

**International Training Programme: knowledge exchange fellowship report**  
Documentation of the British Museum's Palestinian textile collections  
*March - July 2018*



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Palestinian Textiles, Fashion, Ethnomagic & Ethnobotany [Area of Expertise/Professional Interests]

**Project Partners**

The British Council (occupied Palestinian territory)

The Palestine Exploration Fund (London, UK)

## Introduction

The idea for this project began to crystallise back in 2016 when I was in the final phase of finishing my MA in Social Anthropology at Goldsmiths College in London. The BM had acquired one of my works for the exhibition *Life & Sole: Footwear from the Islamic World*, curated by Dr. Fahmida Suleman in 2015 and I was invited to give a gallery talk on my birthday, 20th January 2016, about my featured work. I had first met Fahmida back in 2011 when she attended a talk I gave during my first fashion exhibition *Silk Thread Martyrs* at the Mosaic Rooms in West London, after which, on behalf of the department, she acquired one of my works for the BM collection. When I returned to London in 2013 as a participant on the International Training Programme (ITP) I only met with Fahmida once fleetingly as she was away on maternity leave. During that time, I became more familiar with the British Museum (BM) and the staff there, especially Dr. Zeina Klink-Hoppe (Phyllis Bishop Curator for the Modern Middle East) and Helen Wolfe (Senior Collections Manager of the BM Textile Collection at Blythe House); I had actually first met Helen in 2009 when I was an undergraduate at London College of Fashion and came with Dr. Shelagh Weir to research the collection for my final year project. So it was only towards the end of 2016 that I began discussing this project with Fahmida.

Fahmida had initially wanted me to spend some time at the BM to work through unsorted materials related to the Palestinian Textile collection at the BM and in particular the 1989 exhibition *Palestinian Costume* curated by Shelagh Weir. These discussions took place intermittently throughout 2016 and 2017 on my numerous visits to London. Towards the end of 2017, after getting the blessings and support of the ITP, consulting with Dr. Weir, and Helen Wolfe, it was agreed that my best possible contribution would be to come and work on updating the Palestinian Textile collection database. The decision was based on my professional experience and own interests in this field, as well as the BM's need for assistance in updating their records.

In addition to the core funding and support received from the ITP, an additional £5000 (five thousand pounds) was received from the British Council in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and £2000 (two thousand pounds) was received from the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in London.

The project was initially intended to last for three months from its start date on 5<sup>th</sup> March, but halfway through it was extended for another another six weeks until Friday 14<sup>th</sup> July. The project was extended in light of the sheer amount of work that remained, and based on availability of funds and the ITP's willingness to contribute a further £1000 (one thousand pounds) to the project.

## Why the project is necessary

The project is vital in so far as it seeks to remedy the notable lack of information on the Museum records for a significantly large number of objects in this particular collection. Basic descriptive information and images, in addition to date, provenance, material composition and anthropological information were generally unavailable or lacking in part. From my point of view, as a researcher and specialist in this field, it is vital to ensure that the BM has updated and accurate information (to the best possible standard), as any lack or inaccuracy will have

significant impact on further research and work in this field due to the BM's prestigious global position as a reliable reference and authority. On a more personal level, this project has allowed me direct access to one of the most important collections of Palestinian historic rural textiles in the world. To be able to examine, handle each object and study it has afforded me great insight into this field. This is also important in so far as it consolidates the working relationship between the BM and Birzeit University Museum (BZUM) and encourages further future collaboration through the ITP.

### What I brought to the project

In addition to my specialist academic knowledge in this field, I also bring my experience as a maker and designer who understands textiles and dress from a hands-on technical point of view. I have often felt that to have the ability to understand the deeper story behind an ethnographic object one needs to also understand *how* it was made just as much as *why*. Understanding the chemistry of colours, composition of constituent materials, as well as the techniques of making provide us with more clues when it comes to identifying, understanding and analysing each object. My knowledge in this field is also informed by my lived experience in Palestine as well as my work at BZUM, both of which offer ample comparative insight for improving the quality of my work in this project. I have since 2006 dedicated the bulk of my time toward studying and understanding historic rural dress from Palestine.

