



# Portuguese Influence

**Natalia Manley** tells us about her personal experience of exhibiting at the Festival of Quilts

LAST YEAR I was invited to show a small selection of my work at the Festival of Quilts. It was an unforgettable experience which started 18 months before the show. I received a letter from Andrew Salmon inviting me to exhibit but also telling me that it would be a very small space as the show was already finalised and he had only just discovered my work. Of course I was over the moon because although in 2004 the Festival was only in its second year, I knew from the moment I set foot inside the NEC that this was a very special event.

The way the quilts are displayed, the individual galleries, the Quilt Academy - not to mention all the traders - all contribute to make this the quilt event not to miss in the UK. I immediately booked myself a room at The Hilton and a place at the Gala Dinner for the 2004 show - my excuse being that I had to prepare myself for the 2005 show!

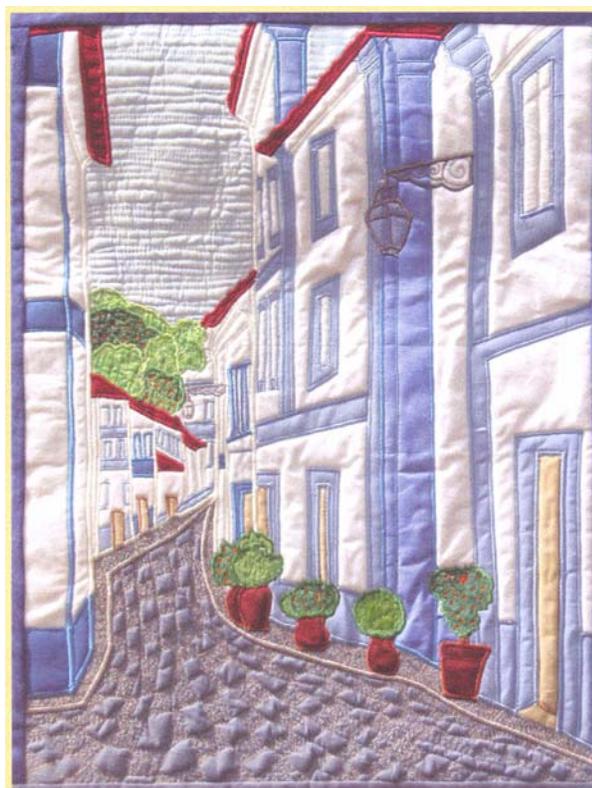
I had been planning for quite a while to make a collection of quilts inspired by memories of my childhood in Portugal and this seemed the ideal opportunity. I wanted to show quilts that were special to me and decided to call my exhibition 'Private Universe'. I came to England when I was 13 and I have now hit 50, but naturally I just had to visit Portugal again (this was, after all the perfect excuse),

though I didn't actually get there until November 2004.

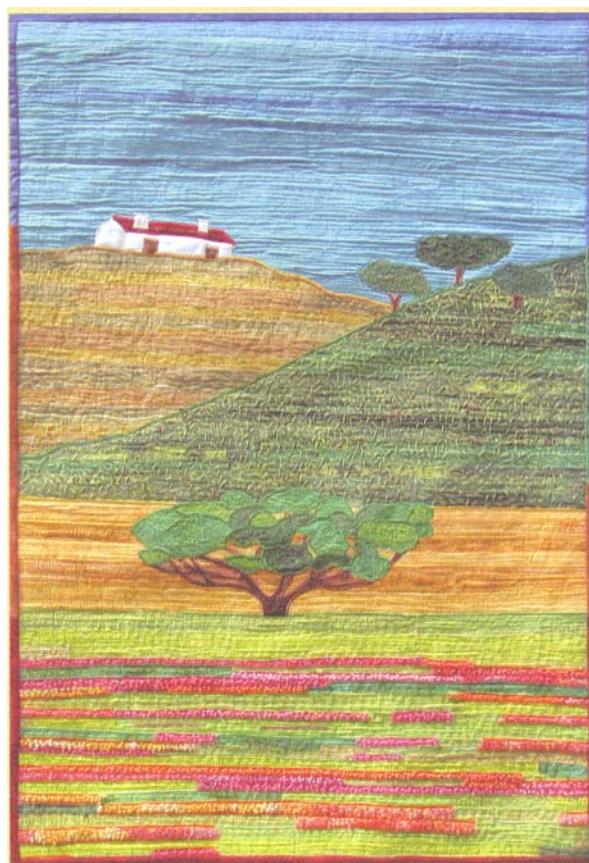
I came back full of ideas and planned to start straight away but, alas, nothing ever goes as smoothly as planned, and as a consequence of a period of ill health, I didn't actually get down to work until the end of February. Panic was now beginning to set in - what if I got sick again and couldn't make any quilts? Happily my husband reminded me that I have at least 50 quilts in the house that I've never exhibited, which was some reassurance.

