

The Art of Palestinian Embroidery

The Importance and Consequences
of Its Inscription on the Representative
List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
of Humanity in December 2021



By H.E. Mounir Anastas

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) defines ICH "... as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity..."

One of the lists of the convention is the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which was designed to ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and to raise awareness of its significance. The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage reviews the lists for new inclusions each year.

At its last session, in December 2021, the Intergovernmental Committee examined the nomination submitted by the State of Palestine for the inscription of *The art of embroidery in Palestine, practices, skills, knowledge, and rituals* on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The



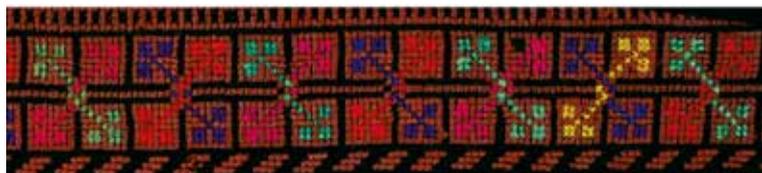
Artwork by Sliman Mansour.

file was submitted with the help of civil society actors as well as many local women's associations that provided materials on the art and use of embroidery across generations. Members of the committee unanimously adopted the decision to inscribe Palestinian embroidery.

The inscription on the list was motivated by many factors and became essential to the practitioners in Palestine and in the Palestinian

refugee camps outside of Palestine. Palestinian embroidery became a public affair when Israel dressed its national airline flight attendants with Palestinian embroidery in an attempt to culturally appropriate Palestinian heritage. Moreover, young Palestinians inside and outside Palestine are playing a very important role in safeguarding their cultural heritage in general and the art of Palestinian embroidery in particular.

Palestinians worldwide consider the tradition of embroidery to be part of their identity. In fact, the embroidered symbols and shapes on the traditional Palestinian dress (*thobe*) are typically inspired by the nature of the region where it was embroidered. The colors and designs used indicate not only the region but also the social, marital, and economic status of women wearing these dresses. In this article, we will not expand on the technical details since many books and articles have already been dedicated to aspects such as stitches, thread, etc., as well as the significance of embroidered symbols and designs on the dresses.



The purpose of this article is to explain the importance of the UNESCO inscription and its positive consequences. The number one goal was to ensure the safeguarding of the embroidery tradition that all Palestinians consider as part of their identity. The inscription was a clear encouragement to Palestinian youth to practice the traditional art of embroidery. Some Palestinian artists are creatively using embroidery designs in the decoration of furniture, jewelry, and other everyday objects.

The inscription of Palestinian embroidery has galvanized Palestinian communities around the world. Many Palestinian brides proudly embrace traditional embroidered dresses for their weddings. Pictures of beautifully embroidered wedding gowns are

being widely shared on social media and creating a new trend.

The inscription has raised visibility of Palestinian embroidery on the regional and global levels. Before the inscription, Palestinian embroidery inspired many international fashion designers around the world. Some, such as Maki Yamamoto, have rightfully acknowledged its Palestinian origin whereas others have not, as can be seen in Tory Burch summer 2021 embroidered dresses.

The inscription of Palestinian embroidery on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is to be considered

a protection against the cultural appropriation of this Palestinian tradition by any international designer and/or the Israeli occupier.

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THE PALESTINIAN THOBE OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



BEDOUIN DRESS

This black *habar* (satin-like fabric) dress can be dated to the 1940s or 1950s. We can assume that the dress belonged to a married woman due to the bright colors and heavily embroidered designs used on the side and front panels. Finally, the short sleeves also display the same extensive and extravagant bright color designs.

From the collection of Bank of Palestine