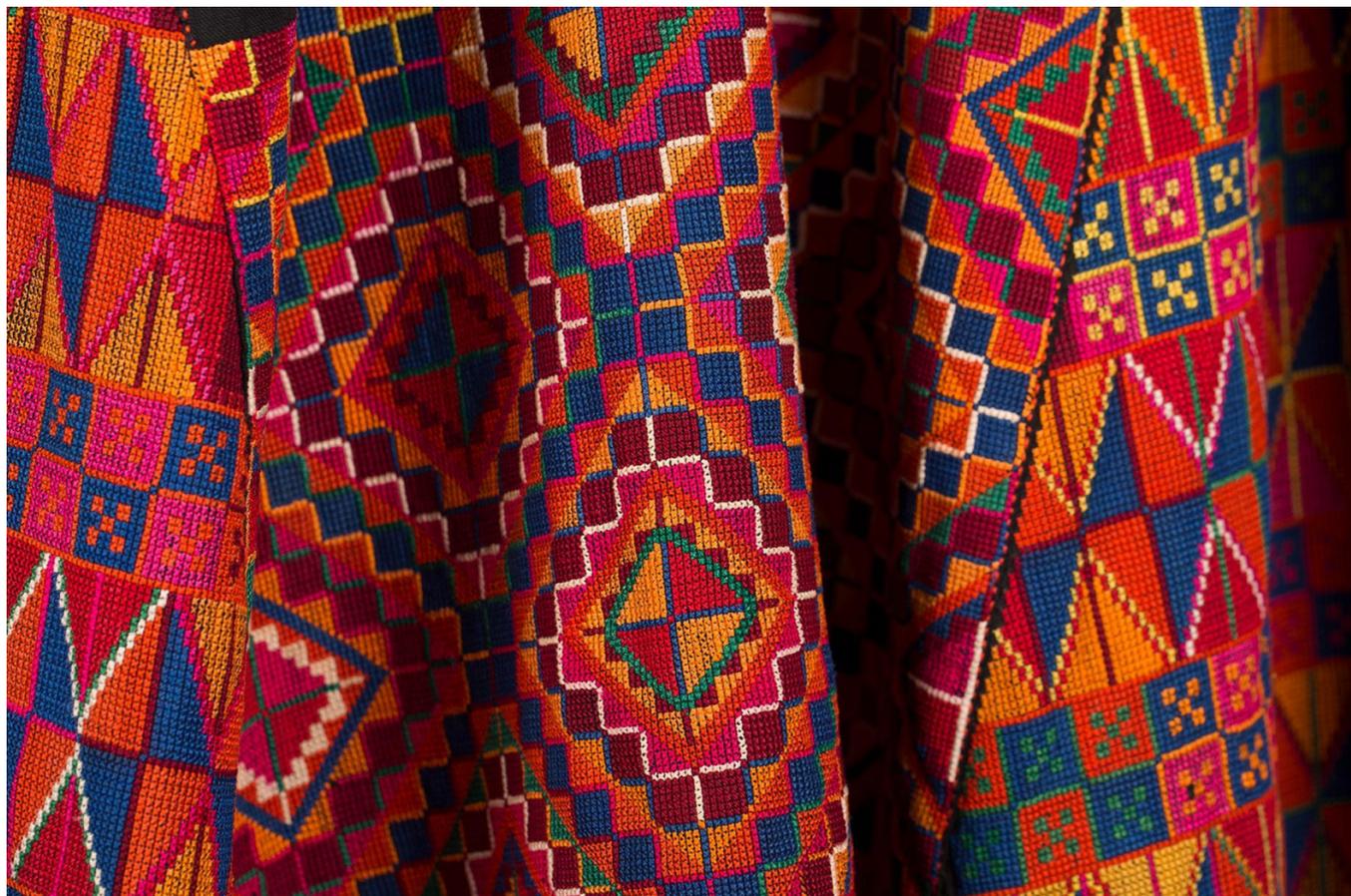


Labour of Love: Palestinian history through embroidery

[William Parry](#) May 15, 2018





A detail of an embroidered dress. Kayane Antreassian / The Palestinian Museum

Much of the media coverage of the 70th anniversary of the Nakba will, rightly, focus on the powerful, tragic stories of Palestinians who were expelled or fled their homes in 1948.

But a fascinating, beautiful and informative exhibition at the Palestinian Museum, just outside Ramallah, gives an unconventional and compelling glimpse into many of the key events and repercussions of that seismic exodus seven decades ago.

"Seeing embroidery as a tool for unfolding a critical history of the country has been the central idea," says Rachel Dedman, the curator of Labour of Love: new approaches to Palestinian embroidery. "For me this show isn't about embroidery but about the social and political dynamics of the past 100 years that play out through embroidery."

And it achieves just that through a rich mix of historic Palestinian dresses, artwork, photography, video interviews and artefacts – it's a prism,

almost entirely through the work of women, that shows that the Nakba wasn't a single event 70 years ago, but one that continues today.

The exhibition opens with pre-Nakba "everyday dresses" as testaments to female labour. Their beauty stems from their simplicity and the ways in which they reflect resourcefulness – incorporating material from the garments of mothers, aunts, sisters – practicality – small holes in the chest panel for breast-feeding "breaks" and tell-tale signs of essential daily routines.

