

Intersections

The Work of Leslie Rinchhen-Wongmo

BY LEANNE JEWETT



THE FIRST POST IN LESLIE RINCHHEN-WONGMO'S BLOG is titled *Intersections*, a word that immediately evokes images of her work; work that is composed of intersections, intricate hand-stitched joinings and overlappings of thousands of brilliantly colored pieces of silk. The resulting images are of Buddhist deities in the Tibetan tradition of silk thangkas or they are portraits of Tibetan people, to whom she feels a strong connection.

How a western woman became a modern fabric artist working in an ancient Asian tradition is the story of another kind of intersection.

Though she always had a love of texture and color and did quilting

as a young woman, Rinchhen-Wongmo didn't seek a life in art but pursued a more practical path. She majored in both women's studies and environmental design in college. In graduate school she studied management as well as urban planning.

It was after graduate school, when she was traveling in India as an economic development volunteer for Tibetan refugees living there, that she was catapulted into the art that has become her life's work.

As part of her volunteer assignment she visited a workshop where a thangka was being created. Thangkas are Buddhist iconographic images created on

fabric. They are a portable form of Buddhist art that is used for teaching, inspiration, and as a visual guide for meditation. Most are painted on cotton canvas, but what Leslie saw that day was one of the more precious thangkas that are hand-stitched mosaics of brilliantly colored silk fabric.

She says the beauty of that image stopped her in her tracks. "Whatever interest that was there that was motivating me to learn quilting ten years before just came full force back up and yet it was more powerful because it was connected to the Buddhism that I was studying."

That transfixing experience prompted her to stay in India where she found a teacher and entered a full-time four-year apprenticeship in the art of making silk thangkas. In addition to cutting, piecing, and stitching silk satins and brocades, she learned the embroidery that is typical of the thangkas and also how to wrap silk thread around a core of horsetail hair to make a kind of piping that serves as a three-dimensional outline of elements of the images.

Today Rinchhen-Wongmo lives in Southern California, working in a light-filled studio, her collection of fabric visible through the glass doors of a large storage cabinet, and her cats, Sushi and Crusca, keeping her company. She continues to create traditional thangkas, the subjects of which vary depending on whether

she is choosing it or it has been commissioned. "They're meditation tools and so either it [the subject] will be chosen by the person or by the quality that I want to inspire in the work ... like compassion and love and wisdom, energy for doing good work in the world."

The final design is transferred onto white fabric that serves as a piecing guide. Then she chooses colors. "I pull out all the fabric, piles of fabric. I move it around and put them together, then cut a little swatch of each one that I select. I pin it or tape it to the section of the drawing where it'll go ... It's not like painting where you can mix the paints and you can create the shade that you need. I have to work with the fabric that I have."



She also uses the same techniques to assemble vibrant portraits of Himalayan people. Asked about the subjects of her portraits she explains, "I have a sense of connection with them. I'm inspired by them, and I'm inspired by the way that their spirituality is blended into their daily life. Making these images is both a way of honoring them and exploring that connection that I feel with them."

Because a single work requires keeping track of a myriad of pieces and takes months to complete, Leslie generally completes one piece before starting another. She does, however, always have a number of ongoing projects in addition to her studio work.

