

Figures in fabric

Gillian Cooper designs for an exciting future

WHEN WE MADE our wedding vows 20 years ago, I don't think my husband really understood what he was getting into when he said 'for richer, for poorer'. You see, at that point I was an ambitious young accountant who liked crafting at the weekends, including cross stitch. I can't say that any of my projects was particularly successful, but I was very enthusiastic. I started buying fabric because it looked beautiful rather than for any particular use. But, with a habit like that, obviously it wasn't long before I discovered quilting and my true craft/art vocation. Accountancy ambitions went out of the window, along with my job, and I went to Goldsmiths, University of London, to study textile art for four years.

After graduation I started on my new career as a textile artist/quilter/artist who uses textiles (or whatever you want to call me), with sidelines in writing about textiles, and running textile and art workshops. Many people have commented on what a brave decision it was to change direction like that but, in all honesty, at the time it was easy. It would have been much harder to continue as an accountant for another 30 years with textiles as a hobby – I've always been a bit 'all-or-nothing'!

Working practice

Fast forward ten years and I now live in rural-ish Scotland, have three children, and a lovely, light, warm, spacious home studio, where I create my artwork and teach classes. As I write, 'Unsung Muses', my latest body of work, is hanging at Farfield Mill in

Sedburgh, Cumbria, and it's fantastic to see it all in one space – the culmination of four years' work. It all sounds pretty idyllic, but it isn't always the case; you wouldn't have liked to have been near me recently when I was trying to tidy my studio to convert it from a personal workspace into a teaching one. At least my husband knew when we got married that I have no ability in housework – luckily that wasn't part of the wedding vows.

My artwork doesn't fall neatly into any category such as quilting or fine art, which is an interesting place to work. I sometimes define my pieces as 'impractical stitching' – definitely no curtains or dressmaking for me. Since it's not meant to be functional, I've moved away from straight edges and binding, although my work still comes from a starting point of quilts.

The question I get asked most often at exhibitions is, 'Where do you get your ideas from?'. A large part of it is just being open to what you see around you; one of the joys of being an artist is finding beauty in the mundane. However, the starting point for 'Unsung Muses' was an Ancient Greek Cycladic figure at the British Museum that I saw 15–20 years ago. I knew I wanted to create something from it, but I also knew at that time I wasn't up to it; it was only after an aborted project based on dolls that it finally started coming together.

Although I don't keep beautiful sketchbooks, I do keep a form of artist's journal, where I jot down notes and lists and make quick sketches or rough drawings of ideas. These notebooks are very



Above:
Gillian hanging a figure in
'Unsung Muses'

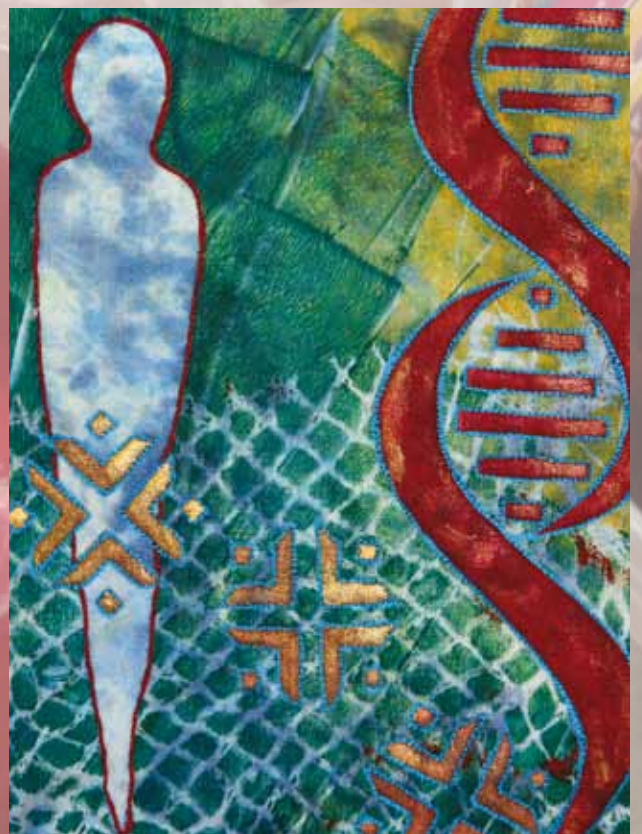
Below:
Forgotten Figures 1; 'Unsung
Muses'