### British Museum experience

For most of this project I spent my time at the Textile Centre at Blythe House (BH) in West London working under the supervision of Helen Wolfe and Imogen Laing (Assistant Collections Manager: Storage and Moves). On a typical day I would arrive at 10 and work until 16:30/17:00, although my times were flexible. For each object record that I updated I had to physically examine its corresponding textile (usually a garment) to ensure that all information entered was accurate and correct to my best possible knowledge. In many cases, exact information could not be discerned, especially in terms of dating or the content of synthetic material, and therefore generalisations had to be made (time periods, like early 20th century, or 1930's were entered instead of exact dates) in order to avoid misinformation. A lot of the time I found that I had to ask Helen or Imogen for a second opinion, or refer to external references, like Shelagh Weir's *Palestinian Costume* (1989) to assist me in identifying some aspects of the textile and/or updating the record. At the beginning, one of the most confusing instances was to differentiate between indigo-dyed linen and cotton. Indigo dye actually coats the textile, thus masking the original texture and weight of the fibre which makes it a great feat of tactility and observation to discern one from the other. With time more hints became apparent and the task grew easier.

The first two weeks I took part in a textile handling, display and packing for loans course led by Helen and Imogen. This was very helpful in terms of getting hands-on practical training, especially on how to fold/roll and pack each item back into its designated box or tube to ensure best storage conditions. Before I started working on the collection I received basic training on how to use MuseumIndex+ from Tanya Szrajber (Head of Documentation). For the first 10 days I worked alongside Holly Wright (Assistant Collections Manager) who photographed the objects I processed and helped me with folding each object and re-boxing it. Imogen took over photographing the textiles and uploading the images onto Odin. This was done intermittently,

depending on Imogen's availability and free time as she was very busy with setting up the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World.

On the days I was at the BM in Bloomsbury, when it was not possible to work at BH, I took the opportunity to work remotely updating/amending records which I had worked on earlier, or whichever records that were already worked on previously by museum staff before but required some editing and further updating. A lot of these records were for textiles that were featured in BM publications, especially Shelagh Weir's *Palestinian Costume* (1989) and *Embroidery from Palestine* (2006) but had not had that link made clear and much of the information in the publications on said objects was not actually on the record.

I was glad once my stay was extended to have the opportunity to meet and briefly engage with this year's ITP participants. As part of their introductory week I gave a small presentation about my project at the BM and later during the programme met with a group of them when they came to BH for a visit to the Textile Centre and they engaged wonderfully with the project on their visit.



## Knowledge Sharing

Despite there being some similar and a few almost identical textiles in the collection, it was very easy to note that each object is different and unique, which made the task all the more unusual. There could be no fair way of systematising a descriptive approach except on a very general level which seemed counterintuitive. I therefore found myself approaching each item independently and working on each in whatever capacity I saw necessary. This was a very important realisation in the sense that one cannot approach material culture with a universal approach, especially objects which have been made individually, by individuals for individual use. This sense of individuality, despite belonging to a general or regional style affords individual study and attention from the researcher and specialist.

That being said, with time, the more textiles I worked on, I began to notice some regional particularities, especially in terms of the patterns and use of particular stitching techniques on certain areas of dress. I was beginning to see distinct aesthetic patterns in the dresses; something I was aware of theoretically but not so familiar with practically or visually.

I am very keen to apply the storage and conservation ideals I learnt whilst working at BH at my home institution, BZUM. I was rather impressed with the system devised by Helen for handling textiles for the purpose of study and storage, that I have already proposed a similar system at BZUM. We have already started working on dedicating a study room for the university as well as public use. We are currently in the process of updating our storage facilities and are applying many of the ideas and standards that I saw at the BM.

The use of a museums' record system like MuseumIndex+ was very practical in the sense that it gave me a working knowledge, insight and practice into a software that we are in need of at BZUM. Having done so, it will be much easier at this point to decide what type of records system or software will best serve us at BZUM and what are the key points that one needs to take into consideration when registering and entering information on museum objects. I have already met with the company, System Simulations that designed MI+ in London in late 2018, and began discussions with BZUM to acquire the software.

