

# Sixteen Stitching Techniques

## The Forgotten Treasures of Palestinian Embroidery



By Tania Tamari Nasir and Shirabe Yamada

**R**ed cross-stitch on black fabric – this is a common feature that dominates today's handicrafts scene, which is teeming with purses, cushions, and shawls produced by a number of women's embroidery groups across Palestine. Over the last several decades, the red-on-black cross-stitch has been erroneously presented and perceived as "the traditional" Palestinian embroidery style. This monotonous trend, it seems, is due in part to the popularity of etamine, a loosely woven, grid-shaped cotton embroidery fabric that makes cross-stitch embroidery work easy and accessible for income-generation means.

Looking at textiles and garments from several collections of rural (*Fallahi* and *Bedouin*) dress from Palestine that date back to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as exhibited at Birzeit University Museum, Dar Al-Tifl Museum, and Inaash al-Usra Folk Museum, one cannot help but notice



Stem Stitch

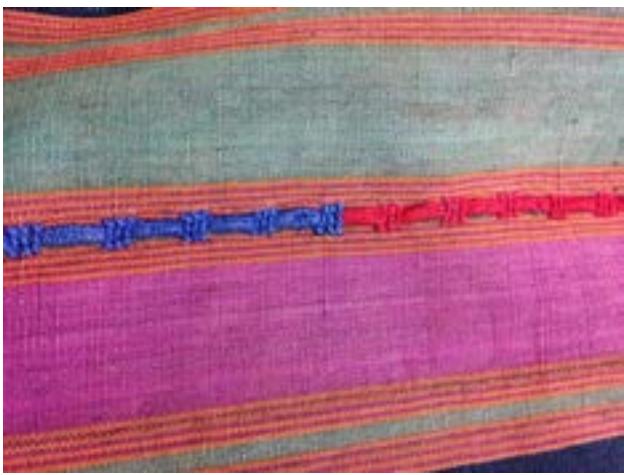
the myriad of vibrant colors such as indigo, orange, fuchsia, and green, which meet and converge through the multitude of intricate stitching techniques that zigzag, swirl, trim, and connect the silk, linen, and brocades of that period. A stark contrast to the all-too-repetitive motifs found in many charity and tourist shops in Palestine.

With the gradual decline in handmade garments in Palestinian villages, most of these non-cross-stitch techniques have become rarer and seemingly almost entirely forgotten, so documenting them from a handful of elderly embroiderers was a race against time. This sense of urgency gave the experts Widad Kawar and Tania Tamari Nasir the idea to make an embroidery instruction manual that would teach today's generation these disappearing stitching techniques. After a lengthy process of research and documentation, the long-awaited book, *Embroidery Stitches from*

The book comes as the unofficial sequel to Kawar and Tamari Nasir's 1990 publication, *Palestinian Embroidery: Traditional "Fallahi" Cross-stitch* (State Museum of Ethnography, Munich, Germany). It was made through an extensive study of cross-stitch, the most widespread embroidery technique in Palestine, and featured patterns from five main areas where it was prevalent: Ramallah, Hebron, Jaffa, Bir al-Sabe', and Gaza. The book, published in Arabic, English, and German, was the first of its kind and received widespread attention. It was conceived by Tamari Nasir who was a witness to the evolution of embroidery in Palestine with its turbulent history: from a family and village folk craft before the 1948 *Nakba* to a commercial tool for income generation today. Faced with the grave responsibility of ensuring the family survival following *al-Nakba* and *al-Naksa*, women throughout Palestine

*Palestine: An Instruction Manual*, will be published this year by the fair trade organization Sunbula. Focusing on sixteen lesser-known stitching techniques as well as the unmistakable cross-stitch, the book aims to reassert the relevance and centrality of these techniques as part of a long and inspiring history of crafting and creativity in Palestine.

and *al-Shatat* (the diaspora) began to sell their embroidery work through charities and women's organizations as a means of income generation – making shawls, cushions, and bags by adapting the decorative surface motifs in their dress to fit the new products. Ironically, unable to afford their own work and creations, as well as moving away from making their



Manjal and Manjal Madalawi

own traditional dress, most of what was being produced began to lose the sensitive and personalized touch of generations past. While flourishing and being celebrated internationally as a symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance, the repetitive production of this traditional craft for the sake of sales was losing its purpose, distinct characteristics, and individual charm, especially as the old expert embroiderers were passing away and younger generations were naturally looking for the less expensive alternative to the labor- and cost-intensive embroidery.

Tamari Nasir, Kawar, and their group of concerned friends embarked on the journey of safeguarding the patterns and techniques of traditional embroidery, to which Kawar offered her internationally renowned collection

of traditional Palestinian costumes and accessories for study. Hundreds of traditional dresses, spanning the period between 1850 and 1950, were examined, and patterns and color combinations were carefully studied, documented, and reproduced. The book, printed in multiple editions since its first publication, has successfully fulfilled its mission. It is being used today in almost every women's group in Palestine as the must-have resource of cross-stitch patterns for making handicrafts.

