

# Safeguarding Heritage

## The Role of Museums and Institutions in Preserving Palestinian Heritage



By **Baha Jubeh**

Translated from Arabic  
by Hind Hussein

**B**ased on my experience of more than 25 years of documenting, preserving, and exhibiting Palestinian heritage at Palestinian museums and institutions, I believe that the remarkable accomplishments of Palestinian institutions and museums are even more valuable than what is reported in the media, especially in light of the Israeli occupation's continuous attempts to steal and assail Palestinian heritage. Moreover,

these museums with their rich history and valuable heritage collections of dresses and tools shed light on Palestinian social and cultural history and its preservation. Each museum owns a distinctive collection that tells its own story. By reviewing these archives and tracing the history of Palestinian heritage museums, one can understand the important role that these museums play in heritage documentation and preservation. Through thorough documentation and the publication of the findings, heritage can be recorded and remembered, archives produced, and studies carried out.

Several collections in Palestine are dedicated to the preservation of heritage, and I have contributed to the documentation of collections held by the following museums: The Museum of Palestinian Popular Heritage of the In'ash Al-Ustra Society in Al-Bireh, Baituna Al-Talhami Museum of the Arab Women's Union in Bethlehem, the Birzeit University Museum, the Palestinian Heritage Museum of Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in Jerusalem, and The Palestinian Museum in Birzeit. I am proud to have worked and continue to work with these time-honored institutions that play a significant role in promoting and preserving Palestinian cultural heritage and contributing to the production of knowledge through various methods. Each collection has its own significance and plays a crucial role in preserving Palestinian



The building of the  
Palestinian Heritage Museum  
at Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in  
Jerusalem.

heritage. This article sheds light on the collections that belong to the two museums for which I currently work.

The first collection tells the story of the first museum dedicated to Palestinian heritage, established during the British Mandate, namely the collection of the Palestine Folk Museum. I consider this collection, currently owned by the Palestinian Heritage Museum of Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in Jerusalem, to be the most important collection of this type. The second important collection contains the historic dresses, *thobes*, and accessories that arrived at The Palestinian Museum in Birzeit in 2021 to join its growing permanent collection.

The story behind the 1936 establishment of the Palestine Folk Museum and its distinctive collection chronicles not only the history of Palestinian heritage museums but also Palestinian history during the British Mandate and beyond. Moreover, by tracing the history of this museum, we can also find an abundance of information related to Dar Al-Tifl's role in protecting heritage.

The re-examination and review of documents related to the museum's collection were carried out prior to the reopening of the Palestinian Heritage Museum at Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in 2012. Our team delved deeply into

the history of the museum that was established by Ms. Hind Al-Husseini in 1962, based on the private collection that she had accumulated since she had established Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in 1948. The search unveiled unexpected information about the collections that are the heart and soul of this museum. Archival records under the frequently repeated label "donated to the association" contained a letter by the Folk Museum dating back to December 1969, stating that the museum's entire collection would be donated to Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi. Reviewing the Folk Museum's original records, original English handwritten lists bearing its name, various archives, such as the Palestine Exploration Fund in London and the archives of newspapers issued during the British Mandate, including the *Palestine Post*, we found a vast amount of information that reveals the importance of this collection and sets it apart from the collections of other institutions and individuals. These items were gathered in the 1920s and 1930s to form the nucleus of the Palestine Folk Museum's collection. They form a real treasure trove, as even the smallest piece is more than one hundred years old.

As relating all details of the collection's history goes beyond the scope of this article (the research unit of Dar Al-Tifl



An original catalog documenting the items in the Folk Museum, including items dating back to 1936.



is already researching this topic), I will summarize the information as much as possible, yet wish to demonstrate the significant role museums and their collections have played in preserving Palestinian heritage. They serve as a source to gain knowledge, education, compelling arguments

Society. But the society succeeded only in obtaining some metal and wooden items which they stored at the Jerusalem Citadel.<sup>i</sup> In 1926, the Palestinian Department of Antiquities embarked on a new project that aimed to establish the Museum of National Life. The Mandate government



Examples of documentary photography of the collection in the 1930s.



Part of the catalog and a study of the collections of the Palestinian Folk Museum in 1936.



based on scientific facts, and tangible evidence, which contributes to heritage protection rather than expressing nostalgia for the past. The professional research and documentation carried out by Dar Al-Tifl and its museum are a good example of such an endeavor.

