

Labour of Love

New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery **2018**

INTRODUCTION

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, made with love, 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 visualization in the work of artists, the implication of its commodification’s, the nature of its production by NGOs today, its politicisation in Palestine, and the evolution of its designs across regions and decades.

Although embroidery has been historically considered marginal, or dismissed as ‘women’s work’, *Labour of Love* celebrates women whose work in 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.

About the exhibition

Labour of Love: New Approaches to Palestinian Embroidery is a Palestinian Museum exhibition, initially developed by independent British curator Rachel Dedman, and shown from 18th March 2018—1st February 2019. The exhibition is the result of four years of original research and extensive fieldwork and is accompanied by two research-rich publications.

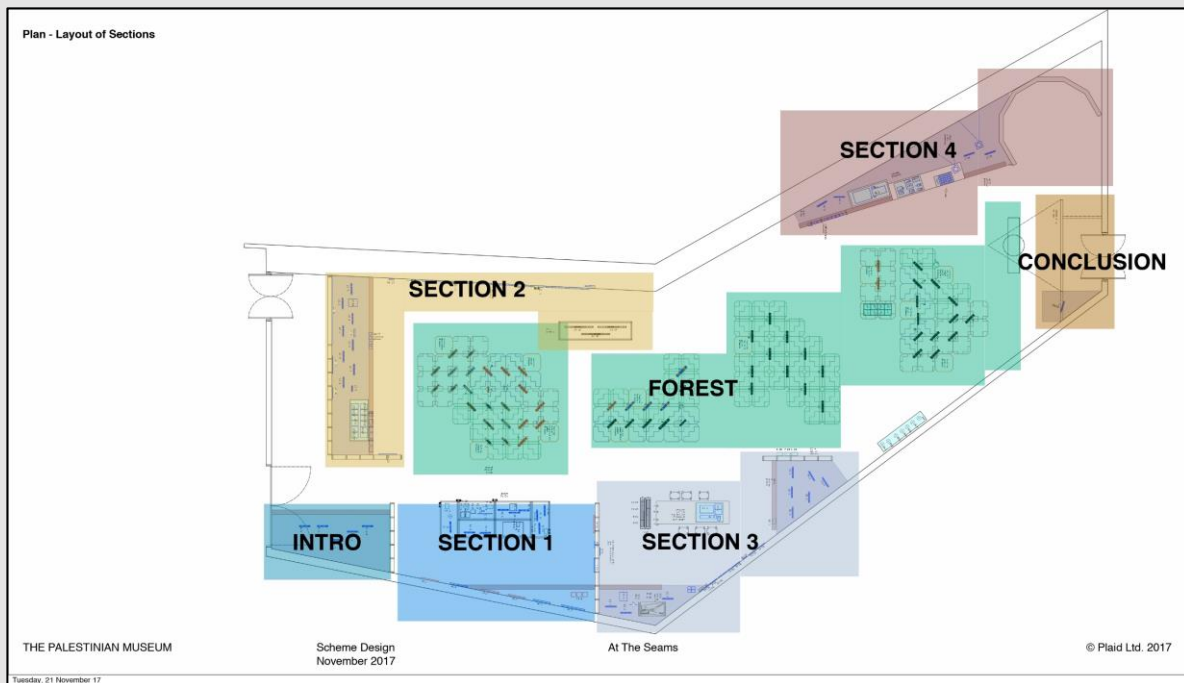
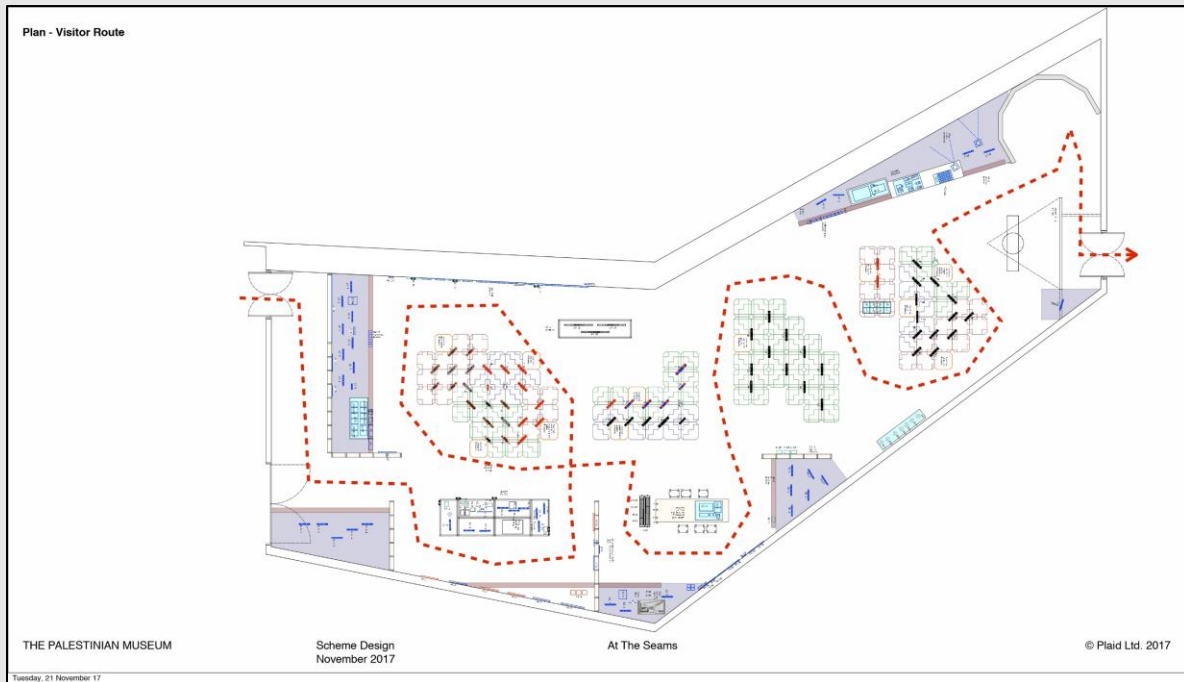
The exhibition breaks new ground in extending the history of Palestinian embroidery into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. From the beginning, it seeks to challenge the apolitical, anthropological and romanticised perspectives through which embroidery is addressed museologically, both within Palestine and abroad. The exhibition celebrates embroidery's historical importance before 1948, but also explore the rich and dynamic transformations Palestinian dress has undergone in the decades since. Embroidery since 1948 has constituted forms of heritage-driven nationalism, militant resistance, nascent economic power and a challenge to the infrastructural and cultural violence of the Israeli state—conditions rarely talked about in museum contexts, where embroidery is relegated to the status of 'traditional craft'.

