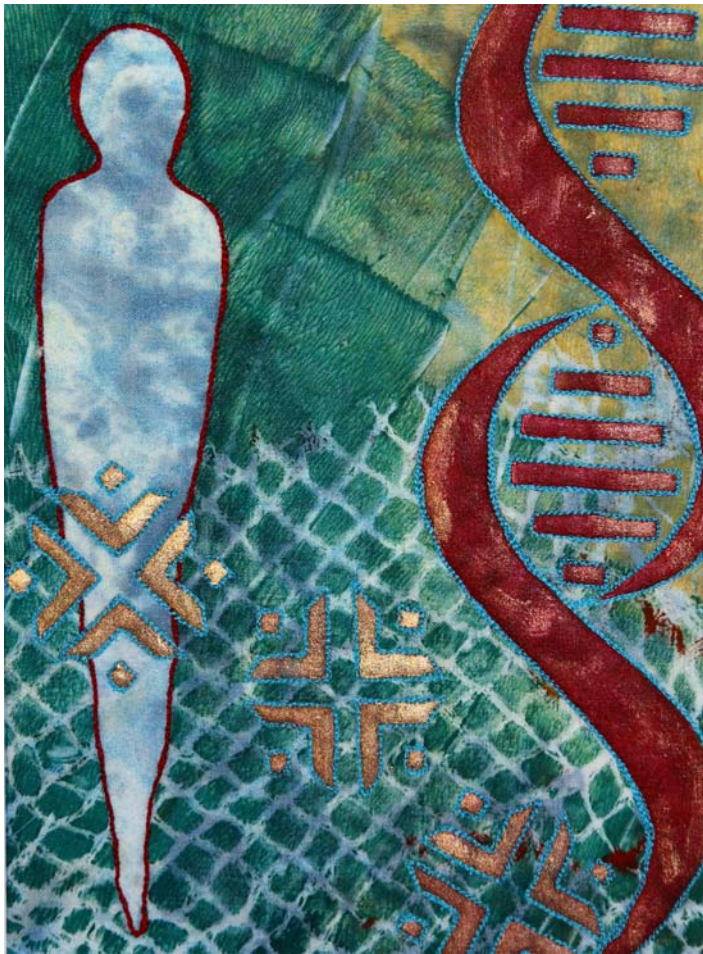
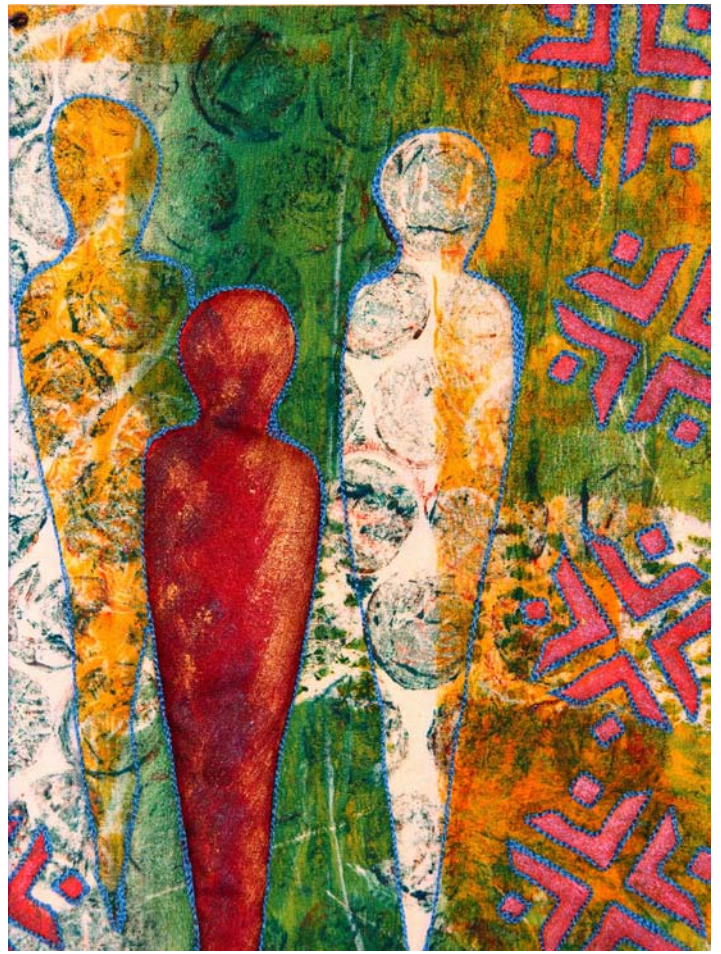