Background:
Dyeing silk fabric

Opposite page
Right:
'Unsung Muses', detail

Far right:
'Unsung Muses' at Farfield Mill

Below right:
Stitching on printed and painted fabric





valuable to me as those words and drawings lead me at least mentally into a world of completed designs. For the first figures, which were made in 2011 for my solo gallery at that year's Festival of Quilts, most of the designs were conceived in my head in swing parks or soft play areas while the kids were occupied. The figures, which are roughly 6 feet tall, were drawn out full-size on lining paper;

the piecing for them developed as they were made. I did try starting with smaller models, but given the scaling-up involved there was no way of knowing whether it would actually work without making one full-size. Luckily, I had worked out a suitably solid quilt sandwich, with wadding in the middle, medium-weight Vilene on each side, and then an outer layer of fabric on each side of that (the figures are double-sided). To start with I butted the edges of the fabric but that took too long, so I had to develop a way of overlapping the fabrics that was quicker and which, I think, gave a nicer finish.

Evolving figures

After the initial series was made for the Festival of Quilts, I realised that I didn't feel I had finished with the subject matter of forgotten goddesses and where they live in our collective memory. When I started working on the topic

again, the website Pinterest (<http://uk.pinterest.com>) was up and running, and it has been a fantastic resource for images of ancient sculptures and new avenues to explore. I came to realise that although I had started from a single Ancient Greek sculpture, this type of figure was universal, occurring around the world in many different cultures more than 3,000 years ago. I also became more interested in the patterning of figures, much of which is no longer visible to the human eye. In addition to Pinterest, I scoured second-hand bookshops for books including photos and information on ancient figurines, and dragged my family to many museums so that I could photograph and draw.

The work has changed and developed as I've gone along. Although you may not be able to see the link with the earlier pieces, for me the progression is perfectly logical. I became quite obsessed with a design on a figure I had seen in a book which gives a pattern a bit like DNA – amazing considering it was painted thousands of years before DNA was discovered. It has started to appear on lots of my pieces lately. The way I'm patterning my fabric has also changed. The original pieces were all made using pieced fabric, Dye-na-Flow paint, dye and Markal Paintstiks. But since I started teaching City & Guilds (C&G) Patchwork and Quilting, I've rediscovered my love for printing, and more recent pieces have



Left:
Gillian's studio

Below:
Waves of Time: 'Unsung Muses'

included screenprinting, thermofax printing and monoprinting using thickened dyes, acrylic paint and Inktense bars, often on a wholecloth. Sometimes I've even used all of these techniques on one piece. What hasn't changed is the heavy stitch outlining important details, and a degree of randomness in my work – an openness to happy mistakes, if you like. This approach means that I do create quite a lot of pieces which I feel don't 'work', but for me this is a better trade-off than having the work so pre-planned you know exactly what it will look like before you start putting a needle to fabric. Personally, I feel if you have it so planned out then there's no point in stitching, as you've already created the work on paper – but I can see that that approach does work for many others.

I've also been trying to do more traditional drawing in a sketchbook, as I have a bit more time to do this now my children are at school. I increasingly value these skills as they enable me to be more ambitious in my quilts. Previously most of my work had been photographically based; a tutor at art school once told me that I could draw much better than I thought – it was just that I drew with a camera.

Moving on

As already mentioned, I also teach. Having run workshops for other groups, taught C&G for the Loch Lomond Quilt Show and had our garage converted into a studio, I decided at the end of 2014 that this year would be the year when I finally took the big step and started running classes myself. The last few months have been a huge learning curve as I've registered to run C&G classes, made my studio visitor-friendly, thought about marketing and, lastly – the enjoyable bit – designed the classes. I'm thrilled that so many people want to undertake the C&G Certificate and Diploma courses in Patchwork and Quilting to further their journey into creative quilting, and am looking forward to these courses starting this June. To cater for those who don't want such a commitment, I'm also running 'Friday Fun Days', with a different technique each Friday, so people can pick and choose.

After the summer, I'm also going to run some shorter non-Certificate classes. This is all very exciting and has the added practical benefit that I need to keep our house tidier if I'm having people in my studio regularly!

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Find out more about Gillian and her classes, and read her blog, at www.gilliancooper.co.uk. You can also join her 'wasting time' on social media at www.facebook.com/gilliancooperartist or on Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest as @gilliantextiles.

Forth Valley Open Studios, 6–14 June

Gillian is taking part in Forth Valley Open Studios when you can visit her in her studio and have a go at some surface design techniques. Her studio is open 12 noon–5 on Sat 6 to Mon 8 June and Thurs 11 to Sun 14 June, at 21 Greek Thomson Road, Balforn G63 0RE.

European Patchwork Meeting, 16–19 September

Gillian has a gallery at the Meeting held in Ste Marie-aux-Mines, Alsace, France this September. Find out more about the event at www.patchwork-europe.com