I finally got going in midMarch and started by making my favourite quilt in my Portuguese collection, 'Avis', a view of the town of Avis where I went to school for a year, at the age of 6. I chose the view which greeted me every morning as I walked from my grandparents' farm across the bridge over the Maranhao Dam, about 3 miles away.

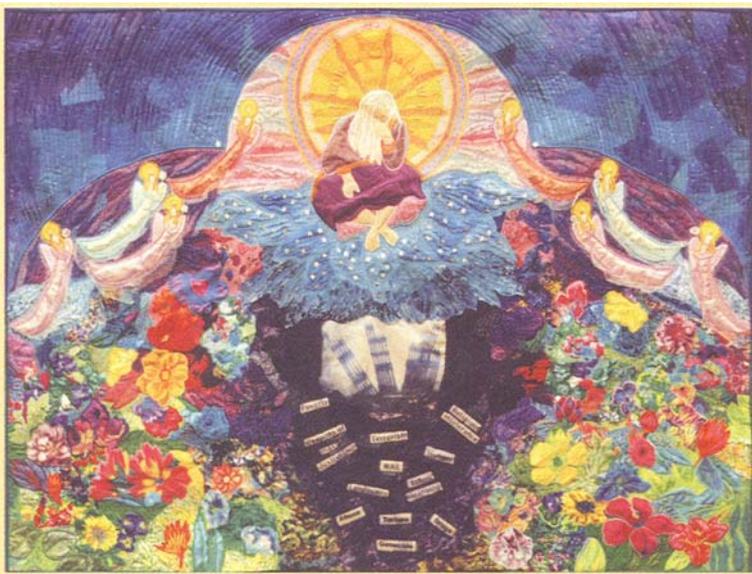
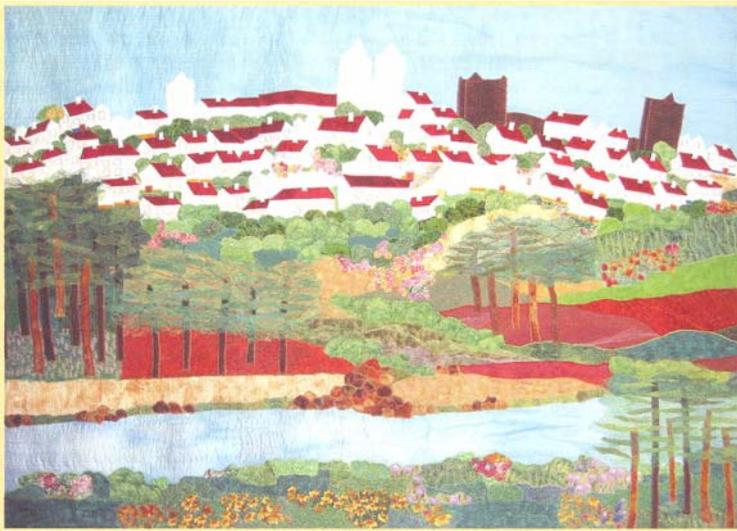
Avis is a medieval town in the Alentejo region of Portugal where I was born. It is the hottest part of Portugal and temperatures of 40°C in the summer are not unusual. It is an ancient land with vast endless plains, thousands of cork oak trees, olive groves, eucalyptus and orange trees which line the streets of sleepy little white towns, each on top of a hill with, of course, a little white church, the centre of everyday life. It is as yet



*Alentejo Street*



*Alentejo*



Top to bottom:  
*Avis*  
*A midsummers  
nights dream*  
*Gods despair*

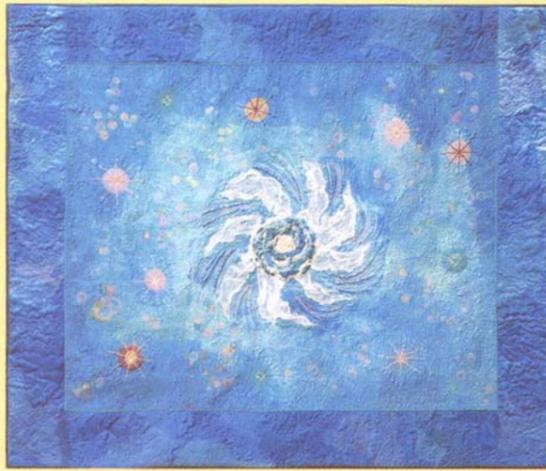
undiscovered by mass tourism and I wanted to capture its magic before it all inevitably changes. Other quilts in the collection include 'Alentejo Street', 'Alentejo', and four other quilts which focus on the other area of Portugal where I spent the rest of my time there, just south of Lisbon along the Sesimbra coast and Arrabida Hills.

