

The Language of Design

Traditional Palestinian Embroidery



By Maha AbuShusheh

There she sits, a young girl just shy of six years old. The girl is impatiently waiting for her mother to finish preparing supper so that they can start their embroidery lessons, just like generations of Palestinian women before her had done. Her mother will give her a leftover piece of cloth from an older embroidery project and a few threads for practice. She will learn how to embroider as if she were learning how to read and write, as embroidery for village women is a language with its own vocabulary and rules. And just like we see ingenious poets bending languages to their will and producing the most articulate literary works, there are women who have bent the needle and thread to their will and created wonderfully stitched works of art. She will find that there are women in her village who are known for their extraordinary work in cutting the dresses or for their famous embroidery techniques, and that there are others who have made a living out of creating embroidery pieces that were sold to American and European pilgrims in Ramallah and Bethlehem.

She will practice until she masters the art and will later start to embroider her own dresses that she will take to her husband's home. Each and every dress will serve a purpose; there will be ones that are decorated and lavish for special occasions, and others for housework and day-to-day life. Her special dresses will be a dark shade of dyed indigo fabric to reflect the high status of the occasion and heavily

Iraq al-Tuffah (apple branch) from Beit Dajan, Jaffa, inspired by Bethlehem embroidery.



An embroidered side-panel piece from western Hebron (Beit Jebrin). The design is referred to as *baqlawa*.

decorated with silk, as fabrics with lighter shades of indigo are less expensive and would be used to create her daily dresses instead. She will also buy colorful orange, green, red, or yellow taffeta pieces for the finishing touches.

She will come to understand and appreciate the motifs, colors, and symbols that distinguish her village's dress from the rest, even after Palestinian women started using the French Dollfus Mieg et Cie (DMC) threads. The most important color of all is red; women in Ramallah did not use the same shade of red as women in Beit Dajan, Lifta, or Dawaymeh, or as Bedouin women. She will learn the rules of embroidering her village's motifs to create the dress that will make her outshine all the other brides from the village on her wedding day. She will consult with other fashion-savvy women and ask about the latest trends; her dress will remain true to her village's original dress, but it will also be influenced by new trends and materials. This includes colored European fabrics that were introduced to the markets of Palestinian cities such as Jerusalem, Yaffa, Lyd, and



Embroidery from Ramallah (Rumi) dress, with sleeves made in Bethlehem style (couching).



Irq al-Tuffah (apple branch) from Beit Dajan, Jaffa, inspired by Bethlehem embroidery.



Detail from a dress from the area west of Hebron, featuring a cypress tree design and Hermizy silk.



Ramleh. She will grow to understand that these markets are crucial to remaining up-to-date in terms of the latest fashion trends, and also to introducing the aforementioned DMC threads that revolutionized embroidery for many, as they came with a set of catalogues and stencils that presented new symbols and motifs and helped guide women through the embroidery process. We will always be able to tell which village her dress is from, but the additions will tell a story of the time she lived in and the trends that she liked. Unfortunately, we can't visualize the complete cycle of evolution of these dresses as the oldest dresses we've found only date back to the mid-nineteenth century.

Her mother will explain to her that although the use of DMC threads and different fabrics affected the construction of the original dress, it still maintained its main structure and motifs which were a reflection of the owner's social and economic status, as well as her attention to detail and her ability to coordinate colors and motifs. It's true that new motifs were added, and new flora and fauna blossomed on the dresses with time, but unique shades of red thread were still used by each village or region. Women in Ramallah started to integrate into their dress decorated sleeves that are similar to those found in Bethlehem, for example. The motifs also evolved



Jillaya from Ramleh area.

into more complex floral combinations as a result of the European influence on traditional embroidery, but we will always find the same unique shade of red in Ramallah dresses. The same applies to the dresses of Beit Dajan and the surrounding villages; they were influenced by Bethlehem's embroidery through Manna Hazboun in the 1930s. The women from these villages used what their teacher had taught them to create their own motifs of orange orchards and flowery meadows.

She will learn how embroidery in Palestine was also affected in the 1920s by the First World War, when women had to adapt their dresses to the dire conditions of war and the horrors of losing loved ones. For example, the wedding dress that was worn by women from the central governorates in the early nineteenth century had a front slit and was heavily embroidered with old motifs that were passed on from generations. The front of the dress contained taffeta silk that was decorated with floral and bead work. Following the war, they were replaced with dresses that were heavily embroidered and completely closed in the front. With time, the old dresses changed as a result of the increased interactions with different villages as well as the introduction of embroidery and tailoring stencils.

The embroidery of Palestinian dresses reveals not only from which region the woman who made the dress originates but also during which period she lived and what conditions she endured.

This was all prior to 1948. For the following eras in Palestinian history, we need to extensively research the evolution of the Palestinian embroidered dress. It is clear, though, that those who had lost their loved ones and their homes were no longer emotionally or financially capable of creating embroidered dresses of the same caliber. But still Palestinian women in refugee camps embroidered their simple dresses with the same colors, motifs, and shades that they had used in their villages. They also started to view embroidery as a craft that could help them secure a source of income for their families.

The refugee women of Asdod and Al-Majdal in Gaza, for example, continued to embroider their dresses with the same shades and fabrics that they had used before being uprooted from their homes, but not to the same standard or with the same enthusiasm as before. It is a simple dress that barely contains any embroidery at all. It lost the sacred connection with land and nature; it lost its connection with home.

Maha AbuShusheh, born in 1962 in Ramallah, holds a BA in economics from Birzeit University. Her professional career has revolved around the family business Abu-Shusheh Contracting Co., a road construction company that now is the sole agency of Peugeot Automobiles in Palestine. She is involved in business and cultural organizations, a board member of Bank of Palestine, the Palestinian Business Women Forum, and Riwaq, the previous chairperson of the Palestinian Shippers Council, and a member of the boards of trustees of Al-Quds University and the Palestinian Medical Relief Association, among others. Ms. AbuShusheh was named one of Forbes Arabia's top 50 influential Arab businesswomen for the years 2006 and 2007 – the only Palestinian woman to make the list – and also one of Forbes Arabia's top 100 influential Arabs. She is married and has four children.

Detail from Beit Dajan, Jaffa dress, using a design called *qubab*, inspired by Bethlehem design.



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