

# University of Chicago Magazine

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## **Like mother, like daughter**

Generations converged at the [Oriental Institute](#) on Wednesday afternoon. Not only did the “Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing” talk pull an audience mixed with older adults and students, but exhibit curator and tour guide Iman Saca’s mother was also among the listeners. Both mother and daughter had a hand in the [exhibit](#), which takes viewers on a colorful tour of regional clothing in pre-1948 Palestine: Iman, chair of the Middle Eastern studies program at Chicago’s St. Xavier University, was digging through OI storage facilities when she found a room full of Palestinian dresses that had never been displayed. She combined the dresses with garments, jewelry, and headdresses from the [Palestinian Heritage Center](#) in Bethlehem, founded in 1991 by mother Maha Saca, to create the exhibit.



Iman Saca began the OI tour with dresses from Palestine’s central region, noting that each region—central, southern, and eastern—has a common theme. “Villages had distinct styles,” she explained, and individual dresses “highlight aspects that represent identity.” A woman’s clothing revealed her marital status (or, as Maha added, “if she likes to have a lot of babies”), age, and social position. The “bridal dress of Bethlehem,” for example, known for its ornate and costly embroidery, was coveted by women from surrounding villages, though most could only afford a single side or chest panel, which they would sew onto a homemade dress. In the Bedoin Sinai Desert, a dress embroidered with blue thread meant the woman was a widow; if she later added red thread, it was a “signal that [she] was ready to be married again.” Women also wore jewelry and coins to flaunt their dowries, so “people could see how much [her husband] paid for her.” Even the act of embroidering itself held significance. Saca explained that a young girl would learn the patterns and techniques that her “grandma was familiar with,” and she would be deemed a good marriage partner “based on her stitch.”

After the 1948 partition, with its shifting of boundaries and resulting wars, Saca said, the craft of dress-making faltered. In the 1980s, however, the Palestinian nationalist movement led to its revival. One dress from this period is embroidered with the word “Palestine” encircling the sleeve and a Palestinian flag.

Ruthie Kott

*Photos: Mother-daughter team of Iman and Maha Saca (top) lead Wednesday's exhibit tour; embroidered Palestinian dresses tell much about the identity of their wearers.*