I plan to continue the series and more quilts are already planned but as I'm lucky to live now in this beautiful England I will also be making some pieces that celebrate Henley and the Oxfordshire countryside. The first of my 'British' collection, 'A Midsummer's Daydream', was sold to an American collector as soon as I made it, but you can still see it on my website (see panel, page 16).

I managed to make seven large new quilts for the Festival as well as designing and making a collection of six quilts based on Japanese art, to sell as patterns at the show. I also put together a CD-ROM which shows 20 of my quilts and includes full descriptions of how they were made and the inspiration behind each one. These sold very well at the show and I'm now designing a new collection and putting together another CD-ROM.

As well as making all the quilts I also agreed to make a quilt to be given away as a prize in the Steve Wright Show on BBC Radio 2. The young couple who won it met me at the show and we discussed their tastes and requirements. I've made the quilt - you may have seen it in issue 105 of *The Quilter*, Winter 2005. (You can also see it on my website, along with a short film of my exhibition and a link to the BBC website - Videonation section which features a short film of me at work.)

We were asked to set up at the NEC the day before the Festival opened, and so with my dear, very supportive husband, I set off at the crack of dawn, making a stop at the BBC Radio Oxford studios where I had agreed to be interviewed on the Breakfast Show. This was apparently a great success, with hundreds of *God's Despair* people calling the



Top to bottom:  
*Cosmic Rain*  
*Four Seasons*  
*Galactic Daybreak*

station to find out about more about the show and my work.

We set up quite quickly at the NEC despite finding that the measurements of the gallery that I had been given didn't match the finished gallery - it was even smaller! So we had to get the workmen to rebuild a wall, which meant they had to repaint it and then we had to wait for the paint to dry. Still, this was just as well as I had to re-plan the whole exhibition since all the walls were now different sizes. Luckily I had brought a number of extra quilts with me so in the end we were able to hang a total of 23 quilts.

Despite all the initial panic, everything then went very smoothly - largely thanks to my husband's inspired idea to bring his own drill. This meant we didn't have to wait for the workmen to hang the quilts". and my husband suddenly found himself very popular amongst the other exhibitors!

He stayed with me until Friday morning but came back again on Sunday with my son, who thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing - and to hear him talk to visitors you could be forgiven for thinking that he had made the quilts himself! My son is 24 and a music producer/composer. He has been 'trained' from birth to love quilts, so it was no surprise that he found the show amazing and had an opinion on every quilt.

I can't really explain the thrill and excitement of the whole show. From the moment we arrived on Wednesday morning to Sunday night when we packed the car again, it was non-stop. I didn't sleep, I forgot to eat (that's a first!) and I thought and talked of nothing else but quilts.

I also joined in all the evening parties: the gala dinner with my husband as guests of Cotton Patch; the International evening at the Botanical Gardens; and the line dancing evening - although I only watched, it was great fun!

I was thrilled and amazed by the reaction to my work. So many people told me that my gallery was

their favourite and that my work was a breath of fresh air, that I found myself with tears in my eyes a lot of the time. The whole experience was well worth all the effort and sleepless nights - not forgetting the absolute luxury of being able to see the quilts before the show opened and every day before and after hours: brilliant!

One thing in particular has stayed with me: quilters really are the nicest people. So I would like to say a big thank you to all those who looked after me during the show, including the ladies from Southampton Quilters whom I had met the year before and who came to visit and praise me; Lin Fuller from Oldbury; the lovely American couple from Project Linus whose name escapes me but were terrific; Beatrice Huber from Zurich whose address I lost - so if you're reading this Beatrice, please get in touch; and Margaret Hopkins from County Gavan, who insisted on looking after my exhibition twice a day so that I could grab a quick coffee.

Such kindness from total strangers really does prove what I already knew - that quilters *are* terrific people!

However, none of this would have been possible without Diane Huck, who told Andrew Salmon about my work - and, of course, Andrew himself, whose brilliant idea and great professionalism makes it all possible. So as they say where I come from: *Muito obrigado, Senhor Salmon!*

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A collection of Natalia's quilt patterns and her CD-ROM are available for sale through her website:

[www.natalia.omnia.co.uk](http://www.natalia.omnia.co.uk)