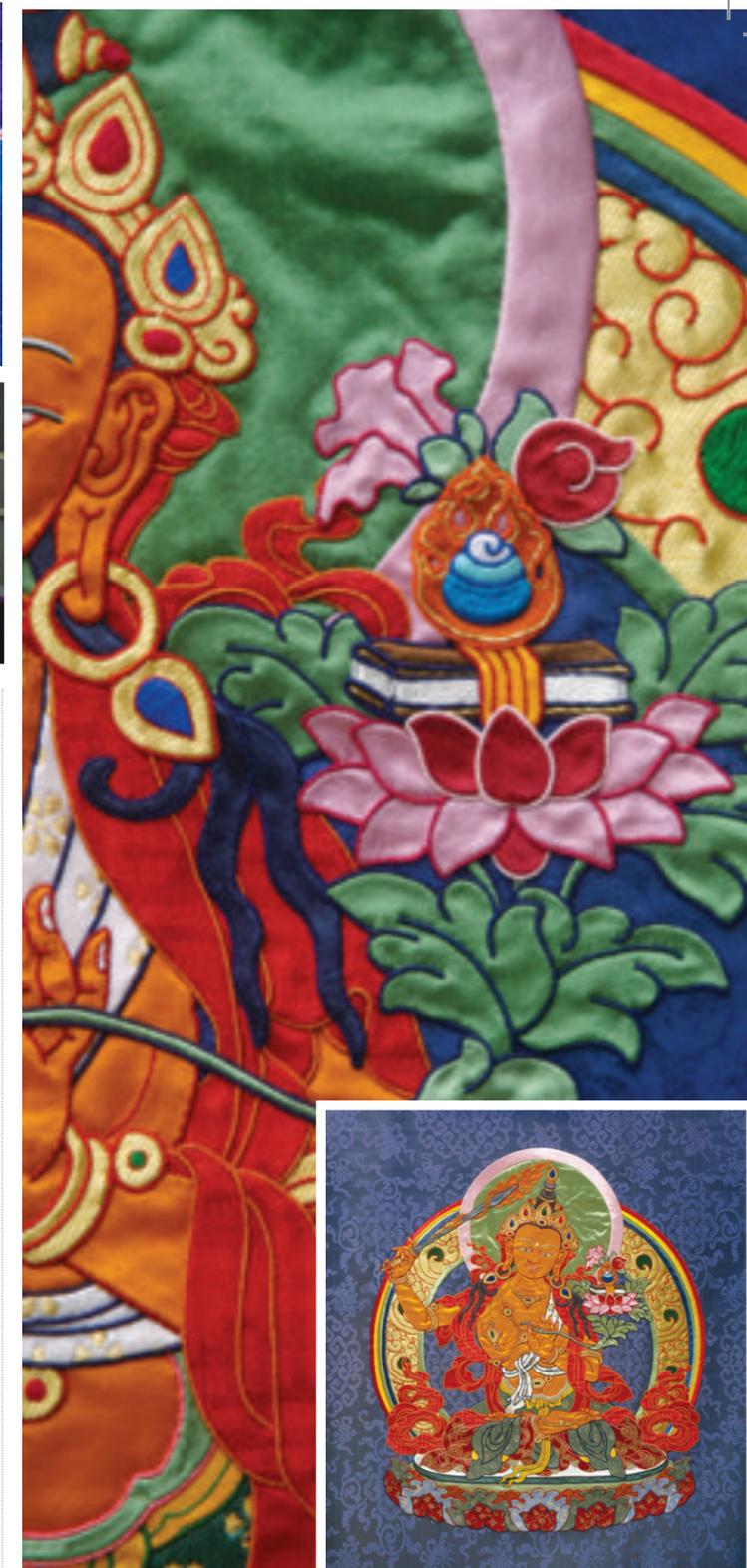
In November of this year she will be taking a small group of artists and travelers to India on what she hopes will

become an annual excursion. They'll visit artists, workshops, monasteries, and other Tibetan cultural and craft centers in and near Dharamsala, where the Dali Lama lives and where she studied and completed her apprenticeship. They will also visit Varanasi, an ancient Hindu holy city on the river Ganges where her fabric is made. "We'll be meeting with the silk weavers and the dyers and learning about the process by which they make these brocades and satins and threads."

In response to numerous requests to teach her intricate art, Rinchhen-Wongmo has focused on the intersection of art and contemplation or spiritual practice. As a result, she has created a kind of digital apprenticeship. She explains that she wanted her *Stitching Buddhas Virtual Apprentice Program* to be more than just an online course, "I felt like the people who were asking me to teach wanted something much deeper. They were drawn to the whole practice and lifestyle of the work. I wanted to offer them as much of that as I could."

For more images of and information about Leslie Rinchhen-Wongmo's work, visit her website at www.threadsforwakening.com.

Leanne Jewett is a contributing editor for *Fiber Art Now*. She welcomes questions and comments at leannejewett@fiberartnow.net



FAR LEFT: In her sunlit home studio, Leslie Rinchhen-Wongmo wraps strands of horsehair with silk thread then stitches them to fabric to create the contours of her sacred images.
ABOVE LEFT: **Nomad Girls**, 2008; silk, satin, cotton, plastic sacking, horsehair, and various fabrics; inkjet photo printing, Tibetan appliqué and machine quilting; 23 x 36".
LEFT: **Nomad Girls**, 2008; detail
ABOVE CENTER: **Chenrezig**, 2008; silk, gold, cotton, and crystal beads; Tibetan appliqué and machine quilting; 43 x 31".
ABOVE RIGHT: **Manjushri**, 2003; detail
BOTTOM RIGHT: **Manjushri**, 2003; Tibetan appliqué finished in brocade frame; silk, gold, & horsehair; 50 x 38".