Below: *Forgotten Figures I*, 2014, 20 x 15cm
Photo by Gillian Cooper



Below: *Forgotten Figures V*, 2014, 20 x 15cm
Photo by Gillian Cooper



Below: Gillian Cooper
Photo by Richard Claughton



History in the making

Gillian Cooper finds abundant inspiration in ancient Greek sculptures. *Pretty Patches* joins her for a look back in time...

Interview by ANNE WILLIAMS

When making the leap from following patterns to the creation of your own unique work, the first hurdle for many quilt-makers can be finding a source of inspiration. But occasionally something ‘speaks’ to you and you just know you’ll have to run with it.

For textile artist Gillian Cooper, a self-confessed museum junkie, the objects calling her name were the Cycladic figures in London’s British Museum.

She explains: ‘I was instantly drawn to the shapes of the flat, stylised figurines. It also appealed to me that

these ancient Greek idols are almost all female; only a handful of male statues have ever been found.’ Interested in paring the human form back to a minimum, she says, ‘It fascinates me just how little information the eye needs to “read” something as being human – a few lines is enough.’

The Cycladic figures, dating from 3200 to 2000 BC, are simple elongated shapes. The curves are restrained but clearly portray feminine outlines. Gillian knew she wanted to do something in textiles based around these pieces, ideally three-dimensional. But when first

captivated by these sculptures in the late 1990s she also knew that she didn't have the technical skills to realise her vision, so relegated the project to the back burner.

GAINING THE SKILLS

In fact, it was over a decade later that Gillian began to work in earnest on her series of goddesses, which became 'Unsung Muses'.

In the intervening years Gillian had taught herself patchwork and quilting techniques, cheerfully admitting, 'I know some of my traditional quilt-making skills are not finely honed.' She had also abandoned a career in accountancy to take an art foundation course, which was followed by a degree in textiles at Goldsmiths, University of London.

'Although I tried, I couldn't find a way to get patchwork and quilting to work in my art pieces,' she recalls. However, her final show did comprise three-dimensional structures, though these were based around themes of surveillance and not Cycladic figures, and were constructed from fabric produced by digital machine knitting. But the ancient statues were still definitely playing on her mind...

A NEW FOCUS

With her degree under her belt, Gillian was armed with the necessary technical skills and also the confidence to think through and develop her ideas. But what really galvanised her into action was the offer of a solo gallery at 2011's Festival of Quilts.

'Nothing focuses the mind like nine months to make new work to fill an exhibition space, but here was the perfect opportunity to make and display my goddesses!' she reminisces.

Gillian began by doing lots of research and the more she found out about Cycladic figures, the more absorbed she became. What were they for? Why are they predominantly female? It seems most likely they were idols and as some appear to be pregnant, perhaps those were goddesses of fertility. 'So much remains a mystery about these female ancestors,' Gillian muses, perhaps appropriately, 'which is a huge part of their attraction.'

With many meanings to explore, the layered techniques of patchwork and quilting, which allow things to be hidden or, conversely, revealed, was the perfect medium. Initially drawn by their shapes, Gillian had always envisaged large three-dimensional figures, which would, like the sculptures, be flat. She was also taken with the idea of utilising the whole space in her Festival gallery, and hanging figures would create an immersive experience for visitors.

