

Embroidered heritage: a design-led visual ethnography of traditional Palestinian motifs

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Abstract

This paper presents a research approach toward the motifs of traditional iconography in contemporary discourses of graphic design in Palestine. The investigation is being undertaken within the scope of a doctoral project in design at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto. It focuses on the visual and semantical deconstruction of traditional motifs that are particular to Palestinian *Tartreez* (hand embroidery) and typically applied in ethnic clothing.

The research fully acknowledges the challenges to, and correspondingly the urgency of, conserving such unique heritage assets in light of ongoing circumstances of strife and uncertainty in the region. It also observes the impact of rapidly shifting technological and consumption paradigms as compounding factors actively marginalising localised traditional enterprises, including manual arts and crafts.

The paper, accordingly, examines the role of design as an essential but often neglected aspect of heritage preservation, management, and activation. It discusses how the general perception of 'graphic design' in Palestine, which inextricably links the practice to cutting-edge newness, can prospectively disregard its agency towards involving in and contributing to more retrospective exercises of meaning-making - specifically in contexts such as historical iconographies residing within unique semiotic ecosystems.

A key area of inquiry for the project, which the paper details, is thus a thorough exploration of the semantic underpinnings present in these traditional motifs and, consequently, mapping emerging affordances of contemporary Palestinian visual culture. The corresponding aim is to articulate prospective methodologies and resources that can be introduced in local academic and occupational pedagogies, which can promote the consultation of cultural inheritance as a more meaningful alternative to arbitrary extra-cultural appropriation in graphic and communication design.

The narrative fundamentally aligns with the third thematic track of the conference, "Handle with care/Inclusivity," as the basic premise of the research is to develop and validate means that enable current and future Palestinian designers to address both emic and etic stereotyping, and critically, pre-

vent the loss of unique heritage assets while carrying forward their visual/material legacies through newer forms of creative expression.

Author keywords

Heritage Preservation; Design Research; Visual Ethnography; Palestinian Tartreez; Graphic Design

Introduction

Embroidery is a fundamental craft form etched in Palestinian culture and has been practised by the community and its diaspora as a means of creative expression for centuries. The corresponding iconography, comprising a diverse assemblage of motifs closely linked to Palestinian land and culture, is an essential pillar in the construction of visual and cultural identity, which the community seeks to preserve in the face of compounding dimensions of conflict. Traditional Palestinian attire (*Thoub*) is the typical medium of motifs for this unique iconography, wherein the motifs can be grouped within different genres - revealing layers of history and cues to civilizations that presided. The research, therefore, investigates the contributions of contemporaneity towards extending this narrative and, conversely, the iconography's value to modern-day precepts of Palestinian visual culture. The latter is of particular importance as a means to identity-building in the context of heritage preservation since the implications are not only socio-economic but are also critically socio-political.

The research identifies key threats to the continuity of the craft: a diminishing practice base abetted by progressively weakening intergenerational transmission of expertise, rapidly shifting manufacturing paradigms, and cultural appropriation by external entities. The effects of these factors are amplified by the occurring instability in the region, therefore, presenting a situation of untenability that warrants the concerted intervention of multilateral and multi-sectoral nature towards the preservation and promulgation of the craft form. The study responds to this call for action by mediating across three key axes of intervention: documentation, design, and dissemination.



Design's role in the continuity of historically significant but antiquated traditional practices involves gaining greater visibility of emerging strategies for addressing real-world issues concerning heritage management (Brandão Pereira et al., 2019). Accordingly, the paper discusses the viability of one particular aspect of design-led mediation – the integration of such traditional iconography in modern Palestinian graphic design, which the project posits can create more meaningful and mutually advantageous synergies between convention and contemporaneity lead to self-innovation for the respective communities of practice.

Research objectives

The research in question is in its initial phase of implementation, wherein the current focus is on deconstructing the semiotic underpinnings of the traditional Palestinian motifs. The aim is to comprehend the associated visual culture from various perspectives, including graphic, semantic, and taxonomic, which may allow a balanced assessment of affordances, opportunities, and interplays in relation to modern-day design praxis. Additionally, the project observes that such analysis may also be relevant for heritage management initiatives – since it is based on source material accrued from a diverse set of references that have emerged from the ongoing primary and secondary inquiry.

The corresponding course of action for the project is to identify contexts where the iconography and/or its specific aspects can be dynamically interpreted, keeping in view contemporary tools, trends, and approaches to graphic design. The research, in this case, acknowledges the criticality of new media towards furthering the inscription of traditional iconography in present-day visual culture and towards its greater reinstatement in public awareness.

