



the
palestinian
museum

LABOUR OF LOVE



#Taawon35

LABOUR OF LOVE: NEW APPROACHES TO PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY

By virtue of being made by women, and worn on the body, clothing is an intimate catalyst for the exploration of history. Woven into the social, economic and political fabrics of its time, embroideries tell stories. *Labour of Love* explores Palestinian embroidery through the lenses of gender, labour, commodity, and class, tracing its shift from a personal practice, to a potent symbol of national heritage, to a product circulated in the global marketplace.

At the heart of the gallery space lies a 'forest' of historic Palestinian dresses. These extraordinary garments, in conversation with posters, paintings, archival photographs, music, literature, and newly-commissioned video, seek to build a complex picture of Palestinian material history. The exhibition examines embroidery's politicisation in Palestine, its visualisation in the work of artists, the implications of its commodification, and the nature of its production by NGOs today.

Although embroidery has been historically considered marginal, or dismissed as 'women's work', *Labour of Love* celebrates women whose work is their strength, and who wield that strength from the margins. At a time of heightened global conversation around women's rights and dominion over their bodies, the exhibition is invested in understanding embroidery's role in the construction of ideals and images of womanhood in historic and contemporary Palestine, and in amplifying female voices.

Embroidery involves the humblest of gestures: the repetitive binding of thread to fabric. *Labour of Love* argues for the exploration of Palestinian history, politics, and culture through the simple intimacy of this practice.





EMBROIDERY EVERYDAY: TESTAMENTS TO FEMALE LABOUR

—
 Everyday dress from Gaza or Hebron, 1935-1940, from the collection of Tiraz; Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress, image by Kayane Antreassian for the Palestinian Museum

PREVIOUS PAGE
 Ahmed Hegazi, 'Liberation, Victory, Return', published by PLO Unified Information, 1978, reproduction courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA)

The 'everyday dresses' that begin this exhibition embody the intimacy, labour and time that characterise all Palestinian embroidery. Carrying a woman through her day-to-day life, everyday dresses are mosaics, bearing traces of older garments inherited from mothers, aunts or sisters. Their stitches, seams, patches, and holes are physical touchstones to rural life in Palestine in the late nineteenth century; they serve as testaments to female labour. Their indigo-dyed linen is lighter in places where the sun has bleached it, over years of wear in the fields. Patches at the knee reveal how women sat to clean or prepare food, wet hands wearing hand-woven fabric to threads over time. Small holes, neatly-darned in the chest panel, indicate how mothers breast-fed their children. Everyday dresses invite us to read and understand all Palestinian embroidery as layered and emotional. Irreducible to a single moment or individual maker, they reflect women's lives over time.

BEYOND 'WOMEN'S WORK': EMBROIDERY AND GENDER



Vera Tamari,
*Palestinian
Women at Work*,
1979, ceramic
relief, collection
of Dr. Ibrahim
Khalil Lada'a,
image by Kayane
Antreassian for
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Embroidery in Palestine is a deeply gendered craft. Practised by rural Palestinian women for centuries, embroidery was historically connected to milestones in a woman's life, playing roles in childhood, marriage and maturity. The entrenched association between embroidery and rural femininity is central to the representation of women in the work of artists after the Nakba. In their painting, the Palestinian village woman, always wearing an embroidered dress, became shorthand for Palestinian longevity and endurance. This imagery took on political weight in the 1970s and 1980s, and has retained popularity in the decades since. While the conflated symbolism of land and mother connotes strength, such images end up reducing women to relatively anonymous signifiers. Even in 2018, embroidery is considered 'women's work', and is not something men in Palestine practice publically. However, for male political prisoners in Israeli prisons—sites of undisputed masculinity—embroidery is a source of pride. In periods when crafts are banned by the Israeli authorities, men embroider in secret, under difficult circumstances. Their extraordinary work mingles patriotism and resistance with devotion to their families at home.





FROM BODY TO IMAGE: EMBROIDERY AS SYMBOL

Intifada Dress, 1987-1993, from the collection of Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress, image by Tanya Traboulsi for the Palestinian Museum

PREVIOUS PAGE
Hatim Al-Araj, two decorative pieces, 2005, cardboard, felt, embroidery, beads, sequins, made in Ofer prison, courtesy of Nawal Al-Araj, image by Kayane Antreassian for the Palestinian Museum

Embroidery's relationship to symbolism is evident on a material level through its internal language of motifs. Patterns were historically drawn from daily life, flora and fauna, and contemporary political events. After the Nakba of 1948, Palestinian embroidery also took on conceptual and constructed symbolic meaning, representing Palestinian heritage, longevity and power. Images of embroidery, and women wearing embroidered dresses, circulated widely on political posters, both within Palestine and abroad. As part of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's revival of heritage as political rhetoric, embroidery was exhibited across the world, and worn for *dabkeh* dance performances. International embroidery shows were backdrops for high profile political meetings, enacting a form of cultural diplomacy. During the First Intifada, embroidered dresses, worn in protest, rendered women's bodies sites of active political agency. Traditional motifs mingled with Palestinian flags, doves, guns, and the Dome of the Rock—symbols of resistance stitched into the fabric of women's dresses.