She did lots of drawings 'playing' with shapes. 'It's important to make the work your own – be informed by your source but don't just copy it.' For each figure she drew a full-size cartoon to use as a pattern, and she owns up to not making samples before starting on the



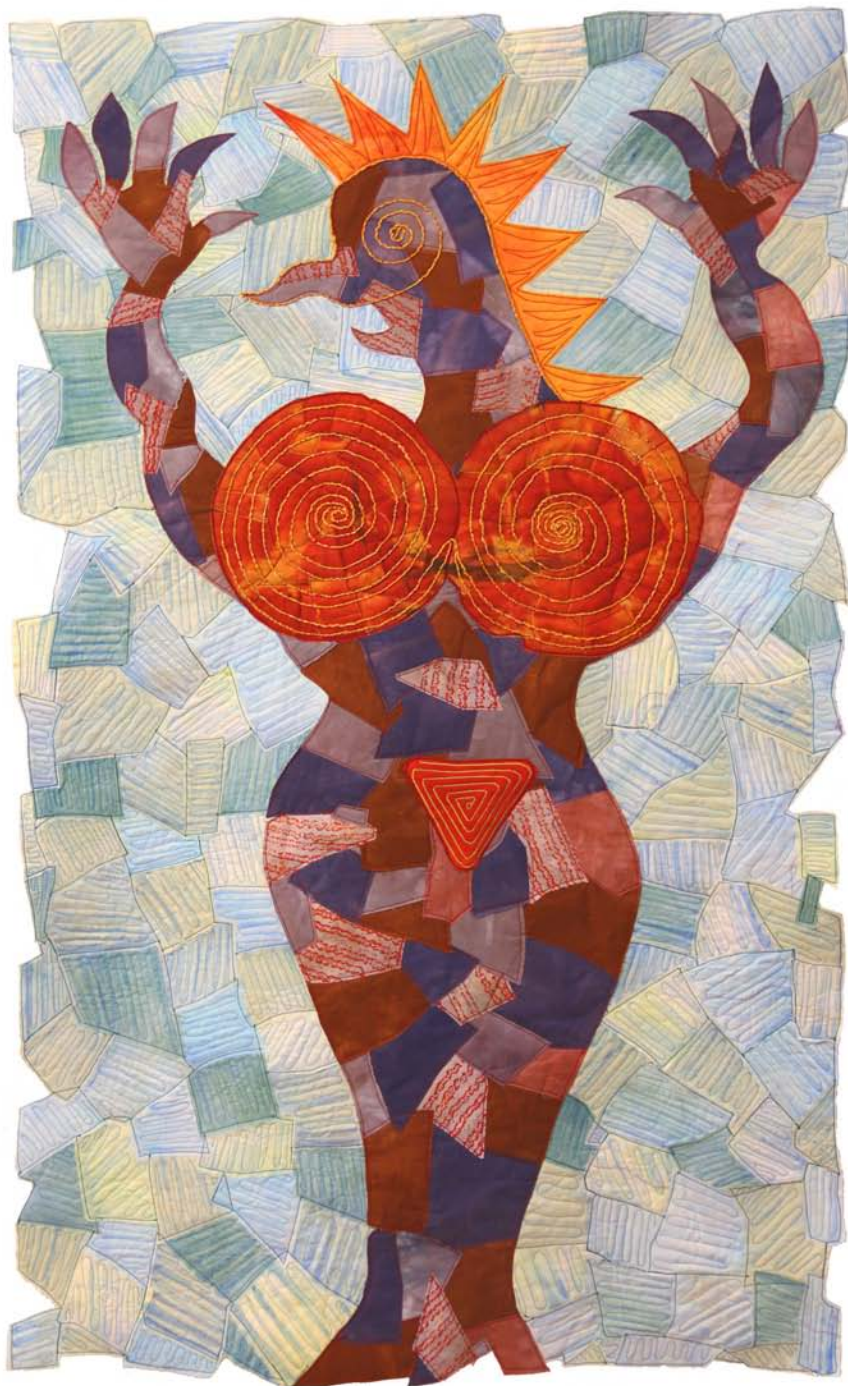
Right: From 'Unsung Muses', 2011
Photo by Alan McCredie

Below: *Forgotten Figures VIII*, 2014, 15 x 20cm
Photo by Gillian Cooper



'It fascinates me just how little information the eye needs to "read" something as being human'





Above: *Protectress*, 2015, 130 x 75cm
Photo by Gillian Cooper

Below: *Synergy*, 2012, 24 x 100cm
Photo by Alan McCredie



full-size pieces. In part she felt she knew enough about the materials and how they'd behave, but adds: 'When making large works it's difficult to reproduce everything to scale so samples are of limited use.'

