

# ventura

FINE LIVING IN VENTURA Y monthly

## WOMEN OF SUBSTANCE

FINDING DEPTH IN FINE FASHION

## THE STYLE ISSUE

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### LEAVE IT ON

Hat Talk with Courtney Ellzey

### THE NEW WEST

A local leather crafter's wild ride

### ALL ABOUT INTENTION

Weaving the fabric of the universe

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# ALL ABOUT INTENTION

Creating art with a purpose, appliqué thangka master Leslie-Rinchen Wongmo weaves the fabric of the universe and serves the Buddhist dharma — one stitch at a time.

BY NANCY D. LACKEY SHAFFER

**LESLIE RINCHEN-WONGMO NEVER INTENDED TO BE A FIBER arts pioneer.** The thangka stitching artist—one of only a handful of people who still practice the traditional Tibetan art form, and the only woman passing the tradition on to others—was pursuing a career in social and economic development. She'd completed her Masters in Urban Planning (she also has an MBA, both from UCLA) and was living in Boston, working in affordable housing development, when she decided to take a year off and travel to Dharamsala, India.

"I was going to have an *adventure*," she recalls. "But I wanted to be a part of the community instead of just pass through, so I decided to do some volunteer work."

In 1992, she contacted the Central Tibetan Administration and was invited to participate on a project designing the first census of Tibetans in exile. Living in Dharamsala, she became, as she had hoped, immersed in the community, working with other professionals (including a retired Indian census official), getting to know her neighbors, and studying Buddhist philosophy.

Her work also afforded her the opportunity to learn in-depth about Tibetan culture and traditions. "While working, I went on a tour of different traditional art centers," she says. "Wood carving, bronze casting,



thangka painting, carpet weaving.” Visiting the Norbulingka Institute, a training center for Tibetan artists, was a transformative experience: “I saw this artwork, and it touched me. And I thought, ‘I just have to do this.’ At the time, I didn’t know I was changing the course of my life.”

A thangka (pronounced tonka) is a religious scroll picture—usually depicting the Buddha deity, an iconic scene, or a mandala—used for meditation and sometimes instruction. The more common form of thangka is painted on cotton or silk. Less well known is the appliqué thangka, or thangka stitching, made by sewing individual pieces of silk and brocade together to render an image, often embroidering certain details to lend them texture and prominence. It is this 500-year-old art form, tradition, and philosophy to which Rinchen-Wongmo has since devoted her life. “I liked that it was somehow communicating the Buddhist philosophy without the words, being with the love and wisdom without ... depending so much on the rational brain,” she explains.

Rinchen-Wongmo became an apprentice to appliqué master T. G. Dorjee Wangdu at the Norbulingka Institute, and spent nearly a decade immersed in a very Tibetan way of thinking—and doing. Norbulingka is a trade school as well as an art institute, and students there learn to create monks’ robes, temple decorations, and other practical items. But for many Tibetans, the lines between art and craft, practical life and religious devotion, are nonexistent. “For the Tibetans in that world, everything we were working on was for the dharma. You live and breathe it. ... You’re always on a spiritual path. Art with a purpose—that is true of Tibetan culture. There is no art for art’s sake.”

Interestingly, while Rinchen-Wongmo worked alongside other women, it was only men who were doing the teaching. “In Tibet, it was only men working in workshops on thangkas,” she recalls. “In Dharamsala, many of my fellow apprentices were women, but none of the women have risen to running their own workshops. Most of the masters are men.” Rinchen-Wongmo admits that she’s not sure if that remains true today, but one thing she does know: when she first started running her online classes as a thangka master, she was the only Westerner, and the only woman, to do so.

Which isn’t to say that she encountered resis-

tance in her artistic and spiritual pursuits. “My teacher supported me. He saw that I was serious about learning.” She was even granted a meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who upon seeing her most accomplished thangka exclaimed, “Oh, it is very well done!” He encouraged her to share her knowledge of this relatively unknown art form with others. “I wanted to take this art into the Western world,” she recalls. “So I asked him, ‘What should I know? How should I discern appropriate opportunities?’ I wanted to make sure that what I was doing was held in positive regard. I didn’t want to offend this culture that had given me this gift.”

His answer: *It’s all about intention.*

In 2001, nine years after beginning her journey into Tibetan culture and art, Rinchen-Wongmo left Dharamsala for Milan. “It felt like the closing of a chapter,” she explains. “It was time to be in my own culture again.” After another nine years in Italy she finally came back to the United States, settling in Oxnard in 2010 and opening up her studio, Threads of Awakening, in Channel Islands Harbor. She offers workshops and other classes (including a weekly Laughter Practice, which just started in February at Oxnard Beach Park), and teaches a growing number of apprentices through her online instruction program.

She’s also started writing a book on appliqué thangka: its origins and history, as well as a detailed description of the construction process, interwoven with Rinchen-Wongmo’s own personal experience. There’s never been a book about this particular Tibetan art form, so once again, she’s stitching together her own path—and serving the dharma along the way.

