

Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery

8 July - 29 October 2023

Press View: 7 July 2023,
10.45am - 1pm



Everyday dress from Gaza or Hebron (detail), 1935-1940, from the collection of Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress. Photo: Kayané Antreassian, courtesy of the Palestinian Museum.

Kettle's Yard is delighted to present 'Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery', an exhibition exploring the historical life and contemporary significance of Palestinian embroidered craft. This ancient practice is characterised by exceptional beauty and intricacy – some of the finest dresses, known as *thobes*, carry over 200,000 stitches. It remains an important living tradition, and the most prominent cultural material of Palestine today. More than 40 dresses and other embroidered objects, loaned from important collections in Jordan and the West Bank, will be on display for the first time in the UK.

'Material Power' will map Palestinian embroidery's evolution over the past century: from rich village tradition, transformed by the advent of modernity, to its politicisation and critical re-interpretation by contemporary artists. Based on research by curator Rachel Dedman, the exhibition will explore the ways in which embroidery embodies female labour and resilience, and reflects pivotal moments in Palestine's history.

'Material Power' will offer audiences in Britain, for the first time in more than 30 years, an opportunity to engage with Palestinian cultural heritage through the intimate lens of clothing. Throughout the exhibition, historical objects will sit in dialogue with rarely seen archival material and artworks by contemporary artists Bilab Bi Delo, Mona Hatoum, Khalil Rabah, Mounira Al Solh, Aya Haidar and Majd Abdel-Hamid.

'Material Power' will demonstrate how embroidery has been connected to the changing social, economic and political landscape in Palestine over the last 100 years. It will open with two early 20th-century 'everyday dresses', which women wore to work in the fields and to look after their families. Such clothing carried women through their day-to-day lives, acting as material testaments to female labour. A 1930s dress from the Gaza region will be an early highlight in the exhibition: its darns and patches attest to the embroiderer's work in the fields, while holes on the chest indicate how she adapted the dress for breastfeeding. Like many everyday dresses, it is a multi-generational mosaic, bearing the traces of older garments inherited from her mother or grandmother.

Alongside these everyday garments, excerpts of interviews filmed by artist Maeve Brennan – commissioned by Dedman for the Palestinian Museum in 2016 – will share the experiences of women who practice embroidery today. Their sewing stories, passed down through generations, will echo throughout a dense display of richly embroidered historic *thobes*, created for special occasions such as marriage and market days. A split-front coat-dress, or *jellayeh*, from Hebron, made between 1900 and 1915, demonstrates the impact of the British Mandate (1918-1948) on ordinary clothing: the slit down the skirt that was traditional in this region was sewn closed to conform to changing modesty standards. Examples of embroidered clothing from Bethlehem and Galilee around the same time show the vast differences

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in local styles: the former embellished with intricate, swirling patterns of embroidery, known as *tahriri* (couching), and the latter favouring sparse geometric patterns cross-stitched into indigo-blue or rust-red linens.

A pair of *Hair Grid* (2001) works by Mona Hatoum will sit in conversation with these historical garments. Created on small looms, they are lattices made from long filaments of hair, each row and column looping into the next, bound by tiny knots. Inherently delicate but deceptively resilient, the works trouble the rigidity of the modernist grid form with the intimacy of their material, and attest to the power of a single strand. Alongside stitched tapestries by Mounira Al Solh, which act as monuments to important women from Palestine and the Arab world, the contemporary works in this gallery will speak to the narrative potential of the thread.

A dress from Ramallah will then mark a shift between older traditions and more recent events in Palestine. Embroidered in the early 20th century, it was donated to a woman who had to flee from her home during the Nakba of 1948 ('Nakba' means 'catastrophe' in Arabic), and who arrived in Ramallah as a refugee, carrying perhaps little more than the clothes on her back. The dress's new owner must have been broader and taller than its original embroiderer, as the dress has been visibly enlarged by stitching into it a section of material from a UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency)-issued bag of flour. This extraordinary garment speaks to the solidarity among women in the face of displacement and occupation. It will sit alongside Aya Haidar's ongoing series *Safe Space*, in which she uses embroidery to document her memories of growing up during Lebanon's Civil War (1975-1990), and the simple gestures her family took to stay safe. In one embroidery, a woman sits on a sofa with an iron pot on her head, protecting her from sniper bullets, while an assortment of furniture piled against the window absorbs a shattering of glass from an explosion. Like the dress shaped by the Nakba, such contemporary work speaks to embroidery's ability to capture the experience of conflict and to embody resilience.

The 1970s saw the development of Palestinian embroidery as a cornerstone of the revival of heritage and articulation of nationalism. In paintings and illustrations from this period, the *fellahi* (peasant) woman in an embroidered dress is made synonymous with Palestinian endurance. Images of idealised rural Palestine and the 'embroidered woman' as mother, wife and carer for the land began to circulate as posters, which were increasingly militarised in the 1980s as part of the Palestinian resistance movement. During the First



Dress from Ramallah, 1930s, from the collection of Maha Abu Shosheh. Photo: Kayané Antreassian, courtesy of the Palestinian Museum.



Karam Al-Maloukh, embroidered bag, 2008, silk, textile, and cardboard, made in Al-Naqab prison, courtesy of Karam Al-Maloukh. Photo: Kayané Antreassian, courtesy of the Palestinian Museum.

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Jellayeh from Hebron, 1900-1915, from the collection of Dar Al-Tifel Al-Arabi Museum for Palestinian Heritage. Photo: Kayané Antreassian, courtesy of the Palestinian Museum.