FROM A LABOUR OF LOVE, TO LABOUR



Group at work in work rooms of the Arab Women's Union, Ramallah, Palestine, 1934-1939, G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, Library of Congress

Embroidery has always been connected to a market of sale, not least through the trade of textiles and the production of fabrics. Its labour, however, tended to be personal: historically, embroidery was done by a woman for her own wear. The Nakba significantly altered the structure of embroidery's production. Although there were embroidered items made for market before 1948, the Nakba split rural women from their self-sufficient livelihoods in agriculture, forcing them to seek waged work instead.

Embroidery organisations were founded to provide support and employment for women and their families, with institutions such as Ina'sh Al-Ustra constituting pillars of political resistance. However, the integration of rural women into a wage-labour market also introduced embroidery into capitalist modes of production. Women became workers, and embroidery became work. Today Palestinian embroidery is most ubiquitous as a commodity. The embroidered dress did not die out, however. It evolved in the mixed environment of the refugee camp and village, settling into homogenised forms, characterised by innovation in colour and motif.

PERFORMING IDENTITY: EMBROIDERY, CLOTHING, AND CLASS



—
 Photograph,
 1973, from the
 archive of Inaash
 Al-Mukhayim,
 courtesy of
 INAASH

Made and worn on the body, connected to the performance of identity, clothing is a mirror to class dynamics in Palestinian society. Embroidery was a rural woman's craft; urban Palestinians had long adopted Ottoman and European clothing by 1900, even using embroidered clothing as 'costume' for dress-up in photographers' studios. In the early twentieth century, the impact of colonialism was manifested in embroidery and textiles. The introduction of the French thread company DMC, in the 1930s, brought foreign pattern books, canvas, and industrially-dyed thread to Palestine, changing the nature of the craft.

Embroidery organisations are also connected to class dynamics. Politically mobile individuals all over the world initiate charitable projects to support those without the same privileges. In the decades following the Nakba, middle class Palestinian women established embroidery-producing organisations to employ refugee women. Without intending to, organisations institutionalise socio-economic divisions between the wealthy women who buy embroidered products, and the poor women who make them. How true is it to say that embroidery 'empowers' women? Acknowledging the neoliberal frameworks in which embroidery is produced today allows us to assess the conflicting desires at stake in its commodification and sale.





THE FOREST OF DRESSES

Red *jellayeh* from Galilee, 1920s, from the collection of Birzeit University Museum, image by Kayane Antreassian for the Palestinian Museum

PREVIOUS PAGE
Detail of a dress from Bir Al-Saba, 1940s, from the collection of Birzeit University Museum, image by Kayane Antreassian for the Palestinian Museum

The exhibition's 'forest' of dresses is formed of historical garments from across Palestine. Although the practice has existed for centuries, little embroidery has survived from before the mid-1800s. Embroidery in Palestine was a rural pursuit, practised by villagers, and required a great deal of skilled labour and time. The cut, colour and form of garments differed regionally, making for rich and diverse clothing traditions; designs even varied among neighbouring villages.

Made up of motifs passed down and transformed across generations, embroidery was a language, with a vocabulary and grammar. A woman's dress could be read and interpreted by others; it reflected her personality, as well as her wealth and status. Linen or calico base fabrics would traditionally be dyed with indigo. Cloth was soaked several times to get the strongest shades; light blue cloth was cheaper, and dark blue cloth more prestigious. The embroidered elements of a dress—chest panel (*qabbeh*), side panels (*banayek*), back panel (*shinyar*), sleeves—would be cut individually for embroidering in pieces, before being sewn together with a sturdy connecting stitch.



