

# A Stitch *in* time

When she started out to pursue her passion for embroidery, Mimi Chan had no idea she would be entangled in the creation of the most famous dress in recent history

TEXT MERCY LO PHOTOS JIMMY LUK









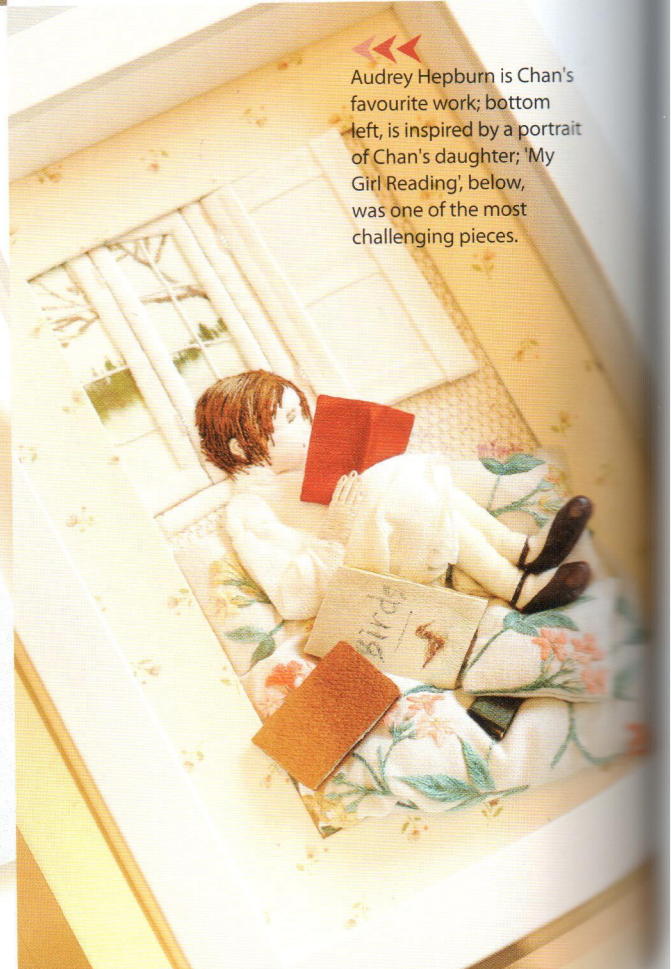
**A rainbow of cottons, crewel wool, and perle threads** make for a mesmerising introduction to the world of Mimi Chan.

Sitting in front of a large embroidery frame, Chan continues with her latest work as she gracefully pulls up a threaded needle and sticks it back into the fabric, which has an incomplete bundle of purple flowers embroidered on top.

When she was a child, Chan put together a few outfits for her dolls using leftover fabrics from her mother's sewing, but it never occurred to her then that she would one day fall so deeply in love with hand embroidery. After graduating from college with a degree in English, Chan became a teacher for a year, worked for a publishing firm and lastly ended up in a real estate company.

Then, one day, five or six years ago, she was browsing the internet and came across a few embroidery websites. "I was fascinated by the colours and patterns of those embroidery works. Right afterward, I ordered a bunch of books and kits online and started my own embroidery journey."

At first she just attempted to do a few works on her own out of personal interest. Later she started taking classes but that couldn't quench her thirst



◀◀◀  
Audrey Hepburn is Chan's favourite work; bottom left, is inspired by a portrait of Chan's daughter; 'My Girl Reading', below, was one of the most challenging pieces.



for needlework.

"There are so many different types of embroidery, and I figured that what we had on offer in Hong Kong was not enough to fulfill my obsession. I wanted to attend the Royal School of Needlework, but as a mother of three, I couldn't possibly put down my family and just leave," says Chan.

To make her plan work, she had to persuade her husband to let her go. Eventually in the winter of 2009, he promised to take care of the family and gave her the green light to move to England.

Life was not easy in the RSN. "Apart from eating, showering, and grocery shopping, all I did was embroidering. I spent 12 hours a day just to embroider. It was so intensive that my fingertips became calloused and started feeling numb. My teacher told me that one who treasures her beautiful hands should not embroider as embroiderer's hands are never soft and pretty," says Chan.

Chan reveals to *The PEAK* that the RSN doesn't have any specific requirements for their applicants, because no matter how good you are, everyone has to start from the basic level to ensure that all the students have a strong foundation and the same embroidery techniques.

While she was studying, one day the principal of the RSN called her in to discuss a confidential matter. "She mentioned briefly about an urgent project that she needed my help with, but everything was top secret and she wasn't able to disclose many details. I was not even allowed to discuss it with my husband. Everyone was required to sign a confidentiality agreement before taking on the task. However, by the time I walked out of the room, I immediately figured out what I had signed up for."

It was the bespoke wedding gown for Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, designed by Sarah Burton of Alexander McQueen. The royal wedding was held on April 29, 2011, and before that date, Chan and the rest of the team worked intently on the project.

"We had to wash our hands every 30 minutes to keep the lace and threads clean. We also had to change our needles every three hours to ensure that each needle is sharp enough to create a perfect piece of embroidery work," says Chan proudly.

However, what satisfies her more is to be the first ever Chinese student admitted to the RSN and to break its 140-year record by graduating with the highest score in its history, 97 out of 100.

After earning a Diploma in Technical Hand

Embroidery at the RSN in the UK, she opened Tour Embroidery on returning to Hong Kong, where she now teaches embroidery classes and takes on private commissions.

Recently she held her first solo exhibition in Wan Chai. Chan is now working on new pieces and looking forward to another exhibition to showcase her creative works.

Chan does not dream to be a celebrity-embroiderer or expand her business. All she cares about is embroidering. "This is the one thing that I love. As long as I am still capable, I will keep on embroidering until the very last day." ▲



PHOTO CORBIS