

The Journey of Palestinian Embroidery

From Its Roots to Collectors



By Maha AbuShusheh

In its early days, embroidery on garments was used to adorn the clothing of the ruling elite and high-ranking religious figures, and incorporated metals such as gold and silver into silk and other fabrics to emboss and embellish the garments. With time, embroidery spread throughout villages as a result of religious sisters who trained economically disadvantaged girls in embroidery to create garments for religious figures. Later, the girls transferred these practices to their own villages. This transition allowed more freedom for the artform to flourish, later becoming a popular practice that was distinguishable based on each village's culture, understanding of nature, and beliefs. Embroidery became a continuing and sustainable practice that connects villagers with their ancestors' heritage, practices, and histories that were founded on the symbols and motifs of their time.

Palestinian women from villages and Bedouin communities have carried this tradition forward, further developing it and allowing it to evolve over the years as they used silk, linen, and cotton textiles to create their garments. These women were generally known to wear a diverse range of garments, from heavily embroidered dresses (worn at weddings and on special occasions) to everyday dresses that were lightly embroidered. All were adorned with a myriad of stitching techniques, most notably the cross-stitch

and Bethlehem couching. These stitches came together in a vibrant and wide spectrum of colors that were combined with highly skilled techniques to create colorful masterpieces in different cuts, reflecting the beauty and modesty of the village and its women.

The earliest samples of embroidered Palestinian clothing are from the nineteenth century. Before then, we only have a description of these pieces based on the observations of travelers. Only a few orientalists and travelers had described the Palestinian dress in relation to their religious interest in the Holy Land, where their contempt and disdain for the local population was apparent through their description of the "primitive" local people.

Missionaries, orientalists, and travelers acquired embroidery for religious interests as well as for economic purposes. For some, the priority was to collect embroidery, for others it was to sell the items in Europe and the United States in order to sponsor their Palestine-based projects. These embroidered pieces

Palestinian embroidered garments are held in collections by John Whiting, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Rolla Foley, Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi, Widad Kawar, the Israel Museum, and the Museum of Bedouin Culture.

became part of the collections of individuals or churches, and eventually ended up in collections at ethnographic museums in the twentieth century, forming the base of museum collections of Palestinian traditional dress.

The John Whiting Collection:
As the manager of the American Colony shop in the Old City of Jerusalem, John Whiting was a

The back of a dress from Al-Ramleh that shares elements with dresses from the villages of Yibna, Bashit, and Al-Basheer, depopulated in 1948.



fluent Arabic speaker and well-versed in local traditions. He was also very passionate about acquiring Palestinian traditional dresses from the various villages that he visited. His collection included some pieces that date back to the 1840s.

When John Whiting passed away in the United States in 1951, his collection was initially passed on to his wife and later ended up at The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. His 26-piece collection became the core of the museum's collection of traditional Palestinian dress, which was later complemented by the support of Widad Kawar who was able to fill in the gaps in the Whiting Collection.

The Church Missionary Society

(CMS) Collection: Sheila Weir worked with the British Museum in selecting a collection of Palestinian traditional dresses from the CMS Collection that had been brought from Palestine. Between 1967 and 1968, Weir conducted a survey across historical Palestine to

document the CMS Collection, to learn the vocabulary of embroidery and the names of items, motifs, and stitches, and to identify the distinguishing features of the pieces based on their place of origin.

Between 1969 and 1970, Sheila Weir expanded her survey to include Jordan and Palestinian refugee camps, and acquired a large number of pieces that women in refugee camps had kept following the *Nakba* and *Naksa*. Weir also acquired looms from Al-Majdal to add to the expanding ethnographic collection of the British Museum. This was followed by the establishment of the Museum of Mankind in London which launched its activities with an exhibition on weaving in Palestine and traditional Palestinian dresses.

The Rolla Foley Collection: Rolla Foley was an American music teacher who from 1938 to 1946 worked at the Friends School in Ramallah, where he was responsible for the music program in Palestine, Lebanon, East Jordan and Syria.

The back panel of a dress from Ni'lin, a village west of Ramallah.



The sleeve of a dress from Ramallah that is exceptional because it has been embroidered with Bethlehem-style couching.

He published several books about music in English, French, Arabic, and Armenian and founded a folkloric music festival that encompassed his interest in local cultural and artistic production, especially embroidery. Throughout his stay in Palestine, Foley collected Palestinian embroidery pieces as well as paintings and ceramics before returning to the United States in 1946.