The paper, therefore, examines the role of design as an essential but often neglected aspect of heritage preservation, management, and activation. It discusses how the general perception of 'graphic design' in Palestine, which inextricably links the practice to cutting-edge newness, can prospectively disregard its agency towards involving in and contributing to more retrospective exercises of meaning-making – specifically in contexts such as historical iconographies residing within unique but vulnerable semiotic ecosystems.

Context of intervention

Palestine, also known as Canaan in ancient times, has long established textile production and trade history. Embroidery, in particular, is a craft form that has been passed down as an



Figure 1. A Palestinian woman practising hand embroidery.
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essential skill between generations of mothers and daughters. The craft epitomises Palestinian rural culture, and girls in the past would typically start learning techniques and styles unique to their village from the age of ten. The embroidery, as stated earlier, was primarily used to embellish traditional Palestinian women's attire called a thobe. The motifs and the patterns reflected elements of daily life and the surrounding environment. Garments for special occasions such as marriages and festivals were more richly ornamented, incorporating a greater diversity of designs (Figure 1).

According to a study conducted by Nasir et al. (2019), "embroidery played an essential part in village life and was thought to reveal a woman's personality. The motifs contained an intricate communication system expressing the wearer's status, wealth, and geographic origin through their style and decorative elements. In addition to geometric, arabesque, and abstract patterns, embroidery motifs and colour combinations sometimes symbolised the surrounding flora and fauna, literally and metaphorically. There were subtle similarities between the works of neighbouring practice communities. However, differences increased with social and geographical distance (Figure 2).

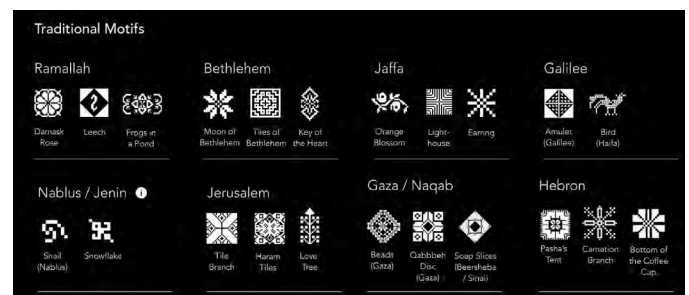


Figure 2. Various motifs and styles from different cities.
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In conjunction, Allenby (2011) notes:

"Embroidered motifs also reflected the political environment of the time. For example, the Pasha's Tent pattern first appeared when the Ottoman Court ruled the region. In contrast, the Officer's Pips pattern was adopted during the British Mandate, imitating British military symbols of rank. Thus, embroidery acted as a symbol of evolving Palestinian identity by historically recording individual interpretations of the political and cultural events that touched the lives of Palestinian rural folk.

Before 1948, the traditional attire of women in rural Palestine was regionally and stylistically diverse, with great emphasis on ornamentation, and fashioned from the finest local and imported fabrics. (Kiwari, 2011) observes that each garment from the era could be considered an individual work of art.

With the outset of *Nakba*, or the Palestinian catastrophe, in 1948, many fundamental facets of daily living changed. A significant section of the population became internally or externally displaced. Severe financial difficulties supervened, as did settling for subsistence in refugee camps, which made it harder for embroidery to remain an active part of daily routines. However, against all odds, the craft survived. Palestinian embroidery after 1948 became a symbol of Palestinian identity and a declaration of provenance. In the coming decades, it

would regain its premise as a means for Palestinian women to sustain themselves and contribute towards local economies.

Despite this, the project comprehends that present-day complications facing the craft form are unprecedented in lieu of the sheer scale of cultural impressions effectuating from the transition to globally connected digital realities. The key challenge for Palestinian embroidery, respectively, has not been the loss of authenticity from a compulsion to reinvent, as is the likely scenario for other localised craft cultures facing a similar conundrum, but the inability to detach itself from what the research argues as veering narratives of visual mimesis. Such circumstances breed indifference towards nuance, which forms a key value proposition for the craft.

The threat of dissipation with regard to indigenous practices has been noted by authors like Ghnaim (2018). In her book documenting "tartreez" motifs and practices from her own family, the author states that after being dispersed into the diaspora, "the number of women who were experts and experienced in embroidery began to decrease", leading to it being considered "an endangered Art." Correspondingly, the author notes, "Our diaspora history is over 60 years old. Before this time, everyone could embroider, but Now, almost three generations since, almost all of them do not know how to embroider. If we don't continue to help the new generations do this, it will fade (Ulloa, 2020).