The archives indicate that the first attempt to establish a folklore museum in Palestine dates back to 1923 and originated with the Pro-Jerusalem

donated 500 pounds to assist with its establishment, but the collectors only succeeded in purchasing a few heritage items that were stored at the department; ten years later, the remainder of the budget, which amounted to 475 pounds, was returned to the government treasury.<sup>ii</sup> In 1935, the Association of the Palestine Folk Museum was formed to establish the museum of the same

name.<sup>iii</sup> In accordance with Article VI of the Ottoman Associations Law, the museum obtained an official license from the Government of Palestine on November 29, 1935.<sup>iv</sup> In 1936, the museum was inaugurated in temporary premises: two rooms in Al-Dabbagha neighborhood, next to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The government promised to allocate a more suitable space in the Jerusalem Citadel at a later date.<sup>v</sup>

At this stage, Violet Barber, the wife of Neville Barber,<sup>vi</sup> played a prominent role in establishing and managing the museum. She was elected its

honorary curator until she and her husband left Palestine in June 1939. A farewell party was held to honor her efforts at the museum,<sup>vii</sup> and she remained dedicated to the museum and its collection even after she left the country. Her name was mentioned everywhere, even after the collection became part of the Palestinian Heritage Museum at Dar Al-Tifl. Archives and letters indicate that she visited Palestine more than once in attempts to revive the museum and document its collection. In 1982, she celebrated her eightieth birthday at the home of Hind Al-Husseini in Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi.



Ms. Zainab Al-Husseini's translation of the old catalogs of the Palestinian Folk Museum, made after the museum was opened at Dar Al-Tifl in 1978.



Part of the items exhibited at the Folk Museum when it was located in Al-Dabbagha neighborhood.

The museum was not eligible to receive aid from the Association of British Museums on the grounds that Palestine was under the British Mandate. Thus, an appeal for donations was published in *The Times* on April 9, 1937,<sup>viii</sup> and to further encourage the British to donate to the museum, 25 dresses from its valuable collection of clothing were sent to England to be displayed in an exhibition in London in 1938. In 1939, the collection was moved to the headquarters of the former Department of Antiquities in the Way House building in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood<sup>ix</sup> and in 1941 to the Jerusalem Citadel under the supervision of the Palestine Folk Museum Society. But another location

had to be found when after the 1948 *Nakba*, the Jerusalem Citadel was used as barracks for the Jordanian army. The collections were boxed and transferred to the Palestinian Archaeological Museum, known today as the Rockefeller Museum, where they were placed under the watchful eye of its curator, Youssef Saad, pending a decision regarding their fate. The Committee of Friends of the Folk Museum in Arab Jerusalem, based in London, remained officially responsible for following up on the collections' affairs. Violet Barber was authorized to transfer the responsibility for the museum to an official Jordanian authority in return for guarantees: the collections would be re-displayed in an appropriate building within a specific

time, the Jordanian government would sponsor the funding of the museum, and a Jordanian expert would take on the responsibility of managing the collection. In 1962, following a meeting attended by Rawhi Al-Khatib, mayor of Jerusalem, Awni Al-Dajani, director of the Department of Antiquities, and Violet Barber, the ownership of the collections of the museum was transferred to the Jerusalem Municipality.

In 1966, a Jerusalemite board of trustees for the Folk Museum was formed that included Anwar Al-Khatib, governor of Jerusalem as chairman of the council; Rawhi Al-Khatib, mayor of Jerusalem as vice-chairman; Youssef Saad as secretary general; Saadiya Al-Ta<sup>x</sup>; Nadia Al-Issa; Najwa Al-Husseini; Nahil Bishara<sup>xi</sup>; Asiya Halabi; Jamal Badran<sup>xii</sup>; Daoud Talil<sup>xiii</sup>; Awni Dajani, director of the Department of Antiquities; and Ghaleb Barakat, director of the Department of Tourism. That same year, the London-based Committee of Friends of the Folk Museum in Arab Jerusalem purchased a collection of Palestinian *thobes* from the Church Missionary Society. They informed Youssef Saad that they intended to add these to the Folk Museum collection at the Palestinian Museum, provided that the museum would exhibit it to the public under suitable conditions and in a suitable

location within 12 months, otherwise the committee would give it to a museum in England. This condition was approved by Folk Museum's board of trustees during a session held in May 1966, but not met in practice, and the dresses were donated to the British Museum instead.