Key elements of the research concern the homogenisation of the *thobe* both pre- and post-1948; embroidery and the fashioning of a modern Palestinian woman in 1970s Beirut; the use of embroidery in the revival of heritage by liberation artists; embroidery as resistance; and the history of NGOs and circulation of embroidery in a global marketplace.

The research has unfolded from the understanding that textiles sensitively reflect the changes in the social and political landscape in which they are produced. Taking material that is little-documented and rarely exhibited, *Labour of Love* places historic Palestinian dresses from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in conversation with photography, painting, archival material, and contemporary design. Newly-commissioned film from contemporary artist Maeve Brennan gives space to the women across Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan who continue to embroider today, and whose voices are rarely heard in this discourse. Song, sound, contemporary artwork, infographics all push embroidery beyond its typical presentation, and make for a rich and fascinating exhibition experience.

EXHIBITION STRUCTURE

The exhibition begins with an introductory section, before opening into four sections, organised thematically. At the Palestinian Museum, these were designated spatially, with a central section for historic dresses, known as the Forest. The exhibition ends with a concluding section.



Embroidery Everyday

Testaments to Female Labour



The exhibition opens with a series of historic ‘everyday dresses’, which 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. Crucially, these dresses greet the viewer before the spectacular festive dresses for which Palestinian embroidery is best known. Everyday dresses introduce an audience to the possibility of ‘reading’ dresses, and understanding all Palestinian embroidery as layered and emotional. Irreducible to a single moment or individual maker, the everyday dresses reflect women’s lives over time.

Content

- Everyday dresses from various collections.
- Archival photographs in reproduction.
- Printed fabric backdrop.

Section 1

Beyond 'Women's Work' - Embroidery and Gender



Embroidery in Palestine is a deeply gendered practice; this section explores embroidery's historic connection to the feminine and deconstructs the political motives of its more recent gendered associations. 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 exhibition shows dresses and objects from each of these stages.

The entrenched association between embroidery and rural femininity took on political significance after the Nakba, becoming central to the representation of women in the work of artists post-1948. In their artwork, 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. A series of paintings, ceramics and relief panels by a range of important Palestinian artists explore and elaborate upon this.

In exploring the relationships between men and embroidery, the section shows traditional Palestinian male dress, including items that would have been embroidered for them by women—such as tobacco pouches and transistor radio holders. Even in 2018, embroidery is considered 'women's work', and is not something men in Palestine practice publicly. However, for male political prisoners in Israeli military

detention centres—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 love for their families at home. The exhibition shows a range of these amazing embroidered objects made by Palestinian men in Israeli military detention centres.

