

A unique vision

Meet Sophie Dutton the driving force behind the book *Madge Gill by Myrminerest*, which reveals the visionary art of self-taught artist Madge Gill

MADGE GILL (1882-1961) was an extraordinary woman, compelled during the interwar years and onwards by her spirit guide 'Myrminerest' to make a huge amount of artwork, including paintings and drawings, postcards, embroideries and dresses. Gill was the subject of a major exhibition at the William Morris Gallery last year – the first time her work had been exhibited publicly since her death – and her revival has been championed by its curator Sophie Dutton, also the author of a fascinating book about this remarkable visionary artist.

In her other life, Dutton works as a graphic designer but she has dedicated much time to researching Gill's work and life, along the way developing a highly personal connection to both. The project began when Dutton discovered photographs of Gill's work on her late father's

phone. He had worked in the Borough of Newham in London, where Gill lived all her life (today Newham holds some 1,600 of her artworks). When you start to read about Madge Gill, much of her early life has an air of tragedy about it; tragedy that takes on new significance when you know that in 1921, aged 37, Gill was first visited by Myrminerest, her spirit-guide – visitations that continued for the rest of her life. At this point she was obviously suffering a great deal mentally. She'd been an illegitimate child born into a middle class family, who decided to have her adopted, although her mother and grandparents were still alive. She lived with a working-class family who fostered children and then, aged nine, she was orphaned out to Canada under the British Home Children scheme – a grim project that provided children as sources of cheap labour.

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Left: Madge Gill, *Untitled*. Colour cotton and silk embroidery. 81 x 69cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger; courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

Right: *Untitled*. Front and reverse of cotton and silk embroidery (detail). 81 x 69cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger; courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL TUCKER