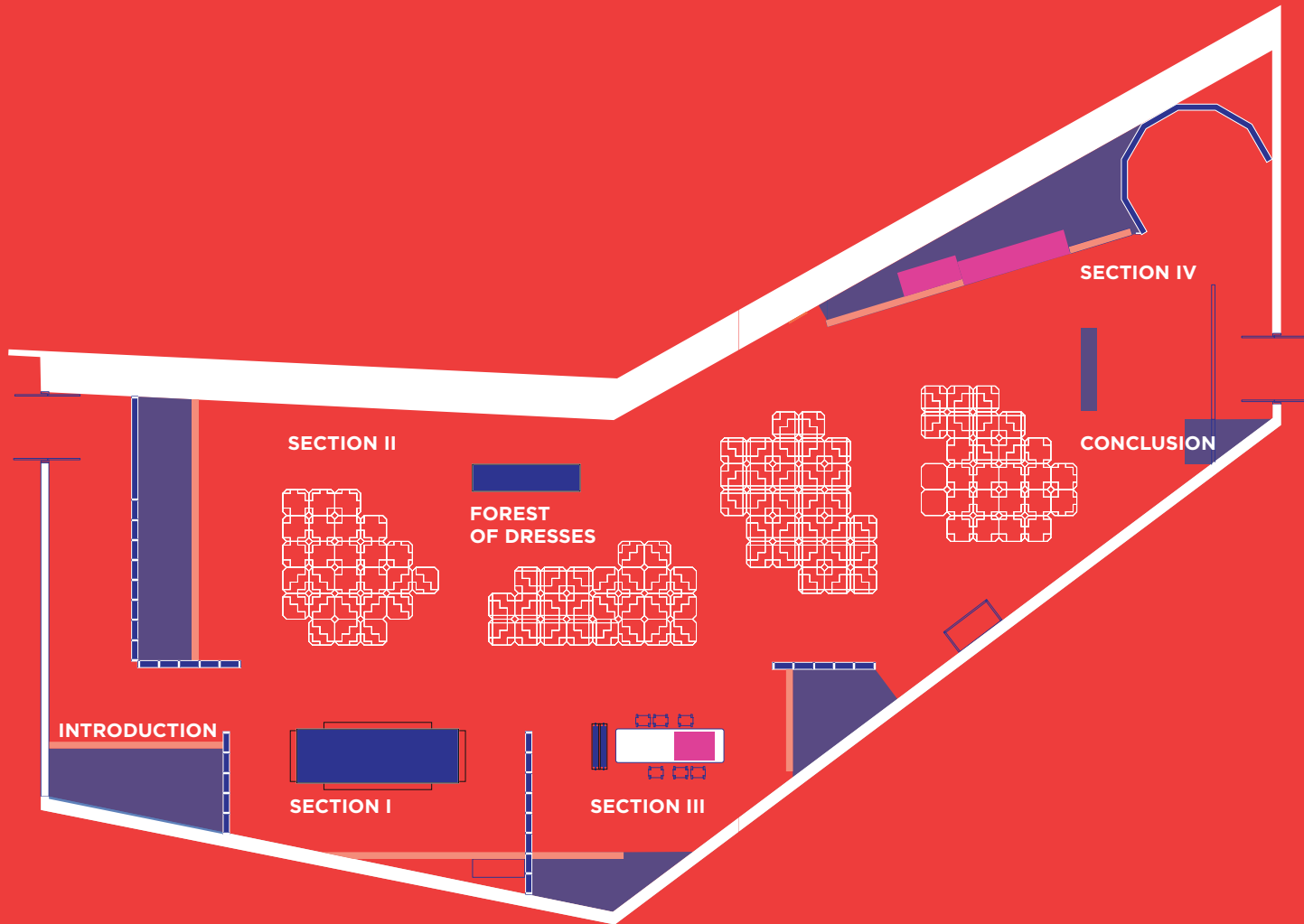
THE EMBROIDERERS

—
 Embroidered
 dress by Raja
 Al-Zeer, 2008,
 courtesy of Raja
 Al-Zeer, image
 by Kayane
 Antreassian for
 the Palestinian
 Museum

Who are the women behind the embroidery we purchase? What does embroidery mean to them? We wanted to know whether the craft remains political for those who make it. *The Embroiderers*, a film commissioned from Maeve Brennan, follows five women through interviews we conducted with embroiderers from all over Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan.

The final object in the exhibition is a beautiful dress made by Raja Al-Zeer, from Salfit. Raja embroidered it to wear at her son's wedding. For an embroidery purist, little about this dress—from its cut, colour, and silhouette, to its motifs, patterns and form—would be considered 'traditionally' Palestinian. Yet, by virtue of being made by Raja, it remains as much a Palestinian embroidered dress as its hundred-year-old sisters.

Raja's work is a reminder that embroidery is an active, living, breathing craft. Just as nineteenth century women sought novelty by looking at their peers, women today draw inspiration from each other, sharing designs on social media. Dresses such as Raja's are evidence that Palestinian embroidery continues to preserve itself, developing in step with the women who make it.



The Palestinian Museum would like to thank its lenders:

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Rachel Dedman is an independent curator and writer based in Beirut since 2013. She curates and writes for institutions, collections and informal contexts internationally. Recent projects include *Kindling* for Fotopub Festival (Slovenia); *Midad* for Dar El-Nimer (Beirut); *Halcyon* for the Transart Triennial (Berlin); *Unravelled* for Beirut Art Center and *At the Seams* for the Palestinian Museum (Beirut). Rachel studied at the Universities of Oxford and Harvard, specialising in Islamic art history and contemporary art from the Middle-East.

The Palestinian Museum is an independent institution dedicated to supporting an open and dynamic Palestinian culture nationally and internationally. The museum presents and engages with new perspectives on Palestinian history, society and culture. The museum is a flagship project of Taawon (Welfare Association), an independent Palestinian non-profit organisation, committed to providing development and humanitarian assistance in Palestine and the Palestinian communities in Lebanon.

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