Content

- Historic dress for a woman, matching historic dress for a child.
- Historic wedding dress and accessories.
- Historic marriage trousseau.
- Historic widow's dress.
- Historic dress showing the work of two women on a single garment.
- Archival photographs in reproduction., and other institutions.
- Paintings and ceramics by Palestinian artists.
- Historic men's clothing, accessories and embroidered items.
- Items embroidered by male prisoners.
- Three short clips of interviews with contemporary embroiderers.
- Film of hands embroidering, no sound: a large-scale projection onto stretched fabric.

Section 2

From Body to Image - Embroidery as Symbol

This section addresses embroidery’s diverse symbolic significance, over time. On a material level, embroidery’s relationship to symbolism is evident through its internal language of patterns and motifs. These were historically drawn from daily life, flora and fauna, and contemporary political events. The section highlights three dresses, from different regions of Palestine, and explores their motifs—pointing out specific designs on the dress, clarifying these through geometric schematic drawings, and bringing it to life with archival image of the motif’s subject itself. The aim is to allow a viewer to begin to recognise the patterns they see on the dresses before them. Drawers full of embroidery motif tests and offcuts allow a viewer to build a tactile relationship to embroidery.



After the Nakba of 1948, Palestinian embroidery also took on conceptual and constructed symbolic meaning, in its projected representation of 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 Palestine 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. This section includes myriad posters, an interview with Tamam al-Akhal about the PLO’s travelling exhibitions, and other PLO material from this period.

During the First Intifada, embroidered dresses were worn in protest, rendering women's bodies sites of active political agency. Traditional motifs mingled with doves, guns, and the Dome of the Rock—symbols of resistance stitched into the fabric of women's dresses. These extraordinary items make up the final highlight of this section.

Content

- Three historic dresses from diverse regions of Palestine.
- Archival photographs in reproduction and other institutions.
- Motif designs from the book *A Treasury of Stitches*, by Margarita Skinner.
- Embroidery test motifs.
- 25 posters in reproduction.
- 5-minute film of the Palestinian Artist Tamam al-Akhal, commissioned for the Palestinian Museum.
- Playlist of resistance songs and festive music from the 1970s onwards, referencing embroidery, dress or the context of the Intifada.
- Intifada dresses.
- PLO postcards and songcards.
- Intifada artwork by Nabil Anani.
- Ship of Return embroidered in prison.
- Three short clips of interviews with contemporary embroiderers.

Section 3:

From a Labour of Love, to Labour



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. This section explores embroidery’s changing relationships to (predominantly female) labour and local economy. This section with the pre-1948 marketplace in which embroidery was made: rolls of textiles tell the story of the silk trade from Syria, the arrival of British cotton during the Mandate, and Bethlehem’s cottage industry in couching embroidery in the 1930s.

The Nakba, however, 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 and forced them to seek waged work instead. As women lacked the means, and connection to the lifestyle that supported embroidery before, the practice became paid labour for thousands of women. Embroidery organisations were founded to provide support and employment for women and their families, with institutions such as Ina’sh Al-Ura constituting pillars of political resistance, and SAMED a militarised sense of embroidery’s importance to the resistance.

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, something this section of the exhibition explores.

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. A series of camp dresses, and others with stories connected to the Nakba, bring to life the urgencies and agonies of this period in history, as well as the generosity and resilience of Palestinian women.

Content

- One historic sewing machine.
- Two historic embroidered jackets—one with a British cotton lining, one made for market.
- Historic dress from Birzeit with Bethlehem couched sleeves.
- Historic embroidered objects made for the pre-1948 market: dolls, panel, shawl.
- Archival photographs in reproduction.
- Photographs and documents in reproduction.
- Embroidered Objects.
- Embroidered purse.
- Collection records.
- Two posters in reproduction.
- Documents about SAMED
- 5 camp dresses or ‘new dresses’, from various collections.
- Historic dress enlarged with UNRWA sacking.
- Contemporary embroidered commodities.
- Three short clips of interviews with contemporary embroiderers.

Section 4

Performing Identity: Embroidery, Clothing, and Class

Made and worn on the body, connected to the performance of identity, clothing holds up 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, and even used embroidered clothing as 'costume' for dress-up in photographers' studios. This section examines the history of class in Palestine, as manifested in attitudes to dress. This extends to the history of colonialism in the early twentieth century, whose impact was also apparent in embroidery and textiles. The introduction of 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—introduced in section 3—are also inherently connected to class dynamics, as politically-mobile individuals 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, these organisations have institutionalised 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 neo-liberal frameworks in which embroidery is produced today allows us to assess the conflicting desires at stake in its commodification and sale. This section ends with a series of infographics exploring Palestinian embroidery as a contemporary industry, constituting the most critically powerful portion of the exhibition.

