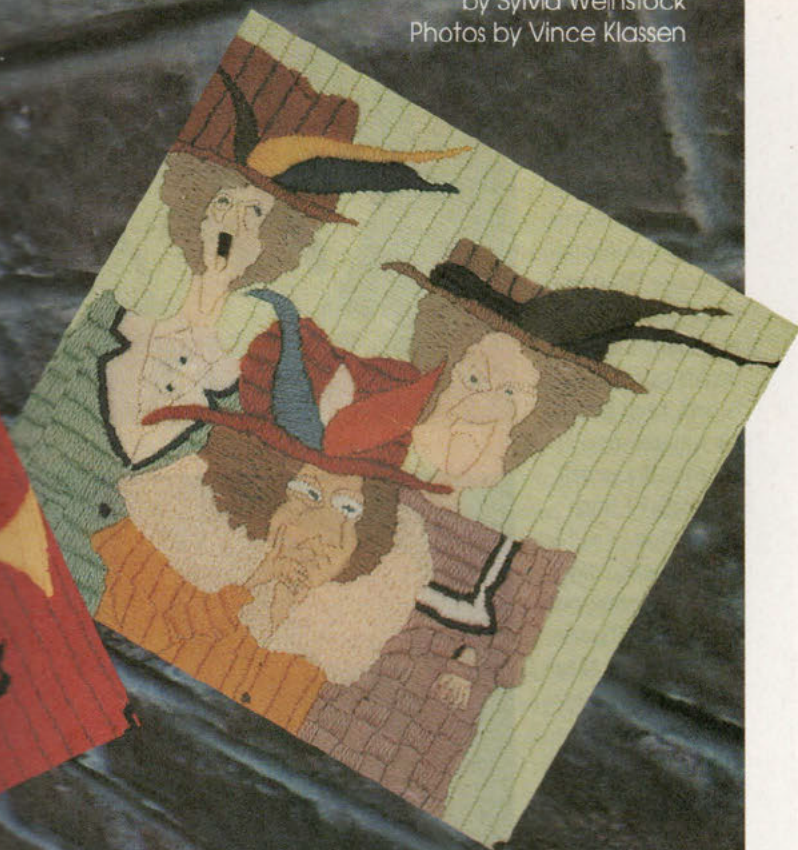


LES

Chan's latest passion centres on the wool crewelwork tapestries that combine his graphic talents with his humorous outlook. His upcoming spring show has a tea theme. Pictured are "Tea and Trumpets" and "Tea Bags," as well as one of his culinary creations.

by Sylvia Weinstock
Photos by Vince Klassen



CHAN

*He stitches, he sautés,
he sketches*

On a full-length mirror in the hallway of his James Bay apartment, Les Chan has posted several affirmations, written in his tidy calligraphic handwriting on stick-it notes. One, placed dead-centre on the mirror, catches the reflected viewer right in the region of the heart. I lean close to read it aloud.

"Opportunity is nowhere."

"Look again," Chan suggests.

I try sounding out the words.

"Opportunity is now here." Ah hah.

"That's one of my favourite quotes," Chan explains. "It says to me we have a choice of how we view the world. People will see what they want to see, positive or negative."

A tour of his rooms reveals an array of embroidered artworks and more posted aphorisms. Spotting the words of my favourite motto — “You must do the thing you cannot do” — on his bulletin board, I tell him it’s a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt.

“Really? I find inspiration everywhere,” says Chan, pointing out a quote attributed to Confucius: “The greatest glory lies not in never falling, but in rising each time we fall.”

These inspirational messages are not merely etched on paper throughout his home; they are

guiding principles this 41-year-old artist, chef, cooking instructor, tour guide and bon vivant around town has incorporated into his daily life. If at one time he was labelled “disabled” (two brain tumours at the age of 13 resulted in paralysis of the left side of his body), he has since “enabled” himself to achieve success on many levels, as a stand-up comic, motivational speaker and tourism promoter, among many other accomplishments. He even uses humour in speaking of the radiation therapy that left him hairless during the long-haired ‘60s. “It was the first time I was bald,” says Chan with a wink.

When I first met Chan several years ago, I was immediately struck by his irreverent sense of humour. I sensed I had met a true original, someone who was always on, who loved being the centre of attention. He calls his positive attitude “a basic survival instinct.” “I’ve always been quite humorous. I’d rather people laughed with me than at me. I love the attention because I’m a big ham. Standing in front of a cooking class, or a tour group, I’m the star, centre stage, and it feels great. I like to take risks. I’m constantly pushing myself beyond my limitations.”

