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*How a California girl became a master of the rare
Tibetan practice of sewing sacred textiles*

Meditation *with* Needle *and* Thread

by LESLIE RINCHEN-WONGMO

Stitching a Buddha is a path of presence, care, and quality in each moment. It's a path of immersion in and familiarization with imagery that embodies our deepest aspirations to be awake, compassionate, loving, and fully alive in the moment.

One of the literal meanings of the Tibetan word for “meditate” (*sGom*) is to familiarize or habituate. Creating a silk *thangka* — a two-dimensional art form designed to assist in the process of self-transformation — is itself a process of meditating with needle and thread. This does not mean that the artist making the *thangka* is absorbed in meditative equipoise or engaged in formal practice. It means that making a sacred image by hand is a profound process of familiarization with the qualities of an enlightened mind — which is none other than our full human potential — and with the tools which many enlightened masters have used to realize that potential.

OPPOSITE: *Chenrezig*, embodiment of compassion, 2008, 48" x 28", by Leslie Rinchon-Wongmo.



Sacred Buddhist images are signs pointing toward enlightenment. They are maps for uncovering our own innate potential. They are costumes we don in a dress-up dance with the qualities of enlightenment, habituating ourselves with those qualities until we recognize them as our own.



Unexpected Journey to Thangka Making

I never set out to be a *thangka* maker. A California girl, I studied urban planning and community development at UCLA and fully intended to make my career in that field. My first trip to India was a brief interlude between graduate school and work — a trekking adventure through Kashmir and Ladakh, a high-altitude Tibetan Buddhist region in the Himalayas of northern India.

I'd always been interested in Buddhism. But on that trip, I fell in love with Asia, too, and with Tibetan culture. So I returned to India in 1992, planning to travel for a few weeks and then to volunteer for a few months in Dharamsala, seat of the Tibetan “government in exile” and home to the Dalai Lama. But when I arrived in Dharamsala in the downpour of monsoon rain, I felt

instantly at home. I looked in the Tibetan faces and saw family. I heard the language and felt joy. I soon learned that I loved walking the mountain paths to the market to buy vegetables, that I had no trouble heating water in a bucket to bathe, that I loved the power outages, that I loved the rain! The view from my room at the Tibetan Library was the most beautiful I could imagine in my richest fantasy, and I quickly shed my identity as “traveler” and became a resident of India.

For the first year, I worked with the Tibetan Planning Council, writing project proposals and helping to design the first demographic census of Tibetans in exile. In the mornings, I studied Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan language. In the evenings, I taught English to a *thangka* painter. I was getting by very happily until one day when, as part of an economic development team, I toured several centers where traditional Tibetan arts were being produced.

It was late in the day when we arrived at the famed Norbulingka Institute, which was created by the Dalai Lama to preserve Tibetan art and culture. The institute, on terraced grounds in the Kangra Valley below Dharamsala, has a classic Tibetan garden and spectacular temple created by the artisans trained there. As we entered a workshop, a giant image of Garuda — a deity with the head, wings, and talons of an eagle and the body and limbs of a man — was being created out of silk. I saw the image and stopped in my tracks. For a moment, the room went silent and time stood still. I had been taking Buddhist philosophy classes at the Tibetan Library and attempting to meditate for months, but in that instant I connected to the Buddha's teachings in a way I never had before. It was as if all the threads of my life came together in that work — my love of colors, my interest in quilting and in putting images together, scrapbooking, meditating, trying to be a better person, working in community. The work had a spiritual depth that I couldn't fathom, like a poem or a song whose depth you feel even when you don't understand all the metaphors. Somehow, I got it. Or more accurately, the Garuda got me.

I found myself asking the master whether I could study with him. In the context of my visit, my request was completely inappropriate, and the teacher rather blatantly ignored me. But as soon as I returned to Dharamsala, I set out on a mission to find a way to learn to make these sacred silken images with my own hands. What I learned is that the art form has become so rare that most Tibetans never encounter it. Nevertheless, I was unstoppable and soon found one reluctant teacher and then an eager one. Gratefully, I entered an apprenticeship with Tibetan appliqué master T. G. Dorjee Wangdu.

The Origins of Silk Thangkas

Thangkas are designed to be rolled up for storage or travel. The vast majority are painted on cotton and framed in brocade. Since the fourteenth century, however, a tiny fraction of this sacred art has been made from silk fabric and thread. In Tibetan, these are called *gos-thang* or *gos-sku*, which means cloth thangka or cloth image. Nowadays, the word “appliqué” has been adopted to describe this art form, even by Tibetans themselves when speaking English.



ABOVE: *White Tara*, goddess of longevity, 2001, 58" x 30". OPPOSITE: *Guru Rinpoche*, 1999, 58" x 35". Also known as Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoche brought Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century. Both thangkas by Leslie Rinchen-Wongmo.

Art for your Highest Aspirations

Whether painted or stitched, all thangkas are supports for the process of self-transformation. They can serve as inspiration for anyone who aspires to grow his heart and mind — and are especially beneficial for those who desire a visual reminder of their highest aspirations in their living space. Here are ways to learn more about silk thangkas:

Creating Buddhas: The Making and Meaning of Fabric Thangkas

This 2008 documentary by Isadora Gabrielle Leidenfrost follows my six-month-long creation of a Green Tara thangka. In addition to recounting my own story, the film provides a wealth of information about Green Tara and the sacred silk thangka tradition through interviews with scholars and practitioners of Tibetan art and Vajrayana Buddhism. For more information, visit silkthangka.com/film.

