

Palestinian Embroidery

Palestinian textile traditions are vibrant and rich, spanning millennia through an ancient practice preserved and passed on between mother and daughter. The exhibit presented between the dates November 18, 2022 and March 25, 2023 at The Museum of the Palestinian People focuses on the contemporary styles that emerged after the 1948 *Al-Nakba* (Arabic, meaning “the catastrophe”). It is commonly believed that no styles have emerged in the Palestinian diaspora, however this is a misconception. After 1948, Palestinian dresses began to be stitched without reference to regional identity, as it once was. In exile, Palestinians continued the practice of embroidery to showcase a national identity and resist the cultural appropriation of their textile traditions.

Curated by Wafa Ghnaim

Palestinian Traditional Costume Map (2003)

Source: Palestinian Heritage Center

Object No. 2022.010

The Palestinian Heritage Center (PHC) was established in 1991 in Bethlehem. Mrs. Maha Saca, the founder and director of the Center, possesses extensive experience and background in Palestinian folklore, especially in the origins and meanings of traditional embroidery. Mrs. Maha is an early pioneer in the preservation of Palestinian embroidery and dressmaking, conducting decades of research on the subject, opening PHC, and publishing her work in collaboration with her daughter, Mrs. Iman Saca, in the well-known publication "Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing" (Oriental Institute Museum Publications). Mrs. Maha and PHC are well-known amongst Palestinians for producing various postcards and posters in the early 1990's, focusing on the regional variations of dress across historic Palestine between 1850 and 1948. These items circulated the diaspora extensively for decades, and many, if not all, Palestinians have encountered or own these items in their home.

Contemporary Dress, *Thobe* (2000s)

Object No. 2022.116

This is a contemporary dress, with shoulder pads, using traditional Palestinian cross-stitch technique, colors and patterns. Starting in the 1970's, the embroidery patterns used for Palestinian dresses (*thobe*), expressed a national allegiance to Palestine, rather than to a particular village or town. The motifs and style utilized in this dress, and during this time period, continue to underscore a unified Palestinian style and identity. The dresses of the post 1948 era no longer represent the regional identity of the wearer, but a national one in the face of cultural erasure and appropriation.

Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim (1995)

Courtesy of Oregon Folklife Network

A color photograph of Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, award-winning Palestinian embroiderer, in her Oregon home carrying *The Gardens Dress*. This dress was produced with the help of her daughters, Fida, Wafa and Safa Ghnaim as young children. *The Gardens Dress* was made using traditional techniques, and served to pass on the art form from Feryal to her daughters. Feryal was born in Safad, Palestine and was exiled to Syria as a young child. She studied art and history in Damascus University and taught Palestinian embroidery across the diaspora. After immigrating to the United States with her husband and having three daughters, she passed on the art form as it was to her from her mother. The dress is similar to the Six Branch dress format. Palestinian embroidery continues to be practiced in diaspora communities around the world by families, as well as educational arts initiatives such as *Tatreez & Tea*.



Six Branch Dress, *Thobe* (1980-1990s)

Object No. 2022.120

After 1948, we began to see a transformation in the use and style of embroidery, تطريز [tatrız]. Due to *al-Nakba*, over 700,000 displaced refugees no longer had access to embroidery supplies, weaving centers and Syrian imported fabrics, let alone their livelihoods and income. Palestinian society was devastated, and the 1950's was a period of great upheaval for families who had newly become refugees. Therefore, little documentation is available about Palestinian costume during this time. During the late 1960s, Palestinians revived the "six branch dress" style, named after the six vertical bands of embroidery that ran from waist to hem. This style of dress had been practiced prior to 1948 using traditional motifs that represented village styles. However, its reemergence during the mid-twentieth century showcased curvilinear motifs or branches of birds, as shown in this dress. In its widespread popularity during the 1960s, this dress became the first post-1948 style to evolve without being tied to an established regional style. The patterns in the "branches" were primarily European, however the style grew over the decades to include more traditional motifs. The beauty of the "six branch dress" was that the design structure allowed one to embroider the "branches" to reflect one's own economic necessities: very thin if times were hard, broadening the panels as small luxuries became possible. Gift of Nadera Rammouni

Hasan abu Khdair's Wedding in Shu'fat (1983)

Source: The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive

Object No. 0242.01.0028

A color photograph of women in Palestinian dresses at Hasan abu Khdair's wedding in Shu'fat refugee camp, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Even with the new patterns used in the dresses produced after 1948, the cut remained traditional and so did the placement of the embroidery. The new dresses which emerged after 1970 have specific names derived from the fabric used, the type of chest panel, or the number of "branches" of embroidery applied vertically on the side panels.

Camp Dress, *Thobe* (1970s)

Object No. 2021.005

This is an elegant modern version of the traditional Palestinian *thobe* produced at a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in the late 1970s. This style of dress was referred to as a "Camp Dress", due to its mode of production and sale. This particular dress is similar to dresses produced by INAASH workshops, a Lebanese organization established in the 1960s that has trained and empowered thousands of Palestinian women in the refugee camps, and is still active today. In an effort to satisfy a commercial need at the time for Palestinian embroidered items, charitable organizations and NGOs that employed Palestinian refugee women in the camps produced various items such as cushions, bookmarks, shoulder purses, and wall hangings that became very popular, and were subsequently copied throughout the world. During this time, Israeli groups had begun acquiring and selling Palestinian embroidery items, claiming Israeli heritage. The intentional labeling on the inner lining of the dress that states "Embroidered by Palestinian Women according to Traditional designs" is a direct response to the rise of Israeli cultural appropriation. Gift of Lucy Asper Rumpf in memory of Ann Asper, 2020

Handmade Embroidery Products by INAASH Association (1973)

Source: The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive

Object No. 0096.01.0253 & 0096.01.0261

Color photographs showing a model wearing a Palestinian handmade embroidered product created by the Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps (also known as INAASH). The dress worn by the model is nearly identical, except for a few thread color differences, with Object No. 2021.005.