Maeve Brennan, still from *The Embroiderers*, 2016, courtesy of the artist.

Intifada (1987-1993) – a Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation – a new kind of embroidered dress emerged. Alongside familiar patterns, explicit symbols of resistance, including flags, doves and guns, were embroidered into dresses: a means of protest more difficult to seize than placards and banners.

Accompanying the works in this section will be Khalil Rabah's *Defeated Geographies* (2017-2019), a series of fragmented, embroidered pseudo-maps exploring embroidery's intimate connection to a 'Palestinian pastoral', and its ties to the struggle for territory.

The exhibition will further consider embroidery's role in the construction of gender norms and ideals. Although embroidery in Palestine is considered a feminine practice, it also offers a creative outlet for Palestinian men held as political detainees in Israeli prisons. Despite embroidery and other crafts being frequently banned in prisons, men use them as an opportunity to express their resistance to circumstance, and to create gifts for their wives and mothers. On display will be a selection of embroidered objects – a bag, prayer beads, book and pen – made by prisoners with the tools at their disposal: threads from their own clothing, dye from medicines and cardboard from cereal cartons.

'Material Power' will close with an examination of embroidery's commodification in recent years. As the Nakba eroded traditional, economic and social structures for embroidery's making, the practice shifted from a labour of love, embedded in village life, to labour for pay in refugee camps. This dramatically altered the nature of production; embroidered objects and clothing now exist predominantly as a commodity produced by NGOs, which circulate in the global marketplace. As a result, many craftspeople cannot afford the objects they make. On the other hand, embroidery-producing organisations play a vital role in sustaining the traditions of *tatreez* (embroidery), while enabling its creative evolution. For women for whom it is their livelihood, embroidery is meaningful work that connects them to their heritage. The exhibition will take a critical look at these dynamics, and Brennan's film *The Embroiderers* (2016) will spotlight the women and families who sell their work out of refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan. Meanwhile Majd Abdel Hamid's ongoing cross-stitch series, *Son, this is a waste of time*, will call attention to the complex relationship between embroidery's abstract value and the labour it demands.

Visitors to the exhibition will be able to learn more about the history and contemporary relevance of Palestinian embroidery in the Kettle's Yard Research Space, with films, audio interviews and books.

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'Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery' has been organised by Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge in collaboration with the Whitworth, The University of Manchester, where it will travel from 24 November 2023 – 7 April 2024.

The exhibition at Kettle's Yard will be accompanied by Dedman's 2016 book, *At the Seams: A Political History of Palestinian Embroidery*, published by the Palestinian Museum.

'Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery' has been generously supported by The Orange Tree Trust.

Notes to Editors

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A note on the exhibition

'Material Power' is based on two exhibitions curated by Rachel Dedman for the Palestinian Museum, West Bank, in 2016 and 2018, while she was based between Beirut and Ramallah. These projects and their publications involved research and fieldwork in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan, and collaboration with private collectors, specialists and embroiderers. 'Material Power' reworks the content, structure and curatorial methodology of 'Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery', on view at the Palestinian Museum from 18 March – 31 December 2018.

About Rachel Dedman

Rachel Dedman is the Curator of Contemporary Art from the Middle East at the V&A, London. In 2021, she curated *Jameel Prize: Poetry to Politics* for the V&A, featuring the work of eight contemporary artists and designers from the global south. From 2013-2019, Rachel was an independent curator based in Beirut, Lebanon, where she curated exhibitions for institutions across the Middle East and Europe. Recent work includes projects for Ashkal Alwan and Sursock Museum (both Beirut), Serpentine Galleries, Nottingham Contemporary and the Palestinian Museum (Ramallah). Rachel is the author of two books on Palestinian embroidery and has published extensively in contemporary art contexts. She is a trustee of Metroland Cultures, delivering the Brent Biennial in London.

About Palestinian embroidery in the UK

While the dresses and other embroidered garments in the exhibition have been drawn from collections in the region where they were made, Palestinian *thobes* and other garments are held in UK collections, including the British Museum, V&A, The Whitworth, and National Museums Scotland. The last exhibition devoted to Palestinian embroidery in this country was at the Museum of Mankind (a branch of the British Museum) in 1989-1991, curated by Shelagh Weir.

While the Kettle's Yard collection does not include Palestinian embroidery, textiles of all kinds play a central role in the unique domestic spaces created by Jim and Helen Ede in the Kettle's Yard House. From framed artists' textiles by Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, to rugs, wall hangings and embroideries by unknown makers from around the world, the Edes valued these objects as much as the artworks they collected for their artistic quality and personal significance.

About Kettle's Yard

Kettle's Yard, part of the University of Cambridge, is a leading gallery and unique house with a remarkable collection of 20th-century art. Its founders Jim and Helen Ede believed in art's ability to transform lives, a vision upheld today through critically acclaimed exhibitions, pioneering community and learning programmes, and research of the highest quality. Our aim is to offer an inspiring and enriching experience for everyone who visits. Find out more and get involved at: www.kettlesyard.co.uk

About the Whitworth

The Whitworth is proudly part of The University of Manchester. Textiles have been a major part of the Whitworth's collection since the gallery first opened. The Whitworth is home to an internationally significant collection of around 25,000 dress and textile objects from across the world that range in date from the third century AD to the present. The gallery is driven by a mission to work with communities to use art for positive social change, and actively address what matters most in people's lives. This new vision has been developed as part of an international dialogue about how to evolve and adapt museums to a constantly changing world.

www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

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