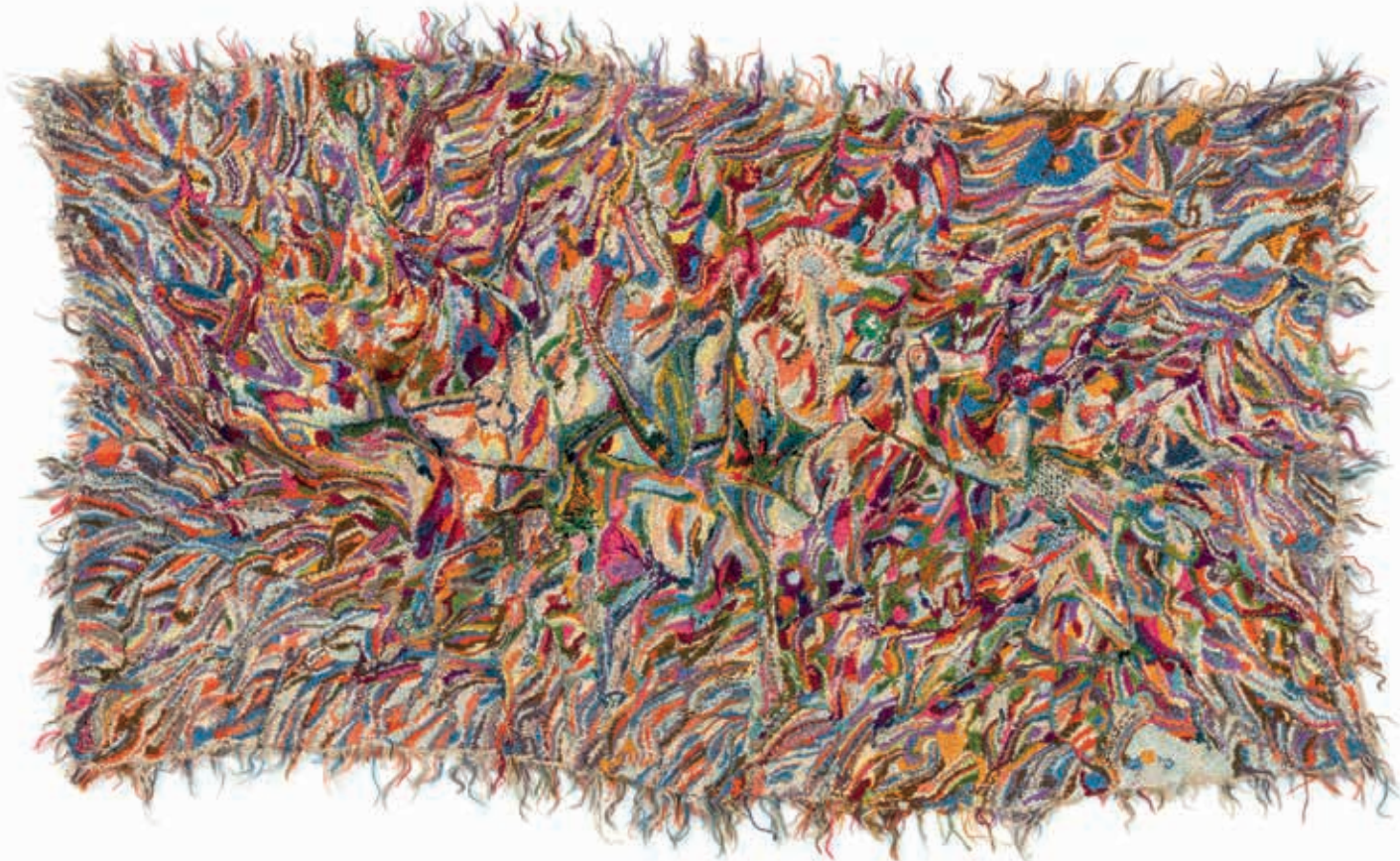


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She came back at age 19, renaming herself Madge (she was born Maude) and began working as a nurse before marrying and having three boys and a stillborn baby girl. She lost her son Reggie when he was eight, an event that affected her deeply. Her marriage was also problematic. And although she was never formally diagnosed, she almost definitely was suffering from depression and anxiety. However, under the influence of Myrminerest, she would enter trance states, and produced a huge amount of work in the next few decades of her life. As Dutton explains: 'Madge talked about hearing voices and seeing things. She had a vision. Myrminerest appeared to her and she started drawing, knitting, sewing, painting, playing the piano. There was no holding back: she found this burst of creativity.'

All Gill's works, except for her embroideries, are characterised by the faces she drew repeatedly, that may or may not have been portraits of Madge or her spirit-guide. But it's her embroideries that interest us here.

In 1947 Madge Gill was photographed with a series of them and she also wrote to a friend describing making more than 30 textile pieces. However only four of these were known to exist in gallery archives. The rest only came to light after Patricia Beger, who has a remarkable collection, answered a public appeal and got in touch with Dutton. It seems Gill made textiles from the very start, although they only account for about five per cent of her final output, which numbers over 5,000 artworks. These were not early 20th century embroideries as we know them – there are no crinoline ladies or Bauhaus-inspired abstracts. Rather they are bright explosions of thread, reminiscent of none of her contemporaries' work. From researching her work, Dutton has observed that Gill nearly always used calico as a base for her embroideries, although some were produced on a ripped bedsheet. Gill started embroidering them in the middle of the cloth, 'because they are denser there and pucker a little bit', and then worked her way outwards, leaving the edges frayed and unfinished – on purpose, Sophie feels. And although at first Gill's embroidery seems completely abstract, Dutton has noticed things: 'There are a couple of her embroideries where I feel like you can still get a feeling of those faces coming through. The fabrics underneath don't appear to have any kind of outline or design. She did them like she did her drawings, free-form and free-flowing. The embroideries





Above: *Untitled*, colour cotton embroidery. 61 x 61 cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger; courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

PHOTO: PAUL TUCKER

Left: *Untitled*, colour cotton embroidery. 115 x 63 cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger; courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

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From left: Madge Gill photographed at the Eades' family home in Woodford, c1904 and (right) c1887. Photos courtesy of Betty Newman.



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Aside from the textiles, Gill could easily draw and paint over 100 postcards in an evening, covered with her looping free-form patterns and her faces. The most striking works were huge ink drawings on calico, some up to 30ft in length, that she would work on her lap – just drawing and drawing. Although her subject matter remained consistent, Dutton has noticed that Gill's work became more accomplished as she went on: 'The faces got clearer, she got more graphic and precise. It's very balanced and confident work.'

Although Gill didn't sell any of her artwork, as she considered it to be by Myrminerest, she did exhibit regularly at the East End Academy at the Whitechapel Gallery. Indeed, in 1932 the *Daily Herald* ran the headline, 'Woman's drawing 20ft long' about the exhibition, which must surely have been a reference to Gill's work. She was also featured in a magazine article in 1947, which shows Gill in the most striking dress (which she made herself) in the very middle-class surroundings of her home, and also showed her making her calicos. Dutton has, through her research, tracked

down much of Gill's work, and unpacked the stories of how a yellow dress made by Gill ended up in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney. And how the artist Jean Dubuffet (who coined the term *l'Art Brut* for outsider art) bought a large collection of Madge Gill's work for La Collection de l'Art Brut in the Swiss city of Lausanne. Gill was a letter-writer and Dutton has been able to trace how friends and acquaintances distributed Gill's work after she died.

The whole story is in the fascinating and beautifully illustrated book *Madge Gill* by Myrminerest, which Sophie has edited.

Madge Gill's embroideries are the most surprising textiles, full of intent, colour and potency. As Dutton explains: 'There is a piece in the collection at L'Art Brut that I like a lot. It's really large, really square. It has a quite a lot of reds in it. But around the outside the colours are almost fluorescent. It feels so contemporary. When you see pictures of Madge's home and what she was surrounded by – thinking about the war and what she was bought up around – and she made this quite powerfully optimistic and beautiful piece, which just feels potentially out of sync with her surroundings. She had a really unique vision.'

JANE AUDAS

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Madge Gill By Myrminerest, which includes rare images of artwork and embroidery is edited by Sophie Dutton. Rough Trade Books £24.99.

roughtradebooks.com

Below L-R: *Untitled*, c1920-1961. Black ink on postcard. Collection Patricia Beger.

Untitled, c1920-1961. Black ink on postcard. Collection Philippe Eternod and Jean-David Mermod, Lausanne.

Untitled, c1920-1961. Black ink on postcard. Collection Patricia Beger

Opposite, top: *Untitled*, colour cotton embroidery. 91 x 87cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger, courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

PHOTO: PAUL TUCKER

Opposite, below: *Untitled*, colour cotton embroidery. 82 x 36cm. Created c1926-1961, specific dates unknown. Collection of Patricia Beger, courtesy of Sophie Dutton.

PHOTO: PAUL TUCKER

