Palestinian Embroidery

Traditional Fallahi cross-stitch

By Widad Kamel Kawar and Tania Tamari Nasir
In cooperation with Iman Assali Dajani, Hala Tameh Ibrahim, and Farideh Saleh Mayer

Printed and published by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, 2019.

Available also at https://bit.ly/3elHjDt

A pioneering endeavor to document and preserve classical Palestinian embroidery and its distinctive motifs, the first edition of this book was published in 1990 with versions in Arabic, English, and German, followed by several editions in Arabic. It was the fruition of five years of diligent preparatory work in which hundreds of sample dresses and accessories from the Widad Kawar collection, representing the five areas of Ramallah, Jaffa, Hebron, Gaza, and Beersheba, were surveyed to design and create representative patterns. The aim was to preserve these items from the wear and tear of time, protect them from theft and appropriation, and encourage women to embroider and innovate (thereby allowing them to generate an income) by distributing these patterns to individuals and women’s associations, in camps and elsewhere, throughout the (Arab) world.

Poet and artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who grew up in Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the 1940s, had this to say about the book, "Palestinians are right to pride themselves on the distinctive embroidery found on the traditional dresses of their women… embroidery is a reflection of a woman’s individual artistic expression, … her humanity and her own life experience… In its entirety, this embroidery symbolizes a joie de vivre…. A joyous exultation in the powerful miracle of resurrection, in nature as in mankind."

The latest edition of this book was published for the celebration of Jerusalem as the Capital of Islamic Culture in 2019. Because its aim has always been to preserve cultural heritage, it has also been made available for download on the Tiraz Centre website.

Palestinian Costume

By Shelagh Weir

Interlink Books, 2008, paperback with full-color illustrations, 288 pages, $40

The traditional costumes of Palestinian villagers and Bedouin are of exceptional beauty and diversity, especially the festive costumes of the women with their lavish silk embroidery and patchwork and their dramatic headdresses encrusted with coins.
**Seventeen Embroidery Techniques from Palestine**

*An Instruction Manual*

*By Tania Tamari Nasir, Omar Joseph Nasser-Khoury, and Shirabe Yamada with Widad Kamel Kawar*

Sunbula, 2019, hardback, 136 pages, $40

The first technical manual to be published on Palestinian embroidery, this book catalogs a wide range of techniques used in dressmaking in Historical Palestine and aims to revive the stitches that have fallen out of use today, such as tahriri (couching), tashreem (patchwork), and manajel (binding). Each technique is provided with background information collected from older embroiderers in Palestine and the diaspora, and step-by-step, illustrated instructions for easy learning. The book also features essays on historical, contemporary, and technical aspects of embroidery in Palestine, interviews with master embroiderers, and photographs of the traditional costume collection at the Birzeit University Museum in the West Bank. Created through years of museum and field research, it is also an unofficial sequel to Tania Tamari Nasir and Widad Kamel Kawar’s 1992 publication, *Palestinian Embroidery: Traditional “fallahi” Cross-stitch*. The book is in Arabic and English.

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In short, *Sew to Speak* preserves Palestinian identity from the 1948 occupation to the present. It leaves for future generations an important historical record that chronicles how Palestinians from all walks of life have fought for their humanity, education, identity, and dignity on a daily basis – peacefully, but passionately.

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**The Journeys of Motifs**

*From Orient to Occident*

*By Margarita Skinner*

Rimal Books, 2018, 280 pages, €35

This book is divided into two sections. Section one traces the history of pattern books in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century central Europe. The motifs were brought by merchants from Persia, Mesopotamia, and Mamluk Egypt and collected in books that served as instructions and inspiration for lace-making and embroidery, considered appropriate activities for educated ladies besides music, spinning, and languages. The development of printing allowed for the spreading of such knowledge. It furthermore summarizes the accounts of more than 44 early travelers to Palestine from the sixteenth century onward, particularly in search of expressions of their fascination with Palestinian embroidered dresses and headresses from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramleh, Nablus, Jaffa, Haifa, Gaza, the Galilee, and more.