Foley returned to Palestine in 1952 to complete his PhD research on folkloric Palestinian music, where he was confronted with the fact that his friends from Yafa had become refugees in Ramallah following the *Nakba*. They had lost their homes and the majority of their possessions. Foley recognized that due to the forced displacements, Palestinian embroidery was under the threat of erasure, so he started a diverse collection that included embroidered dresses, jackets, and pillows. He also established a small museum in Oakland, Illinois in the early 1960s, but due to his untimely death in 1970 the museum was shut down. His collection was passed on

to Hanan and Farah Munayer, with a detailed description of every piece, including the history of the piece itself, the date of acquisition, the name of the owner, and the village from where it had originated. This thorough documentation allowed for this heritage to be passed on to future generations and provided invaluable information about the collection's pieces. It is worth noting that the collection Foley amassed over the years is one of the few that were acquired by non-Palestinians and later returned to Palestinian hands.

In the early 1930s, Palestinian collectors started to establish their own embroidery collections in an attempt to preserve this heritage and ensure its continuity for future generations. Two main collections are important to mention here.

The Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi Collection:

Hind Al-Husseini started collecting Palestinian dresses as part of the Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi Collection in the 1930s, then expanded the collection following the 1948



The sleeve of Al-Ramleh dress.

special collection of Palestinian dresses in an interactive and educational setting. She has also contributed greatly to producing invaluable books and materials to document and preserve this heritage. Her collection and efforts have inspired and encouraged the establishment of several individual and organizational collections.

Other collections of Palestinian embroidery are held by Palestinian institutions, including Birzeit University and The Palestinian Museum, and by Palestinian individuals who seek to preserve and document Palestinian heritage and history.

Nakba. Her response stemmed from her belief in the importance of safeguarding Palestinian heritage from being wiped out in the face of occupation. This was in addition to her philanthropic work, where she provided housing for refugee children in her foundation, Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi. Following the 1967 *Naksa*, the Dar Al-Tifl Al-Arabi Collection expanded further to include the embroidery collection from the Palestinian Folk Art Museum.

The Widad Kawar Collection:

Sometime later, Widad Kawar started a journey that has now led her to acquire thousands of pieces from Palestine, Jordan, and other parts of the Arab world. She started her collection with a mesmerizing dress from the village of Aboud, and today owns a collection that has travelled the world carrying the message of Palestine. Widad Kawar has also established Tiraz Centre in Amman, Jordan to display her

There are also collections of Palestinian embroidered dresses and jewelry, among many other Palestinian items, found today in Israeli museums and private collections. In 1948 Israel wiped off the map more than 400 Palestinian villages and transferred their populations to neighboring countries. Israeli collectors subsequently amassed a great number of Palestinian traditional costumes and tools in an attempt to find a link between these items and the Israeli assumed history in the region.

In parallel to the Israeli state's ongoing efforts to erase Palestine and Palestinians from map and memory, Israeli museums have paradoxically collected Palestinian

traditional clothing and tools in a relentless manner over the years. The following are some examples.

The Israel Museum: The museum was founded in 1965, when anthropological researcher and curator Ziva Amir was responsible for collecting Palestinian traditional clothing en masse. Amir took advantage of the extreme vulnerability of Palestinians at the time and used this situation to acquire Palestinian embroidery from impoverished Palestinian refugees. Amir published several books and papers on the topic, focusing on tracing the Old Testament through these collected pieces, without once mentioning Palestine or Palestinians.

The back of a dress from Hebron with elements typical also of dresses from Al-Faluja, Iraq al-Manshiyya, and Beit Jibrin, villages depopulated in 1948.





Side panel of a white rumi (linen) Ramallah dress of the early twentieth century.

The Museum of Bedouin Culture: The museum's collection dates back to its establishment in British Mandate Palestine in 1938. It documents Bedouin life in Al-Naqab and includes a diverse range of pieces that include clothing, tools, tents, and weaved rugs and textiles

This history and present-day reality emphasize the importance of developing and expanding Palestinian-owned embroidery collections. In addition to safeguarding a traditional Palestinian artform that has been violently disrupted due to the *Nakba* and ongoing occupation, these collections can also preserve an essential part of our intangible heritage. The stories they tell do not merely encompass the garments themselves, but also the way of life they were artfully designed to accommodate. In the face of the brutal occupation machine, preserving and celebrating our cultural identity is integral to ensuring the continuity of our culture for generations to come.

Born in Ramallah, Maha AbuShusheh holds a BA in economics from Birzeit University. A collector of Palestinian embroidery and jewelry, she is engaged in the private sector and serves as a board member of many institutions. Ms. AbuShusheh was named as 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 one of Forbes Arabia's top 100 influential Arabs. She is married and has four children.

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'IRQ AL-LOUZ DRESS

WESTERN HEBRON HILLS (BEIT JIBRIN, AL-FALUJA, IRAQ AL-MANSHIYYA, ZIKRIN, SUMAIL/AL-MAS'UDIYYA, TELL ES-SAFI, VILLAGES DEPOPULATED IN 1948)

This dress is known in these villages as a bride's wedding dress from the 1930s. As its name indicates, the primary motif is the almond branch that is embroidered with a special stitch called *rashiq*, specific to this region, with its multiple bright colors on silk fabric in orange and green.

From the collection of Maha AbuShusheh