Stitching Buddhas Virtual Apprentice Program

Through a series of interactive online courses, I share this unique way of integrating creativity and spirituality with a handful of fiber-loving spiritual women, scattered around the world. And locally,

at the Bell Arts Factory in Ventura, California, the Stitching Buddhas Atelier provides a space for people to try their hands at horsehair wrapping and other wonders of creating sacred beauty. All are welcome to drop in on the first Friday of every month. For more information, visit StitchingBuddhas.com.

Commission a Thangka

I enjoy helping my patrons identify the aspect of their deepest potential that they want the artwork to evoke. We use that insight as a guide in selecting a divine form that embodies the quality for them. Working on commission gives me focus. I keep patrons in mind as I stitch, directing my intention in support of theirs. Each stitch is a step along the path and an offering. Contact: info@LeslieRW.com.

No thorough historical study has been made of the development of silk thangkas but it is clear that silk was commonly offered as tribute by Chinese emperors to Tibetan lamas, and Tibetan artists were commissioned to produce paintings for the Chinese. At some point, “copies” of Tibetan Buddhist paintings began to be produced in China, using the finely developed Chinese stitchery techniques of embroidery and tapestry (*kesi*). The precious materials, rarity, and beauty of these silken images endowed them with greater prestige than the paintings from which they were copied. When the silk thangkas were presented by the Imperial Chinese court to Tibetan religious officials and visitors, a process of reciprocal inspiration ensued. At some point, probably in the fifteenth century, Tibetans began to use their own indigenous appliqué techniques to produce their own original silk thangkas.

Strictly speaking, however, this work is not appliqué. There’s no backing cloth to which pieces are applied, which is one reason silk thangkas are so difficult to make. There is no single ground on which everything rests. Rather, each separately outlined piece of silk depends on its neighbors for support. It’s a patchwork of interlocking, overlapping, outlined pieces of silk, held together by their connections — just as we are and as our world of experience is.

Every element of the image is outlined with a silk-wrapped horsehair cord, the most distinctive facet of the Tibetan “appliqué” technique. Strands of horsehair are wrapped with silk thread, by hand, to create colored piping. These silk-wrapped cords are then couched to the surface of luscious silk satins and brocades, along the contours of the drawing. Finally, the individually outlined pieces are cut out and assembled like a jigsaw puzzle to create a cohesive image.

Appliqué thangkas can reach heights up to several hundred feet and take many hands working for months or years to create. The famous giant thangkas of Tibet are made with these same techniques and are displayed at annual festivals on hillsides and monastery walls for thousands to view and be blessed by.

The Gift of Apprenticeship

I’m still amazed (and deeply grateful) that Dorjee Wangdu immediately accepted me into his *tsemkhang* (sewing workshop). I know I was fortunate, because during my tenure there, whenever an unknown westerner entered the studio, he’d call me over to send him on his way. He pretended he didn’t know any English at all and had me talk to the person in his place. In fact, his English was rudimentary. My instruction was all in Tibetan. But he could have communicated enough, if he’d wanted to.

When I asked him about his reticence to talk to other westerners, he said that most were looking for a fast-food version of sacred art. They wanted to learn some tricks to take home with them in a few weeks. He said that making a silk thangka required dedication and practice, and he only wanted to work with people who were ready to devote themselves.

Luckily for me, Dorjee Wangdu saw my own seriousness before I even knew it was there! I quickly learned to adore working with fabric, engaging all my senses in the making. I happily hiked up the hill to work in that *tsemkhang* six days a week for the next four years.

Advice from HH the Dalai Lama

After finishing my apprenticeship, I went to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama to ask for his blessings on my work and his advice on how to share it with the world. He encouraged me to be open with the craft and to use it in service of what inspires people. He explicitly encouraged me to make images from other religious traditions and from my own culture. So far I have not made other religious images, because I am personally most inspired by the Buddha’s teachings and Himalayan imagery. But I’ve kept His Holiness’s advice close as I’ve begun to experiment with contemporary portraiture and with the integration of



contemporary quilting techniques into my work. Respect, care, authenticity, and excellence were the qualities His Holiness — and the other lamas I spoke with — most emphasized.

Stitching Buddhas, No Patience Required

Fabric thangkas have always been considered especially precious, both because of the valuable silk and gold materials they’re made of and because of the extraordinary amount of time it takes to complete them. It takes me several months to make just one small thangka.

Still, despite the days, weeks, and months required to learn and to do this work, I take issue with anyone who calls me patient! I’m always quick to point out that it doesn’t take patience to do what you love. It takes patience to tolerate what you find unpleasant. And I find stitching Buddhas to be very pleasant, indeed!

Making things brings us into intimate relationship with them. We are connected with these things. We know and understand them differently than the things we buy. And we don’t just know them in their finished form. We get to know them as they come into being, as they become.

So, on the one hand, I just love working with cloth and coming to understand how it behaves, what its qualities are, why an image can’t be made too small without running up against the nature of the material, and so on. But at the same time, I’m creating images that represent my most important aim in life. They embody the qualities I’m trying to uncover in myself, to cultivate in my behavior and in my relationship with the world.

And I know I can’t do it all at once. It’s a process of becoming, of evolving, just like my silken images evolve, stitch by stitch.

Leslie Rinchen-Wongmo is one of the only westerners trained in the rare Buddhist art of silk appliqué thangkas. She is passionate about the preservation and evolution of this cultural tradition. Her website is LeslieRW.com.

OPPOSITE: *Three Mongolians*, 2006, 24" x 35", by Leslie Rinchen-Wongmo. ABOVE: Rinchen-Wongmo with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

