on the "star" aspect. What could I do?

I turned to my master diamond template again and while laying it out onto the assembled top, I discovered that rotated by 60 degrees, it would fit exactly in between the outer portions of two pieced diamonds! What would have been more logical than to decide to add an uneven edge to the quilt, as this is something that I regularly do in my show quilts? In order to achieve this effect, I traced along the outer edge of the master template and—voilà!

With the master template in place, I also realized that thanks to fusible appliqué I could "extract" certain patches from my design and add them to the otherwise plain background sections with the help of more raw-edge appliqué. Thus, I prepared and cut out six more sets of "ladder" band patches, then arranged and fused them in alternating color gradations around the center star.



Creating the "halo" effect

As an effect of connecting the outer tips of two neighboring star diamonds with a "ladder" band, the star seems to have a halo. At the same time, all of the ladder sequences or bands are connected. This not only softens the geometry of the design a bit, but more importantly it expresses my intention of showing that the original meaning of the biblical Jacob's Ladder story still has relevance today: The roads we are traveling are all surrounding the center—the origin and utmost destination. As long as we are aware of this center within ourselves, we will be getting there—no matter how windy the roads may be!

The cutting, fusing, and assembly process of this quilt top was completed about 48 hours later on Sunday evening! When I loaded my quilt sandwich onto my machine the following Monday, I felt the strong urge to secure the edges of the fused patches but still wanted to play around with quilted and non-quilted areas which I love to do!

Recently, I had treated myself to a six-spool collection of variegated YLI silk thread and this was the perfect project to use them on—all of them! I opted to do some very dense quilting along the edges of the individual patches to avoid any fraying issues in the future complemented by various whimsical quilting designs that change from color to color.

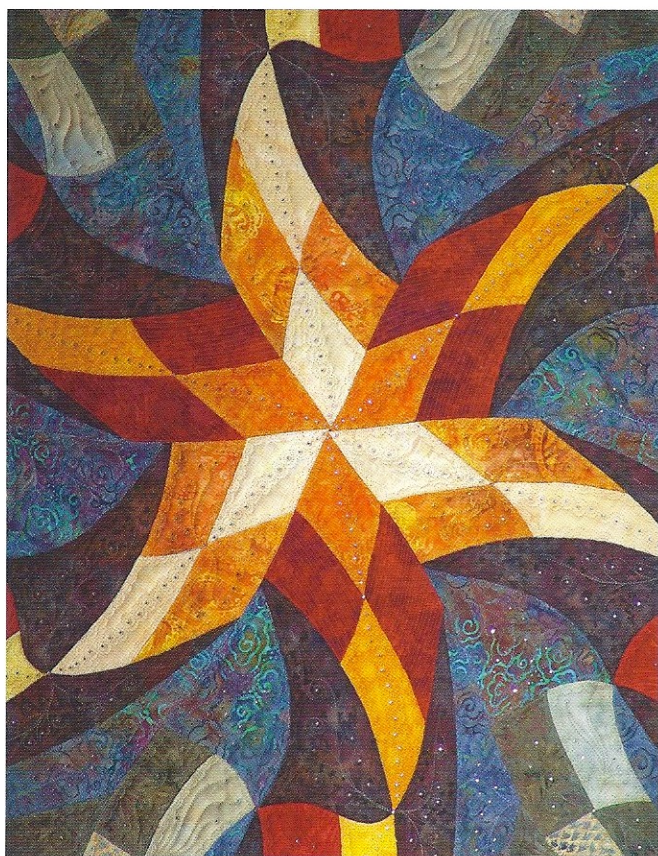


Close-up of the quilting



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I always make sure to include quilting designs that are suitable to accommodate hotfix Swarovski crystal embellishment later on. That's one of the reasons that you very often find pebble and various style swirl quilting designs in my quilts.



Star center

To complement the wild and dense quilting of the star patches (which was completed on Thursday evening), I opted to stay a bit more formal and subdued in the background quilting so I chose to quilt semi-whimsical feathers bearing in mind that the outer edge of the quilt would be curvy and irregular. I picked a spool of YLI metallic thread from my thread stash noticing that it was a *SPOOL* and not a *CONE* but not paying any attention to the yardage. I'm sure you can guess what happened. After less than half of the background quilting, I ran out of thread on a Friday evening with no local store carrying this type of thread and no chance to put in a rush order anywhere—remember, I'm located in Germany! I had to have the quilt finished by Wednesday evening of the

next week because of the impending deadline. After several hours of angst, I realized that there was just one thing to do—RIP! And I ripped... Friday night, Saturday morning and afternoon, Sunday morning and afternoon, and finished the job on Monday morning! After days of ripping, I completed the background quilting using a thread that I triple-checked that I had enough of on hand and it only took me three or four hours!

I took the quilt off the frame on Monday evening and used my master diamond template to cut the curvy outer edge. The double-fold bias binding was attached by machine and hand-stitched to the back that night and the following morning.

When all the sewing was done, I took out my collection of Swarovski crystals and another of my favorite toys—the “magic” crystal applicator wand! I always try to distribute the right number of crystals evenly over a quilt top so that the viewer gets the impression of randomness, although each and every rhinestone has been positioned with a purpose. Despite the *VERY* tight time frame, I had fun with the “crystallization” process.

For blocking, I took over my dear son's bedroom on Wednesday—which luckily was one of the days that he is at school all day—and booked my husband for that same night for the final photography session. QUILT DONE!

I still cannot believe it, but I made this quilt from scratch within two weeks, which I never thought would be at all possible! A huge thank you to everybody who followed the process, let me rant, and who offered support during this time. Looking back, the making of this quilt actually is a good example of what I'd like this piece to express: The roads may be windy and unforeseeable things may occur, but as long as we don't lose our perspective and focus on what's important, we can achieve anything—even if it seems impossible along the road.”