And of course, there are the thangkas themselves, which continue to weave their spell over her, deepening her artistic experience and spiritual life. “When I first started teaching, I thought that I was just making pretty things,” Rinchen-Wongmo says. “But it’s a major spiritual experience. These images carry the energy of the centuries of practice. They carry the teachings with them.”

And now, thanks to Rinchen-Wongmo, those teachings have been carried to us as well. ▀

Learn more about Leslie Rinchen-Wongmo and the art of appliqué thangka online at [threadsofawakening.com](http://threadsofawakening.com).





With encouragement from the Dalai Lama, Leslie-Rinchen Wongmo (above) became the first woman to teach appliqué thangka to the Western world. She continues to break the mold with nontraditional pieces such as Three Mongolians (opening page), a hand-stitched exemplar of Tibetan appliqué and embroidery featuring contrasting fabrics and the application of real mala beads.

PHOTO BY DOUG ELLIS



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

# WHITE SPACE IN A BLACK HOLE

IT'S HAPPENED EVERY YEAR SINCE 2011 and our first Style-themed issue. In the lead-up to March, our editorial calendar takes on the daunting aura of a black hole: vacant, impenetrable, frighteningly unfamiliar as it spins through worlds I'll never know.

The empty page stares at me.

I stare back. Nothing happens. The clock ticks and the days and weeks pass and I start to think that maybe this is it—maybe this will be the year for a Ventura version of the Beatles' *White Album* cover. Just an empty editorial space.

Then, one by one, the pitches drift into my universe. Fashion-forward friends like Naz Madaen introduce brilliant ideas to illuminate my path. Because as I said on this page in the spring of 2011: I don't do fashion; I wear clothes.

This magazine is a collaborative effort, to be sure—and never more so than now. Working with Harper Point Photography ([harperpoint.com](http://harperpoint.com)) and several local businesses, Naz managed to corral four of Ventura County's "Women of Substance" (cover + p. 32) for a stylized photo shoot at Acacia Mansion in Ojai.

That's one way to smarten up a spring fashion pictorial and add layers of depth to this Style-themed issue.

Here's another: On page 11 we profile Leslie-Rinchen Wongmo, a contemporary American textile artist and the "caretaker" of appliqué thangka, a 500-year-old Tibetan art form that weaves tradition and philosophy into something far more profound than "pretty things," as she put it.

Leslie's work inspired even the Dalai Lama, and with his encouragement to share her knowledge with the Western world, the Oxnard-based artist began teaching as a thangka master—the only Westerner, and the only woman, to do so.

Her story takes us from Boston to Dharamsala to Milan before concluding within county lines. Closer to home, Ventura native Chris West (p. 19) channels his childhood passion for playing cowboys and Indians into uniquely stylish leather goods—think upcycled cowboy boot purses, Western wine totes, fringed chap skirts, colorful cuffs.

Then there's our interview with Vanner Hats founder Courtney Ellzey (p. 27). I wasn't sure what to expect from this one. Really, how much can be said about hats? I use them to block the sun or conceal a tangled nest of bedhead.

Courtney, on the other hand, sees beyond their functionality. Crowned with a well-worn corduroy cab driver's hat, she gallops from topics like gypsy spirit and cowgirl chic to Navy Seal wives and breast cancer awareness. In her world, the hat is a hallmark of fearless style, a celebration of the warrior within. And her company, she explains, is not simply about looking good—it's about women empowering women.

Turns out my utilitarian relationship with hats isn't the end of the story.

But this is the end of the page. And as you can see, we did manage to pop out of that black hole.

Hope you like what we found on the other side.

— Matt Katz  
[matk@ventanamonthly.com](mailto:matk@ventanamonthly.com)



## EDITOR IN CHIEF

Matt Katz

## ART DIRECTOR

T. Christian Gopen

## ASSISTANT EDITOR

Maxine Hurt

## CONTRIBUTORS

Doug Ellis

Eliot Lee Hazel

Naz Madaen

Nathan Rega

Mariana Schulze

Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer

Leslie A. Westbrook

Kateri Wozny

## GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Bret Hooper

Tim Twaddle

## ACCOUNT EXECUTIVES

Kasey Black

Warren Barrett

Barbara Kroon

Diane Newman

Kelly Spargur

Dave Stephens

## CIRCULATION

Teresa Wann-Davis

## HUMAN RESOURCES

Andrea Baker

## BUSINESS MANAGER

Linda Lam

## ACCOUNTING

Sharon Huie

## PUBLISHER

David Comden

## CONTACT US

### ADVERTISING

[sales@ventanamonthly.com](mailto:sales@ventanamonthly.com)

### EDITORIAL

[matk@ventanamonthly.com](mailto:matk@ventanamonthly.com)

PHONE 805.648.2244

FAX 805.648.2245

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Ventura, CA 93001

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