In contrast, the main exhibition moves to elaborately and impeccably embroidered dresses "connected to milestones in a woman's life, playing roles in childhood, marriage and maturity". These are coupled with post-Nakba art from the 1970s and 1980s, in which many artists, such as Sliman Mansour, depict Palestinian women in traditional embroidered dresses representing the Motherland, working the land, even giving birth to a nation, presenting a return to an idealised past through a gaze firmly fixed on the future.

Dedication to the project

The exhibition is the culmination of four years' work for Dedman. One of the unexpected challenges she faced, she says, "was convincing lenders that something is beautiful when they believe them to be ugly, like the everyday dresses at the start, or these camp ones," she says, pointing to a group of relatively simple dresses from the time of the Nakba.

Dedman tells a moving story of how displaced women in the camps immediately after the Nakba helped each other by giving simple embroidered dresses to those less fortunate than themselves.

In one case, a woman inherited an evidently small dress from another refugee and stitched part of the durable sack of UNRWA rice or sugar to make it large enough to fit her – with some of the faded UN-blue print

from the sack still visible below the right armpit.

Dedman is clearly dedicated to, and passionate about, this project. When asked about anything unexpected that came up, she lights up and says: "Aspects of the material that I just had no idea existed beforehand – the [first] intifada dresses for instance.

"I'd never heard about them before, and you really can't find out much about them at all online or in the books that exist. When I found them it was like a holy grail for a researcher working on this kind of material, because they're completely extraordinary."

They stand out, particularly when you think that there was an Israeli crackdown during the first intifada in the late 1980s on anything that promoted nationalist motifs, symbols or even colours of the flag.

The Palestinian women who embroidered these intifada dresses defiantly wore their hearts on their sleeves as acts of resistance, embroidering doves, guns, the outlawed Palestinian flag, Al Aqsa Mosque and other nationalist motifs into the fabric to make an explicit political statement, risking arrest and detention. Embroidery became very important to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's "revival of heritage as political rhetoric' in the 1970s and 1980s, the exhibition notes.

Embroidery by male political prisoners

A curious, but important detour for an exhibition on Palestinian embroidery touches on one area where men have played a minor but symbolically very important role in a predominately female field – embroidery produced by male political prisoners.

It alludes to the widespread, systematic and decades-old Israeli policy of using arrest and detention to break individuals, families, communities and resistance, and has had devastating consequences on Palestinian

communities living under occupation. The exhibition notes: "In periods when crafts are banned by the Israeli authorities, men embroider in secret, under difficult circumstances. Their extraordinary work mingles patriotism and resistance with love for their families at home."

The exhibition concludes with a critical look at the current embroidery industry. Palestinian women traditionally produced embroidery for personal use, but the Nakba changed that, splitting "rural women from their self-sufficient livelihoods in agriculture, forcing them to seek waged work instead", it notes.

Embroidery organisations have been founded over several recent decades to empower women by giving them a livelihood and also to retain part of their heritage – both erosive impacts of the Nakba.

Continuing impact of the Nakba

But today, the exhibition suggests, the commodification of embroidery, coupled with the mushrooming in the past decade of co-operatives and enterprises designed to empower women through embroidery production, is leaving Palestinian women financially more vulnerable than empowered.

Dedman's research notes: "Women who make embroidery cannot afford to own or wear what they produce, and remain dependent on other forms of income and support.

Many organisations operate a 'pay-per-piece' policy. This means that the more a woman embroiders, the more money she earns. But this precarious system leaves her vulnerable.

When she most needs money – to look after a sick child or support an ageing parent – she is least able to work, and may not get paid at all."

The economic vulnerability of these women is further evidence that the

Nakba continues due to continued Israeli policies, exacting a high toll on livelihoods, traditions and culture in Palestine.

Other aspects show the continuing impact of the Nakba. There is no embroidery or input from women in Gaza, for example, due to Israel's long-term blockade. And while many of the women who contributed to this exhibition attended the opening, a great number from outside the West Bank could not. The continued fragmentation of Palestinians that began 70 years ago has only deepened.

Likewise, the museum routinely faces obstacles in trying to function due to Israeli policies – from Israeli-issued building permits to Israeli-issued customs restrictions, to Israeli-issued visas for artists, curators and so forth.

Dedman says the materials from countries such as Jordan and Lebanon had to be brought in “unofficially, or under the radar”.

Read more:

[**First Palestinian art museum in US opens its doors**](#)

[**Art under occupation: The challenges facing Palestinian artists and cultural institutions**](#)

[**Shifting Ground, Ramallah: art under occupation**](#)

Her curation of the show itself articulates volumes about the current realities faced by Palestinians fighting occupation and fragmentation. However, Dedman and the museum acknowledge that the exchange has been two-way and focused throughout.

"Being able to move between Lebanon and Palestine is an enormous privilege that my Lebanese and Palestinian colleagues cannot do easily," she says. "My background, my education, my language – all of these things play into the power I have in this situation, so it's always about how do you leverage that, and how can I use this opportunity to give space to women to speak who would usually never come to a museum like this or be addressed in a museum like this, or who would never be heard from in the public celebration of Palestinian heritage."

Labour of Love: new approaches to Palestinian embroidery at The Palestinian Museum runs until August 25, 2018

Updated: May 14, 2018 07:16 PM

SHARE