Chan’s latest passion centres on the wool crewelwork tapestries that combine his graphic talents with his humorous outlook. The pun-laden titles pop into his mind first. Moving quickly from conception into production, he quickly sketches an image that embodies the play on words onto a piece of broadcloth, without any intermediary drawings. Propping the embroidery hoop between his right knee and his chest, Chan painstakingly stitches the image. An average piece takes more than 200 hours to



Left:
"Strip Teas"
and
"E. Tea."

complete. He has created several series of these labour-intensive embroidery works, each with its own theme. Given his love of cooking, it's not surprising that most of his themes are food-related. He explored dish puns in pieces such as "In Dish Be Leaf," "Child Dish" (a slingshot,

baseball bat and rattle are the utensils), "Dish Lexic" (silverware is reversed in a place setting) and "Dishcotheque" (well-dressed cutlery cuts up on the dance floor beneath a mirrored ball). His upcoming spring show has a tea theme, and by mid-July he had already completed more than 12 pieces, including the evocatively titled "Tea and Trumpets," "Tea Rex," "Tea and Symphony" and "E. Tea." As always, he is thinking three steps ahead with ideas for more pieces to round out the show, which will be held in March 1998 at the Picture Framing Studio at 712 Cormorant Street.

Other than high-school courses, he's never taken art or cooking classes. His intuitive sense of design is demonstrated in the spontaneity and immediacy of his drawings. "I decided to try crewelwork after seeing my aunt doing cross-stitch. At first I bought kits with patterns, but quickly tired of them. Soon I was drawing and stitching my own designs." His love for embroidery far outweighs his desire to continue drawing the delightful pen and ink drawings that often embellish his cooking-class recipe handouts. "I've spent 28 years searching for my niche. I've decided I'm never going to become a brain surgeon, but I think I may have found my calling."

Chan has always had some kind of creative outlet. He became interested in cooking as a teenager, after he returned to Nanaimo from a second brain tumour operation in a Victoria hospital. In Oriental communities, men often do all the cooking, so it was natural for him to gravitate to the kitchen. It also helped his mother, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. "Seeing what my mother was capable of gave me the impetus to get off my duff and stop whining." He wasn't the star pupil of his high-school cooking classes. Like most intuitive chefs, he doesn't measure ingredients, a prerequisite with Home Ec. teachers who didn't appreciate his ad-libbing. "It's always a challenge for me to provide exact measurements for my students. I love the artistic side of cooking, experimenting with food. It's another example of risk-taking and a bridge of communication. A food-laden table is a wonderful catalyst for conversation."

In the mid '70s, Chan led weekly cooking classes in Nanaimo, and starred in a short-lived cable show called *Going for a Wok*. Sensing that Victoria held more opportunities for someone with his initiative, he settled here in the early '80s. By 1985 he was working for Kitchen Etiquette, a kitchen store/cooking school, offering cooking classes and Chinatown cook's tours for students curious about the source of his unusual ingredients. He also began leading historical tours through the former "Forbidden City," calling himself the "unofficial goodwill ambassador of Chinatown." On the historical tours, Chan guides participants through the Chinese temple, herbalist shops, old opium factory site, tea ceremonies and visits with aromatherapists and calligraphers. His popular cook's tours of Chinatown markets demystify ingredients, and offer tips on utilizing and storing Chinese groceries. One type of tour culminates in a dim sum lunch, the other in a cooking class back at Kitchen Etiquette, where purchases are turned into a spontaneous feast. "This year alone, I've brought close to 1,000 people through Chinatown, helping them get a sense of the markets so they'll feel comfortable

**"Tea and Symphony"
and "A Cup, B Cup,
Tea Cup."**



shopping there. I enjoy providing that bridge of communication."

Chan has also offered "Culinary Conquests," a class geared to people with physical limitations, in which he demonstrates techniques for zesting, peeling, rolling and chopping,

using only one hand. "I

also go into schools to talk

about being disabled. I think it's

important for kids to have some kind of role

model. I've worked with stroke patients, showing them

creative ways to perform everyday tasks. My objective is to convey that opportunities are here, now, for everyone to grab, with one hand, or with both hands.

"The thing I want people to get is, if you have a problem, look at it as a challenge," he emphasizes. "Take that challenge and think

out the steps required to solve it."

I'm reminded of the Buddhist philosophy that every situation is workable, and of the Bodhisattva vow

"Obstacles are countless. I vow to cut through them." Now



there's a quote that would be right at home on Chan's wall. He demonstrates how he ties a tie one-handed, using a length of black wool that is lying in readiness for use in his latest embroidery. Knotted around his neck, the black wool tie makes a smart sartorial statement. Between that and his inspirational statements, he may have just inspired a new fashion. Positively. ▼

Sylvia Weinstock frequently uses Eleanor Roosevelt's words of wisdom—"You must do the thing you cannot do"—as a motivating force, particularly when she is trying to convince herself to go beyond thigh level in the cold ocean.