Content

- 1 historic dress-coat embroidered in the Ottoman style.
- 1 historic dress and shawl for an urban woman, from the 1920s.
- Archival images in reproduction.
- One embroidered panel with archival photograph.
- Historic DMC pattern books and DMC thread.
- Historic shawls with mixed Quaker and Palestinian motifs.
- Ottoman-style embroidered 'towel'.
- 2 1970s embroidered dresses.
- Archival photographs.
- Archival slides.
- Infographics.
- Two short clips of interviews with contemporary embroiderers.

Central section

Forest of Dresses



This 'forest' of dresses is formed of historical garments drawn from every region of Palestine. Clustered on 'islands' down the centre of the exhibition, the dresses are organised by region. Texts describe each individual dress, and offer viewers insight into the specificities of embroidery in each area of Palestine. Displayed on structures that hold dresses up by the shoulders, poised in different directions, the garments float above the floor, soaring up towards the gallery ceiling. The Forest creates a dramatic landscape with plenty of detail for an audience to explore. While most exhibitions choose just a single dress for each village or region, the Forest often features two or more dresses from each place. While they may look superficially identical, small details reveal the individualised hands and skills of their different makers—reminding the viewer of the woman behind each dress, which can be 'read' as indicative of her personality, her choices, her lifestyle and her home.

Content

- 64 historic Palestinian dresses and shawls from various collections.
- Jewellery and historic headdresses.
- Archival footage of a woman wearing a Bedouin pocket dress.

Conclusion

The Embroiderers



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 today. *The Embroiderers*, a film commissioned from contemporary artist Maeve Brennan, follows the stories of five women through interviews we conducted with embroiderers from all over Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan.

The final object in the exhibition, and the only one in this section, is a dress made by Raja El-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 practise it. The exhibition concludes on this note.

Content

- 23-minute film, *The Embroiderers*.
- Contemporary embroidered dress loaned by its maker, Raja El-Zeer.

EXHIBITION CONTENT

The exhibition's content can be split into three lists—loans (of physical objects, which will need transportation), reproduction (material which can be printed on-site), and digital (audio and visual material which can be downloaded).

Loans – objects that will be sourced by the Palestinian Museum from individual and institutional lenders.

- 100 historic Palestinian dresses, jackets and *jellayeh* from various collections.
- Jewellery and historic headdresses from various collections.
- Historic shawls, accessories, panels, sewing machine, loaned from various collections.
- Contemporary embroidered items.
- Embroidery offcuts.
- Photographs and slides.
- Paintings and ceramics by Palestinian artists Suleiman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Vera Tamari, Abdul Rahman al-Muzayen, Abdul Hay Musallem, Issam Badr, and Intifada artwork by Nabil Anani.
- Embroidered objects made by men in prison.
- DMC pattern books and thread owned by the Palestinian Museum.
- Embroidered commodities loaned from various individuals.
- PLO material, books and archival ephemera.
- Embroidered purse.
- Collection records
- PLO postcards and songcards.
- Historic men's clothing, accessories and embroidered items.
- Items embroidered by male prisoners.

Reproduction – material which can be printed locally from digital files

- 25 posters.
- 6 panels of infographics.
- Photographs
- Documents in reproduction from various sources.

Digital – material produced or compiled by the Palestinian Museum which can be downloaded

- 7-minute film, *Malak al-Husseini Abdulrahim: The Art of Embroidery*.
- 23-minute film, *The Embroiderers*.
- Eleven 2-minute video clips of interviews with embroiderers.
- 5-minute film, *Interview with Palestinian artist Tamam al-Akhal*.
- Looping 10-minute film of hands embroidering, from the fieldwork archive of *At the Seams*.
- Archival footage of a woman wearing a Bedouin pocket dress.
- Playlist of resistance songs and festive music from the 1970s onwards, referencing embroidery, dress or the context of the Intifada.

DISPLAY AND DESIGN

Exhibition Design

The exhibition was designed by Plaid Studio, London, for the Palestinian Museum. Plaid can be contracted to adapt the design for another institution. Alternatively, the exhibition's design can be reinterpreted by the host organisation. However, the exhibition's graphic identity must be adhered to, along with various design principles key to the exhibition—particularly in relation to the presentation of the historic dresses.