The second section gives samples of motifs, tracing them back as far as possible and including the meaning of the patterns. As Palestinian women loved their motifs, the patterns were given names and had specific meanings that are explained and shown with variations in the book. Popular were various bird patterns, S-shapes, stars, and rosettes. Particularly interesting is a motif from Hebron named horn that is traced back to prehistoric times when curved animal horns were styled in the form of a heart. Today, the motifs of the dresses have become expressions of identity and heritage.

Exhaustively researched and beautifully illustrated, the book includes more than 150 pages of embroidered garments and specific motifs, including paintings and sculpture, photography and colored dresses as well as stitch patterns. As the author writes: “If a library is the pharmacy of the mind, Palestinian embroidery is the pharmacy of the soul.”

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**Sew to Speak: A Woman’s Journey to Preserving Palestinian Identity**

*By Siham N. Abu-Ghazaleh*

Interlink Books, 2021, hardback with colored illustrations, 288 pages, $29.95

*Sew to Speak* tells the moving story of one Palestinian woman and her 50-year quest to safeguard Palestinian culture through the preservation and promotion of its national costume. It is also an effort to document the vital contributions of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), a group of dedicated volunteers who have worked tirelessly to preserve Palestinian identity and culture through love, conviction, pride, and hope.

The book describes the rewarding work of GUPW as well as the obstacles faced by the group. It documents its activities in detail as a part of the history of Palestinian women’s struggle for liberation, the role it plays, and the impact of its work in promoting and fulfilling Palestinian rights, including empowering Palestinian women and their families towards self-sufficiency, protecting Palestinian culture and identity from Zionist theft, fundraising for student education and social welfare programs, and much more.
**Threads of Identity**  
*Preserving Palestinian Costume and Heritage*  
*By Widad Kamel Kawar*  
Rimal Books, 2011; second edition, second print, 2019, 464 pages, €45

This book is a record of the 50 years that Widad Kamel Kawar spent researching, collecting, and preserving a large part of the heritage of Palestine. This endeavor evolved into the Widad Kawar Collection, the largest to date of Palestinian traditional dresses and accessories, comprising more than 3,000 items. Kawar presents the story of how the collection evolved and introduces the life stories of the women who produced the beautiful costumes it contains. For her, each item calls to mind an individual or a place: a wife, a mother, a daughter, a family, a house, a village, a town, a field, a market. Each item was worn on special occasions, happy and sad, that marked the owner’s life. Much of Widad Kawar’s knowledge stems from the personal narratives of these women whose embroidery and dressmaking skills she so admires.

*Threads of Identity* is a history of Palestinian women told through aspects of popular heritage, focusing on traditional dresses but also including textiles and rug weaving, rural and urban customs, jewelry, cuisine, and festivities. Interviews with women who lived through the traumas and changes of the twentieth century are a contribution to oral history, augmenting standard historical accounts. While most writing about the Middle East concentrates on politics, Kawar’s book focuses on the dignity of ordinary people and of women in particular, bridging the gap between the major events of history and everyday life. With this book, Widad Kamel Kawar pays homage to Palestinian women.

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**Traditional Palestinian Costume:**  
*Origins and Evolution*  
*By Hanan Karaman Munayyer*  
(with a foreword by Hanan Ashrawi)  
Interlink Books, 2020, hardback with slip case, full-color photos and maps, 560 pages, $100

The historical and cultural richness of Palestine is reflected visually in its costume and embroidery. Distinguished by boldness of color, richness of pattern, and diversity of style, combined with great needlework skill, these textiles have long played an important role in Palestinian culture and identity.

Based on over 25 years of extensive field research and the culling of museum resources and publications from around the world, this book presents the most exhaustive and up-to-date study of the origins of Palestinian embroidery and costume—from antiquity through medieval Arab textile arts to the present. It documents region by region the evolution of costume and the textile arts in Palestine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is lavishly illustrated with over 500 full-color photographs from the highly praised Munayyer Collection, which includes a whole range of embroidered textiles from traditional costumes and coin headdresses of Palestinian village women to cloaks and jackets worn by village men to belts, sashes, and footwear.

“*Traditional Palestinian Costume* is a magnificent work of deep love; among the most elegant artistic productions between two covers I have seen,” says Dick Doughty, the managing editor at Aramco World. “Meeting this book is like opening a treasure box.”

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Artwork by Sliman Mansour.