I have since 2010 been working on an embroidery instruction manual in collaboration with Palestinian fair trade organisation *Sunbula* in Jerusalem. The manual features embroidery samples and techniques from BZUM's collection alongside illustrated instructions and background descriptions. My time spent working on the collection at BM allowed me ample opportunity to look at examples of embroidery and compare them to what I had seen in Palestine. This was very important as it enriched my research and improved my input in the manual which is due to be published before the end of 2019.

One very valuable lesson, a true eye opener indeed, was the realisation that the BM, like all other grand institutions is very typical. What bureaucratic and organisational problems I thought were unique to us in Palestine, now seem universal! The recurring frustration with one's organisation now seems like a staple in a medley of feelings one is lucky to experience when working for an institution as large and significant as the British Museum or Birzeit University. It might sound ironic, but this left me more relaxed than I had anticipated, especially as I was able to see how none of this affected the dedication and conviction of the people I was lucky to work with.

## Outcomes and achievements

Throughout my stay I was able to update more than 400 records, and with the help of Fahmida, Helen and Imogen register and add 39 new objects from the handling collection to the textile collection. I have also contributed two blog posts about the project (see links below).

One very interesting conclusion that I have arrived at was to ascertain the use of a couching technique to embroider a certain motif, known as *irq-il-loz* ('almond branch') from the south of Palestine region on silk inserts. This technique was often mistaken for stem stitch embroidery (see Hanan Karaman Munayyer's *Traditional Palestinian Costume: Origins and Evolution* (2011)). This style of couching is unusual because it uses the same floss silk thread instead of the silk cord and fine silk thread for the entire embroidery. I had to go over several samples with a magnifying glass to make sure of this, and equally with Helen to prove to her what I found.



I also came across several unusual objects in the collection that seem to belong to an entirely different culture and geographical region of the world. The most compelling of these are several child dresses made of tie-dyed indigo cotton. As far as we know, tie-dyed fabrics were not used in Palestine in the late 19th / early 20th century, nor was tie-dyeing a technique employed by rural communities there around the date of the object. This has led us to speculate that the dress might come from Syria, where such styles are not uncommon. Of course, at this point this is entirely based on speculation and comparative analysis.

The Palestinian textile collection is partly made up of two missionary collections which were acquired by the BM in the 60s; the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and the Jerusalem and East Mission (JEM). These missions collected dress and textiles based on certain orientalist beliefs and historical misconceptions that regarded the 19th century styles of rural Palestine as unchanged since biblical times. Their collection was therefore indiscriminate

and often based on their need of dressing up costumes for the biblical tableaux and performances they set up as part of their activities in Britain. This issue of unusual and odd objects presents a valid research avenue that I am curious to look further into. The Palestinian Exploration Fund (PEF) has expressed the possibility of having me give a public lecture at the BM, as part of their involvement in this project and I think this could perhaps make a suitable topic.

### The future of this project

There are still more than 500 records that need to be updated, amended and revised in addition to a large number of records which require images. The purpose of the project is in effect far from complete and I feel that, provided the funding and time, it is worth resuming before the imminent move out of Blythe House. Based on my understanding and discussions with Helen Wolfe and Zeina Klink-Hoppe, there seems to be no deterrent to resume the project. However this must be formally agreed between all partners and we must proceed to plan appropriately. Following the preliminary success of what we started last year, I feel that we can resume this and perhaps expand the team in terms of getting a full time photographer and assistant to help with the updating and handling of each object. I think, based on last year's experience and success we can now better plan and fund this process so that we can ensure a satisfactory conclusion.

On my last visit to London and the BM in November/December 2018, I met with Venetia Porter, Zeina Klink-Hoppe, Helen Wolfe and Imogen Laing and expressed a desire to have them come to Palestine on an exchange trip to BZUM and conduct a research/training visit towards the end of 2019 based on their areas of expertise and interest. The response has been very positive and I feel we must now proceed to find the best way to make this happen.

## BLOG POSTS

April 4th 2018: Documentation of the British Museum's Palestinian Textile Collection:

[ <https://bmtrainingprog.wordpress.com/2018/04/04/documentation-of-the-british-museums-palestinian-textile-collection-omarjoseph-nasser-khoury-itp-2013/> ]

June 29th 2018: Reflections from London:

[ <https://bmtrainingprog.wordpress.com/2018/06/29/reflections-from-london-omarjoseph-nasser-khoury-itp-2013/> ]