In 1967, the collections of the Folk Museum were transferred to the building of the Jerusalem Electricity Company. Shelagh Weir, the author of the famous book entitled *Palestinian Costumes*, published by the British Museum in 1989, stated that Youssef Saad gave her permission to view the collections in 1968, while she was in the company's storage room for her research on Palestinian customs, undertaken with the assistance of Violet Barber.

As Anwar Al-Khatib, chairman of the museum's board of trustees had a strong relationship with Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi, the collection was donated to Dar Al-Tifl, according to an official letter dated September 12, 1969, signed by Anwar Al-Khatib and three members of the board.

To further highlight the role museums play in preserving and disseminating knowledge on Palestinian heritage, I would like to briefly mention the heritage collection that has recently arrived at The Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, receiving a huge echo in the press. It was professionally dealt with in all aspects of documentation, storage, and management. Traditional collections at museums play a crucial role in preserving Palestinian heritage and passing traditional knowledge to future generations. This can be achieved with the assistance of skilled staff who ensure that the storage and display of the collections are appropriately managed. The presence of such skilled and expert staff at The Palestinian Museum gives its collection



An invitation card for the exhibition that was held in London in 1938.



(Photo 14) A document confirming the donation of the collections of the Folk Museum to Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi in Jerusalem.

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great value. Although this collection might not be considered the most important collection in Palestine, I believe that it will undoubtedly become one of the most famous Palestinian collections due to the professionalism of its management, as well as the related projects, programs, and activities that are being carried out by The Palestinian Museum.

SCAN  
TO SHARE



## THE PALESTINIAN THOBE OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



### THE GHABANEH THOBE JERUSALEM, SILWAN, AND THE DEPOPULATED VILLAGES OF LIFTA AND DEIR YASIN

The fabric is made of yellow Damascus silk, embroidered with the famous *tahreer* and *qasab* embroidery stitch. The chest and side panels are decorated with motifs similar to those of the Bethlehem bridal dress since the women of Bethlehem were the ones commissioned to embroider Jerusalem-area dresses.

From the collection of Maha Saca

<sup>i</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), May 17, 1937, p. 3.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), Dec. 22, 1935, p. 10. The *Palestine Post* (daily), Sept. 8, 1941, p. 4.

<sup>iv</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), Dec. 6, 1935, p. 14.

<sup>v</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), March 19, 1937, p. 12. The *Palestine Post* (daily), May 17, 1937, p. 3. The *Palestine & Transjordan*, p. 160. *American Anthropologist*, N. S., 48, 1946, p. 478.

<sup>vi</sup> Neville Barber settled with his family in Palestine in the 1930s, was interested in studying Zionism and the Palestinian cause, worked for a while as a reporter for *The Times* newspaper, then as an editor for the *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* (1936–1939); was appointed to the *BBC* when he returned to Britain, and was in charge of Arab public relations until he retired in 1956. He was awarded the Lawrence of Arabia Gold Medal in 1964, a supporter of the Palestinian cause, and died in December 1972 (*Asian Affairs*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 1973, p. 86.).

<sup>vii</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), June 27, 1939, p. 2.

<sup>viii</sup> *Nature* international weekly journal of science, No. 139, 707 (April 24, 1937).

<sup>ix</sup> *Palestine Post* (daily), Aug. 25, 1939, p. 14.

<sup>x</sup> Known as Saadiya Al-Jabri, and was the wife of Wasfi al-Tal, former Jordanian prime minister.

<sup>xi</sup> A skilled craftswoman in the art of ceramics and glass; studied art at Bezalel College in West Jerusalem (1942–1944 AD), later studied decoration and sculpture at the University of Chicago and sculpture in Italy; died in 1997.

<sup>xii</sup> Born in Haifa, she obtained a degree in fine arts in Cairo in 1927 and a certificate from the School of Arts and Creative Industries in Britain in 1937. She contributed to the restoration of the decorations at Al-Aqsa Mosque, designed the logo of the Arab College, and taught there (1937–1947). After the *Nakba*, she settled in Amman, where she died in 1990.

<sup>xiii</sup> Born in Jerusalem, he obtained a degree in dentistry, was skilled in drawing maps, appointed as a member of the board of trustees in several institutions, including Al-Quds University and the Arab Institute in Abu Dis. He died in Jerusalem in 2003.