

Palestinian Embroidery Has Shaped My Life



By Widad Kawar
(with Mary Kawar)

I am often filled with pride as I reflect on how Tiraz Centre, where my collection is exhibited, has become an inspiration for many. I frequently spend time there, appreciating all the activity that is created by students preparing for various projects; awestruck tourists, journalists, and academics seeking information; artisans looking for inspiration to create modern items; visiting expatriate Arabs wanting to expose their children to their culture, and more. The center is home to my collection, and everyone is welcome to experience it, learn about it, and enjoy it.



Widad at Tiraz Centre.

Some people call me “the mother of the Palestinian dress” or other similar titles, but deep down, that does not make me too comfortable. You see, I never set out to have such a big collection, and I certainly never set myself up for fame. I can honestly say, however, that I am deeply connected to people and places, and preserving Palestinian embroidery was the way I initiated and maintained these connections. I could follow my passion because I am fortunate to have had a supportive husband and children who encouraged me. But, for me, the most important aspect was always the story behind the dress. Through my connection to people and places, I somehow contributed to preserving the past. We Palestinians live with the deep trauma of dispossession. In my case, I channeled this into a desire to understand, document, and preserve every single detail of women’s costumes and lives.

My connection to places started with my early upbringing in Bethlehem and continued during my school days in Ramallah, where I used to watch women converge in the town center on market days. At that stage in my life, I was simply mesmerized by the exquisite Bethlehem dress, aptly called *al-malak* (the royal), and the intricate, refined Ramallah dress with its signature red colors and an abundance of specific patterns. My mother’s family originated from the village of About, which is close to Ramallah, and the place and its dresses are imprinted in my early memory. The costumes

My passion for Palestinian embroidery has been driven by the desire to connect with places and people, especially women, as well as to connect our past to the future.



Widad with students at Tiraz Centre.



Portrait of the Irani family, Widad’s family of origin.



Widad’s relative from About, Im Wadeh Ibrahim, who always wore her Ramallah *thobe*.



Visiting Palestinian refugee women in Hussein Camp in Amman.

and accessories of Bethlehem and Ramallah continue to have a special place in my heart. They represent the happy places of my childhood and early adulthood.

I married Kamel Kawar and moved to Amman in the late 1950s. Amman was a small, diverse, and friendly city back then. I started to volunteer in Palestinian refugee camps even before the issue of refugees became increasingly acute after 1967. As I got to know many women who lived in these camps, I connected to what I later referred to as camp culture. You see, in this new environment, the traditional dress was changing as a result of a number of factors, including modernization and the exposure to new “foreign” patterns, the experience of people from different parts of Palestine learning from each other, the introduction of synthetic materials and threads, and the development of embroidery skills as an economic value for women. So, for me, the refugee camp culture

was also a place of connection, a place where Palestine was being preserved outside its borders. Even though the dresses were changing, they were still Palestinian.

My life in Amman and exposure to Jordanian and, later, Syrian traditions expanded my horizons. While Palestinian embroidery traditions were facing danger, the same threat existed for Jordanian and Syrian traditions. This was due to the ongoing rapid modernization and urbanization and a lack of awareness as to the need to preserve traditional knowledge. In addition, if one understands the history of Palestine, one understands very clearly its regional integration, which includes costume traditions. For example, residents of the geographical area called Houran, which comprises southern Syria and the northern tips of Jordan and Palestine, share the same costume, and the people who live on both sides of the of the Jordan River wear the same costume as well. Syria was the source of silk and textiles for Palestine and engaged in vibrant trade. And cities such as Jerusalem shared with Damascus and Aleppo the late-Ottoman urban dress style. So, my attachment to Jordan, my new home, and my enchantment with Syria lured me to expand my research and enlarge my collection. It is important for me to have this broad perspective and a deep understanding of our regional costume heritage.

Interestingly, this expanded view of the dresses of the Levant opened the door for me to have international exhibitions in Europe and Asia. While many countries were, regrettably, too “careful” about engaging with anything Palestinian and reluctant to even use the word, the rich textile

heritage of Palestine slipped right through these exhibitions and was shown in all its glory for the whole world to see. Although it is easier today to promote Palestinian culture, during the 1970s and 1980s it was virtually impossible. There was an overwhelming demonization of Palestinians during that period. These exhibitions, which took place in many European, Asian, and Arab countries, exposed thousands of people to our heritage. Most touching was seeing Arab migrants visit with their families. Once, outside an exhibition in Cologne, Germany, Palestinians and other Arabs gathered to celebrate, holding a small festival with food, music, and dancing. What a happy atmosphere and how much pride was brought about by the exhibition! I recall how my heart expanded when they asked me to join them right outside the museum.

Today, my head is filled with memories of the women whose life histories crossed with mine. I cannot do justice to all of them in this article, but their courage, resilience, wisdom, kindness, generosity, humor, and intelligence have enriched my life. I am so grateful for those who entrusted their costumes to me and to those who shared their life’s joys and sorrows with me.

