

Palestinian women used clothes to make more than a fashion statement

Not so long ago in Palestine, *what* women wore was *who* they were. They took years learning to embroider their dresses, perfecting the styles of their particular villages and learning how to add other visual clues that sent messages about themselves through their clothing.

Their dresses and jackets became virtual resumes as they walked into the market, or appeared in more elaborate dress at weddings and other events. People could tell their marital status, wealth, and age just by glancing at them as they walked.

Dresses from that period of women's style, from the early 19th Century until just after World War II are now on exhibit at the Oriental Institute Museum, 1155 E. 58th St. at the University of Chicago, beginning Saturday, November 11 and continuing through March 25. Also on display at the museum's Marshall and Doris Holleb Family Gallery for Special Exhibits are women's headdresses and other accessories as well two ensembles worn by men during the period. But, like the clothes of many cultures, it is the women's wear that take the spotlight.

The exhibition, "Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing" is drawn from the Oriental Institute's collection of late 19th and early 20th century garments and accessories from the Middle East as well as some items on loan from the Palestine Heritage Center in Bethlehem, West Bank-Palestine. The exhibition is a joint project between the Oriental Institute and the Palestinian Heritage Center and was organized as part of November's Arab Heritage month.

The tradition of village women embroidering in locally distinctive styles was at its height when the Ottoman Empire ruled Palestine, but it may have much deeper historical roots. "There are traces of similar styles of clothing represented in art over 3,000 years ago," said Geoff Emberling, Director of the Oriental Institute Museum.

It was in Bethlehem that the style of creating elaborate clothing reached its zenith, explained Iman Saca, Exhibits Curator as she walked about mannequins draped in the

Print-quality photo:



Bethlehem jacket

clothing, as she discussed the now anonymous former owners by looking at the details stitched into their garments.

“Wealthy women would commission a jacket or bridal dress to be made for them in Bethlehem and everyone would recognize instantly where it came from,” said Iman Saca, an assistant professor of anthropology at Saint Xavier University and the director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program.

The jackets were stitched with metallic thread combining gold and silver to create floral designs. Wealthy women signaled their status by having entire jackets covered with the stitching, such as one on display in the new exhibit. Other women purchased only the breast panel for dresses if they were less well off.

Married women from Bethlehem and some other villages wore a specially padded hat with coins sewed on, displaying their family wealth for all to see. The more coins on the hat, the wealthier the family. The coins were part of bridewealth from the woman’s husband at the time of their marriage.

“They wore these caps all the time and people say the women got headaches if they didn’t wear them because they got so used to the weight,” Saca said.

Another dress, this one from a Bedouin woman and probably worn to the market, tells another story about its wearer. Because it has blue threads embroidered at the bottom, the woman was a widow. “If she wanted to marry again, she would sew a little bit of red thread into the blue,” Saca said.

Each village had its own motif, and women would also sew in items to represent other communities that were part of their heritage in addition to their hometown. They also incorporated triangles--amulets-- to ward off the evil eye, a common superstition in the Middle East. In order to avoid a jinx from other women, they also stitched in an imperfection in each garment in order to distract other women looking at it, Saca explained.

Much of the attire was produced by girls, beginning at age seven, who learned to stitch from their grandmothers. Because they didn’t go to school, much of their time outside of performing household duties was spent, needle in hand, as they prepared dresses for their trousseau, in anticipation of their marriage at age 15 or 16.

The showiest garments were reserved for the youngest women. As they grew older, the women adopted more matronly ware, Saca said.

The embroidery craft largely disappeared after the establishment of the modern state of Israel and the result relocation of many Palestinian families. It is beginning to return, however, again as a form of expressing identity. A recently produced dress, decorated with the green and red colors of the Palestinian flag and other symbols of Palestinian identity, is on display in the exhibition.

The Oriental Institute Museum is open Tuesday, Thursday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Wednesday from 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 6:00 p.m. Suggested donation for admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for children. For programs, call (773)702-9514, or on the web: <http://www.oi.uchicago.edu>.

<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/061109.palestinianclothing.shtml>
Last modified at 10:15 AM CST on Tuesday, November 14, 2006.

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