If You Can't Read It, Does It Still Say Something?

by Glenys Davies

Thinking about text in quilts, I realised that I tend to use text that can't be read and, from a bit of research, I noticed that other quilters and artists do, too. This got me wondering why, what was the point?

Here is the result of my pondering. It's not a definite survey by any means, more a set of first thoughts and, if the question interests you, do please add your views!

Above: *Kimono* by Glenys Davies

One obvious type of unreadable (by many people) text are words in an unfamiliar language. I included a panel in Japanese in my entry for the Lullingstone 'Silk' Challenge (above right). I copied it carefully from the drawing I was using as inspiration. It was important to me to get it right – I took it off and put it on again when I realised that I had sewn it on upside down. But I have no idea what it actually says. I may well have forged someone's signature. I just hope it's nothing offensive! So why did I include it? To add to the atmosphere, give the piece a touch of authenticity, and, purely in design terms, balance the composition. I feel the work would certainly be weaker without the text, so it is playing a significant role.

Many languages and letter forms can be very attractive visually – perhaps even more so when they are not immediately readable. Think of all the artists who are inspired by Latin manuscripts and Celtic forms. And, to many people, letters or words from such ancient languages carry extra meaning by bringing with them a sense of age, of referring to times past. Runic quilts, some claim, can even incorporate something of the power of the Rune when made 'with specific intention'. So, with the right rune one can, for example, gift hope to a friend (or presumably something less pleasant if so inclined!).

I came across an interesting example of the use of ancient text in work by Willy Doreleijers, who juxtaposed Phoenician, the oldest known alphabet, with depictions of modern texting devices (see *Fenische E-reader,* page 33).

Another way to use text making it difficult to read is to use partial letters or sentences, or to distress the text or obscure some of the letters. This can actually add to the visual impact and the meaning conveyed – probably