The figures, which range between 1.5m and 2.5m in height, are constructed like a double-sided quilt, with wadding sandwiched between layers of patches fused and then machine stitched onto fusible interfacing, rather like a modern form of crazy patchwork.

The sculptures themselves are carved from marble found on the Cycladic Islands and Gillian wanted to reference the delicate creamy colours of the stone. The muted hues also represent how the women have faded from memory. Most of the fabrics are hand-dyed, which gives lovely soft shades, and the figures were overdyed so everything blends harmoniously. But the original sculptures would not have been plain. Using iridescent Markal paintsticks, Gillian added surface detail informed by the colours and patterns found on the ancient

A THEME TO EXPLORE

✧ Finding a theme to explore can be the hardest part of getting started on a creative journey. Here are some of Gillian's suggestions of where to look and how to record your thoughts and ideas...

- ✧ Look at the world around you – items in your home, your garden, buildings, local landscapes and townscapes... Once you get into the habit of really looking, you'll find oodles of inspiration on your own doorstep.
- ✧ If you're going further afield, perhaps new sights and cultures will inspire you.
- ✧ Visit museums and exhibitions, where there's a wealth of artefacts to whet creative appetites.
- ✧ Emotions and feelings can also be a rich source of inspiration.
- ✧ Get into the habit of always having a digital camera to hand – and with smartphones most of us have no excuse – then you'll always be ready to snap handy reference photos.
- ✧ Carry a sketchbook and pencil for written notes and rough sketches: A5-size is perfect for popping into a bag.
- ✧ Crucially, *do not* be intimidated by keeping a sketchbook. It's your personal record – it doesn't need to be a work of art!
- ✧ If something appeals, jot it down or take a photograph immediately. Even if you don't know what to do with it at the time, if it has sparked your interest there's a good chance you'll revisit it in the future.

'It's important to make the work your own – be informed by your source but don't just copy it'



Above: *Loops of Time*, 2014, 74 x 107cm
Photo Alan McCredie

goddesses, giving further symbolism to the work.

To complement the hanging pieces, more recently Gillian has created wall-based works depicting imagery directly influenced by the shapes of her figures, along with patterning found on the goddesses and other ancient designs.

'I know what the work means to me but I didn't want to be too didactic. I believe that viewers should be free to put their own interpretations on artworks,' she says. For example, the free pieces in the cut-out sections of the figures could be seen to represent the soul or the heart, or perhaps a protective shield; and the circles beneath the cut-outs might be the womb.

In the same vein, naming the work was a challenge. Gillian confides: 'It took me ages to come up with "Unsung Muses"'. I wanted to encapsulate what the series is about, but also to leave "space" for viewers to put their own meaning on the pieces.'

Her main artistic focus for five years, there are still aspects of the theme she'd like to consider, possibly working with transparency.

'But first I need to go back to basics and think about what I'm trying to say. The concept is very important to me and it adds integrity to my work – I need a reason to make it.'