In challenge to the distanced anthropological approach usually adopted by museums, dresses in both the Forest and thematic sections are ideally not displayed behind glass, but at a distance from the audience; not on mannequins, but on structures that enable them to float at different levels above the ground. If different from the original schema, the design should prioritise an intimacy with the dresses for the viewer, and an understanding of Palestinian embroidery as a living craft, rather than something held stiffly behind glass.

Graphic Design

The exhibition's graphic design was researched and developed by Sara Sukhun for the Palestinian Museum. The identity and its guidelines must be adhered to by the host institution. This includes identity elements, infographics, and templates for wall texts, captions, and images.

Technical Equipment

- 11 iPads and headphones.
- 2 mid-sized monitors and 2 sets of headphones.
- 2 high-definition projectors, one with overhead shower speakers.
- One further set of shower speakers.

TEXT AND LANGUAGE

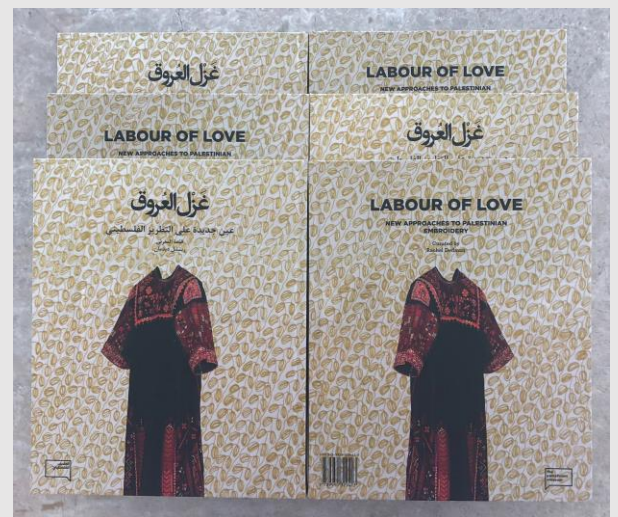
The exhibition’s texts—introduction, wall texts, captions—have been written by curator Rachel Dedman and reviewed by the Palestinian Museum’s advisors and historical specialists. These will be shared with a host institution and cannot be edited. The writing of further captions for additional or alternative objects can be supported by the Palestinian Museum team and must be signed off by the Palestinian Museum before publication.

The exhibition has been developed as a bilingual experience, in English and Arabic. Graphic designer Sara Sukhun has built a dynamic and flexible design identity able to carry both languages throughout the exhibition.

Labour of Love is accompanied by a bilingual research-driven publication. The catalogue is published by the Palestinian Museum and features newly-commissioned photography alongside much of the archival material from the exhibition itself. It should be made available for sale at the host institutions’ shops and sales outlets.

Table of Contents

- **The Palestinian Museum** - Zina Jardaneh
- **Curator’s Foreword** - Rachel Dedman
- **Labour of Love: New approaches to Palestinian Embroidery** – Rachel Dedman
- **In the Care of Other Hands** - Kristine Khouri
- **Floating like Kites: Palestinian Embroidery among consumerist clouds** - Tina Sherwell
- **Is Embroidery Flat?** - Kristen Scheid
- **Close to my heart is the Thobe from Gaza** - Tania Tamari Naser
- **Heritage, Ethnography, and the making of nationalist agents** - Chiara De Cesari
- **Labour of Love: A visual Essay** - Rachel Dedman
- **Highlights from the Exhibition** - Photographed by Kayane Antreassian



Printing Specifications:

Size: 24.5*30cm

Paper: 170gm, chromo matt + varnish

Inside pages: 432

Paper type: 150 gm

Printing: CMYK

Sewing

Paper; chromo matt

Printing: CMYK + lamination matt

Hard cover

Additional published materials about the Exhibition (brochures, educational material, visitors’ guide, etc.) can be developed for the specific needs of the host institution’s audience.

PARTIAL USE OF THE EXHIBITION

Ideally, the exhibition is taken in its full form. The show builds a rich and thorough picture of embroidery's history, transformation and contemporary life across its thematic sections. However, if a host institution is unable to accommodate the full exhibition in its original form, there is the possibility of reproducing it partially, perhaps by curating a new version of the exhibition around one or more thematic sections. This would rely on thorough consultation with the Palestinian Museum.

It is important to note that it is not possible to borrow only the central 'forest' of historic dresses. In keeping with *Labour of Love's* commitment to expanding traditional views of Palestinian embroidery, the presentation of these historic objects must be accompanied by one or more of the critical thematic sections.

LEGAL AND TECHNICAL LOGISTICS

To be negotiated between the Palestinian Museum and the host institution.