Now the impending task at hand was to document the lesser-known embroidery stiches and figure out their techniques, such as the couching-stitch from Bethlehem and the patchwork from Galilee, as well as the various hemming and connecting stiches used throughout Palestine.



Manjal Hallal

Most of these stiches, simultaneously functional and ornate, were primarily used in the creation and construction of entire garments, all the while ensuring a distinct aesthetic identity and style. The social, technological, economic, and political changes that have affected life in Palestine, and indeed the world over, inevitably took their toll on these techniques. As endless war and the Occupation rearranged life's priorities, and as women stopped making their own dress, and economic necessity steered most embroiderers to cross-stitch on black etamine, these complex embroidery techniques began to drop out of use. No longer as relevant as they used to be, and with the rise of the sewing machine and factory-made clothes, these old and sophisticated treasures were being elbowed out of style, memory, and celebrity.

Conscious of this, Tamari Nasir teamed up with Sunbula, which works with hundreds of women

across Palestine by supporting their economic empowerment through handicrafts production. Sunbula recognized the importance of creating a comprehensive embroidery instruction manual – it would not only help to preserve the rich and varied techniques before being lost, but it would also help the embroiderers, young designers, and established artists to enrich their knowledge and skills in order to expand the design possibilities of their products and creative work.

In 2010, the fashion designer OmarJoseph Nasser-Khoury joined the team as a researcher and co-author. The team first studied the collection of traditional costumes at Birzeit University Museum and sorted the techniques into two main categories of stiches: the purely ornamental, and the decoratively functional. Each category contained individual stitching techniques: 16 in total that could be understood and analyzed. The team



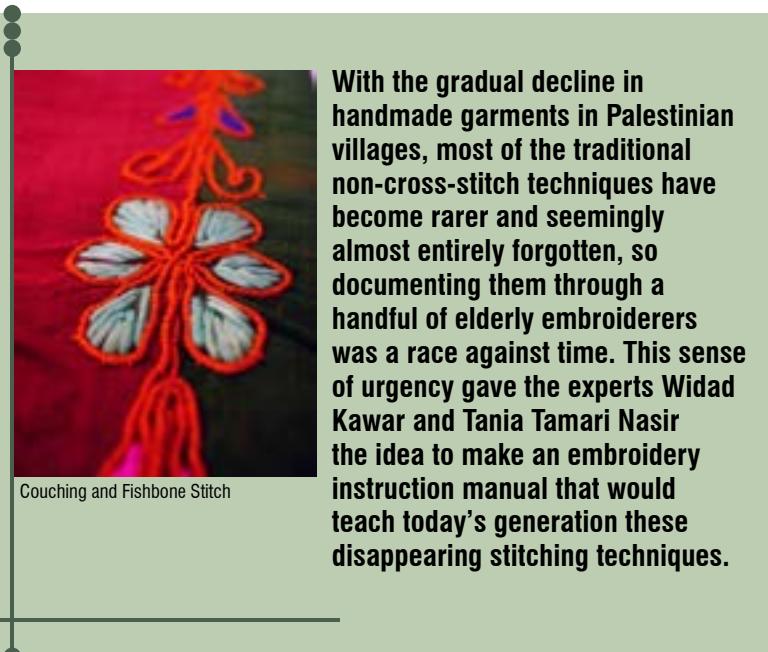
Manjal 'Ereijeh

watching and studying the video, and experimenting with actual fabric and threads, Nasser-Khoury created the illustrated, step-by-step instructions for the sixteen techniques – the most crucial component of the book, whose goal is to reinvigorate these techniques and reaffirm their place in contemporary and future Palestinian creative production.

The book, a bilingual Arabic-English publication, is currently in the final stage of production. Once completed in June, Sunbula plans to make it widely available for women's organizations across Palestine and in the diaspora, and to hold workshops that aim to promote its use as a practical aid for contemporary and future embroiderers.

enlisted the help of embroiderers – Sabha Ali from Yatta, Dawlat Abu Shawish from Amari Refugee Camp, Jameeleh Abu Nijm from Al-Bireh, Sumayya Abu Audeh from Gaza, and Ruqiya Al-Santareasy in Amman – who approached elderly embroiderers in their communities to help identify the names, locations of origin, and usages of the stitches. The result was a fascinating collection of information on such techniques as *tihsai*, the satin stitch used to fill in floral motifs, or *al-e'qeida il-majdalawieh*, the connective seam stitch from al-Majdal in southern Palestine used to sew together separate pieces of fabric.

The next step was to deconstruct and understand each stitching technique. The team interviewed and videotaped Julia Khaliliya from Beit Jala and Sabha Ali from Yatta, who still knew how to embroider using these stitches. After many hours of



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You can support the publication of *Embroidery Stitches from Palestine: An Instruction Manual* by joining Sunbula's crowdfunding campaign. To find out more, visit [www.sunbula.org](http://www.sunbula.org), Facebook: sunbulafairtrade, or Instagram: sunbulapalestine.

Article photos are courtesy of Omar Joseph Nasser-Khoury and Birzeit University Museum.



Couching and Fishbone Stitch



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