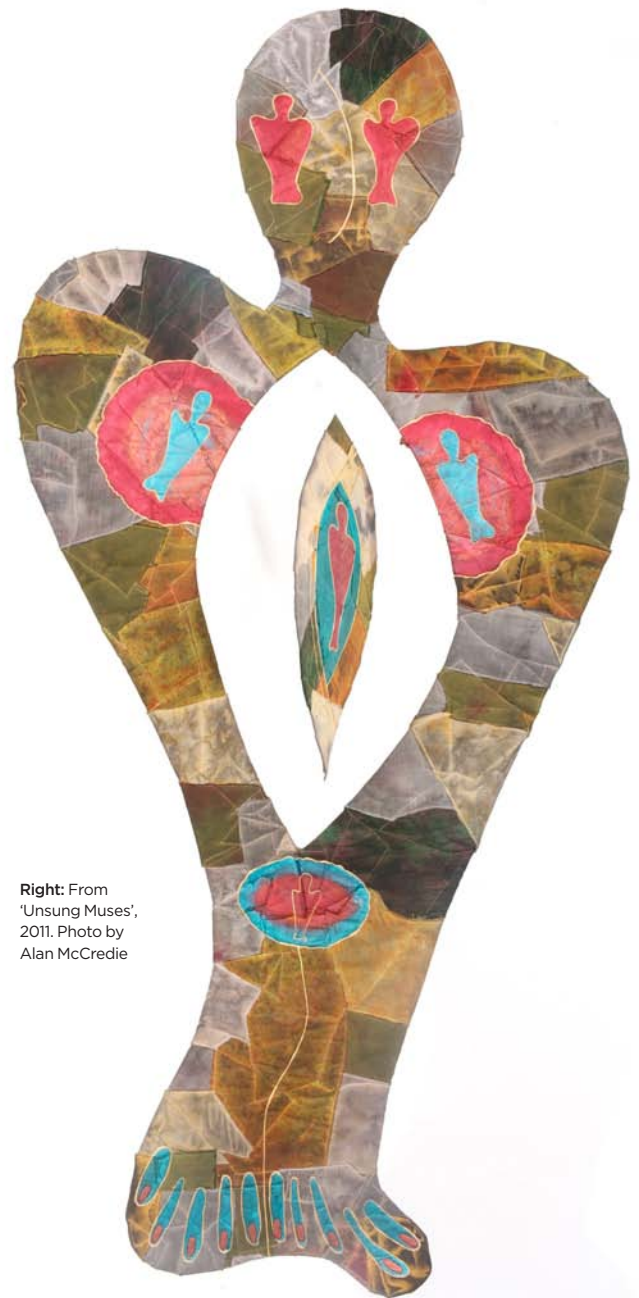
So watch this space, there may be more muses to come. And if you haven't seen them at any of their several outings to date, some of the current body of work will be on show at SECC, Glasgow in March 2016 (see left).

A CREATIVE HUB

Having entered her artistic life via adult learning, Gillian is passionate about encouraging other adults to find their creative voice. She enthuses: 'It's wonderful to see people who think they can't "do" art develop self-belief in their work.'

After years of leading classes at other venues, earlier this year she converted part of her home into a studio and teaching space. From this creative hub she delivers a range of workshops; registered as a micro-centre for City & Guilds (C&G), she also offers Level 3 Patchwork and Quilting Certificate and Diploma courses.

Gillian smiles. 'Having students coming regularly to



Right: From 'Unsung Muses', 2011. Photo by Alan McCredie

my studio does help me to contain my creative mess!

There are other benefits too. As anyone who has studied for a C&G qualification knows, the syllabus requires students to experiment with a wide range of methods, both stitched and surface design techniques, which of course the tutor must be familiar with.

'Teaching means that I do have to keep up to date with the latest products, which can inform my own work as it's very easy to get stuck in a familiar rut. And as well as trying out new things, my interest in methods I haven't used for years has also been reawakened.

'Another plus is that I'm now way more conscientious about doing samples and keeping notes. I feel I should practise what I preach!' 🍷

❖ Find out more about Gillian and her work, her studio and workshops at www.gilliancooper.co.uk

'UN Sung MUSES'

3-6 March 2016

10am-5pm (4pm on Sunday)

The Quilting Show, SECC, Glasgow
Adults £8 in advance (£10 on the door), seniors £7 (£9 on the door)

Part of ICHF Events shows, tickets are 3-for-1 and include entry to The Stitching & Sewing Show and Hobbycrafts.

www.ichfevents.co.uk

Gillian has produced a 28-page catalogue about her 'Unsung Muses' series, which features colour images of the work along with notes about their inspiration and creation. You can order a copy from www.gilliancooper.co.uk