You see, to better understand any dress I acquired, I would seek the story behind it. For me, the costumes were but a living testimony of the owner. I recall each life story and how the costume and embroidery were at the center of the individual’s life: There is the story of a young woman who saw her future groom for the first time; of aunts who helped embroider a dress on social afternoons; of a wedding day when the bride was



Poster from an exhibition that took place at Bubikon Castle in Switzerland in 2003 (photographed here on the walls of the castle). The woman in the photograph is wearing the traditional costume of the Bir Sabe’ area.



Framed poster from the *Costumes Dyed by the Sun* exhibition in Tokyo (1982).

fetches from her father’s house; of a mother-in-law who had great embroidery talent but a challenging disposition; of market days when women used to dress their best; of an innocent love affair in the fields; of the firstborn daughter; and on and

on. Unfortunately, many of these stories also have painful sides rooted in dispossession and trauma.

Another category of women I connected with were what I call *al-tarazat*, the embroiderers. These are the women who used their embroidery skill to gain an economic advantage. Many of them still exist in my life today, as we have enjoyed lifelong relationships. I was able to connect the dots: the women who had the required skills and needed an income, the market demand for Palestinian embroidery on modern, usable items such as cushions, runners, coasters, jackets, table covers, etc. I helped many NGOs and handicraft shops in Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon to develop this tradition, and I helped link the *tarazat* with these income-earning opportunities. Just as with the women who entrusted me with their dresses, I also developed a great connection with these women, their marriages, their financial situations, and their children's education. I was



A Palestinian embroidery inspired art piece titled *Shawl* displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (the Naqsh Collective).

simply part of their life cycle, and it gives me pleasure to know that I have somehow contributed to their welfare.

I would like to mention one woman, known as Im Ibrahim or Ruqiyya al-Santarisy, with whom I had a deep connection and who sadly passed away in Amman a couple of years ago. She had fled from her home in Beit Dajan in 1948, and anybody who knows Palestinian embroidery knows the richness of the Beit Dajan dress. This sumptuousness was a reflection of wealth because the town is located in an area of orange groves that used to export as far as Europe at the time, when the "Jaffa Orange" brand was known as the best kind of orange – only to be appropriated later on by the Israelis. Anyhow, Amman became Im Ibrahim's home, alongside her husband and eight children. By the 1960s, she turned her embroidery skills, which she had learned when she was ten years old, into an income for her family. She was able to build a nice house and send most

of her children to university. But much more than that, her legacy is that she trained hundreds of women over several generations in what became her signature products due to their high quality and accuracy. Im Ibrahim and I shared a particular connection with the patterns, and we would sit and gaze at them or discuss and analyze them and their names. I do miss her.

Thinking back today on my life, and having amassed possibly one of the largest Palestinian and Arab costume collections, I think I was trying to capture the past through the act of preserving these dresses. The Palestine I knew and, later on, the Jordan I knew have dramatically changed. So by surrounding myself with this collection I forged my connection with my past. When I connect the dots of my life history, I see that it has been punctuated with



Im Yousef, one of the master embroiderers.



Widad and Salua Qidan with master embroiderer Im Ibrahim (Ruqiyya al-Santarisy).



Tiraz team today: Widad Kawar, Mary Kawar (daughter), Laila Mushahwar (granddaughter), Salua Qidan, and Ruba Al-Thaher.

traditional costume heritage. This heritage is my life story.

I am happy to have published the book *Threads of Identity* that pays homage to Palestinian women. I am also pleased at the success of Tiraz Centre, especially as my daughter Mary and my granddaughter Laila are taking a special interest in this art as well. We also have a lovely team with the designer Salua Qidan and our curator Ruba Thaher. So institutionally, there is certainly continuity.

I am also pleased to see that creative young people have a substantial interest in heritage. I am always delighted to see the innovation around me and how our heritage is being taken into another sphere. There is brilliance and artistic talent out there. Embroidery has become an inspiration to a new generation, and this is a great sign that this tradition will live on and thrive. There is, however, an element of cheap commercialization of embroidery that somehow bothers me. But never

mind, such is life, and things move on from one generation to the next with the positive and not so positive.

I am very proud that the art of Palestinian embroidery, with its practices, skills, knowledge, and rituals, has been added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. This is a clear recognition of the Palestinian women who fought for their country with their fingers and through needles and threads, who persisted in embroidering their identity, preserving their history, and transmitting it all to the next generation. Together with these women, I know in my heart that my life's work has contributed to this UNESCO recognition. I also know that this tradition will live on through the next generation of strong women.

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THE PALESTINIAN THOBE OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



HEBRON HILLS

BLACK LINEN DRESS FROM AL-FALUJA OR IRAQ AL-MANSHIYYA

This black linen dress may have been made in the early twentieth century, as can be seen by the embroidery design used on the sleeve and chest panels where opposing small triangles called *hijbeh* were embroidered in a design called "Waves of the Sea." The chest panel has an extension to the back panel made of yellow Syrian material. The front panel of the dress has a magnificent embroidered front piece with bright multiple colors on pink silk material called *hermizi*. The side panel is a signature of the Hebron area, and its uniqueness stands out with the use of a combination of hefty embroidery designs of squares, triangles, palm trees, and *kheyam al Pasha* (al-Pasha tents). Finally the lower panel of the dress is framed with silk *hermizi* fabrics called *tashreema*.

From the collection of George Al-Ama