Therefore, unlike in the past when the craft's rootedness in Palestinian identity was enough to sustain social and economic relevance, there is a real possibility that unless sustained cultural mediation is instituted, its historical legacy and material intricacies may further recede in the public consciousness – with prejudicial socioeconomic and sociocultural implications for the craft and its tapering practice community. In response, the investigation seeks to explore and build upon potential complementarities with contemporary graphic design practice as a supportable framework for reinscription.

Issues surrounding remediation

During the first phase of the research, a number of systemic issues were noted regarding previous and ongoing remediation initiatives. A significant issue, as discussed earlier, pertains to a general lack of awareness about the meaning of many symbols and motifs constituting the iconography, despite the existence of courses and programs related to embroidery in public and private institutions. A manifestation of the same can be gauged from a recent but rampant permeation of 'intrusive inscriptions' into the craft from non-native cultures/cultural productions. The craft has historically imbibed influences from external cultures and civilizations; however, the process of reinterpretation was previously gradual and, importantly, dialogic, wherein the corresponding production was a tribute to the original idea rather than emulation.

Similarly, the introduction of computerised embroidery over the past decade has presented another challenge to the craft's individuality; however, the implementation has faced firm resistance from the practice community who have insisted on the exclusivity of the practice as a manual craft form, arguing that the motion is entirely unacceptable since it works to destroy the very foundation of the practice in furtherance of innovation.

Correspondingly, the lack of precise framing of the ambit of the associated iconography and limited interpretative taxonomy of the visual system (and corresponding sub-systems) are also causes of concern since it exposes the craft to the risk of cultural appropriation.

In lieu of its disposition as a design-led strategic intervention aimed at cultural sustainability, the project effectively falls into the remediation category; however, the standpoint of 'design' here is reflective. By building a holistic comprehension of the attached sensitivities through in-depth on-ground research, it seeks to address some of the concerns identified above and avoid the obvious pitfalls that have afflicted previous initiatives. Its central mission is, therefore, to develop articulation strategies and generative resources that secure continuity for the tradition without undermining the ipseity of the craft or the representation of its practice community.

Methodological approach

Primary research is being developed in close proximity with several communities of practice, particularly within the context of workshops and training centres run by state and non-profit organisations for purposes of expanding the practice base. A key collaborator in this regard has been the Inash Al-Usra Association which has been supporting the upkeep of the craft since 1965 and whose main motive is to preserve Palestinian identity and heritage by empowering women, who form its central pillar.

During the research process, the archives of the Palestinian Museum and the Birzeit University Museum have also been consulted, which include rare collections of traditional garments dating back to the mid-1800s. Another collaborator and a key source of information for the study has been the Palestinian Heritage Center, a hub for the embroidery industry before 1948, which currently possesses an extensive collection of handmade Palestinian dresses. Fieldwork with and within the mentioned entities is ongoing, and a further set of collaborators is under consideration. The main aims of the fieldwork are to create an image bank for visual analysis and gather information on semiotic and semantic derivations of the motifs and patterns represented in the iconography.

The project also emphasises sharing and discussing research findings with practising designers, which at present is an exploratory exercise towards generating ideas for implementation scenarios. In future phases, such interactions are expected to be more focused, especially taking into consideration the possibility of interpreting iconography as a situated system of visual identity in contemporary Palestinian graphic design.

Visual research, therefore, is an imperative component of the analysis and will be instrumental towards a number of corresponding research actions, such as deconstructing compositional elements and determining the levels of taxonomic hierarchy that can then inform the prospected construction of the visual identity system, and subsequently, integration of the craft form into graphic design practice and pedagogy.

Expected outcomes

The prospective outcomes include a visual archive bringing together imagery from a diverse group of primary and secondary sources consulted during the period of research. The project will correspondingly seek the possibility of making

the archives open access and expandable towards integrating further contributions from the community. The analysis of these visual resources, as described above, is expected to lead to an inferential understanding of the taxonomic structure of the craft and, subsequently, a proposal for considering iconography as a unique visual identity system. Finally, the study's main findings will inform and be disseminated through curricular resources developed and contextualised individually for graphic design education and industry in Palestine.

Discussion

Palestinian history is rich in detail. Symbols and traditions extend to past civilizations spanning hundreds of years. Many different societies ruled Palestine, and it has been a region of permanent conflict, provoking countless narratives of hope, grace, and glory that have enriched the culture and are reflected in its motifs and customs.

Restricting Palestinian embroidery and iconography to clothing or tourism products may be an economically viable practice for now. However, the role of embroidery as a way of life in Palestine needs further attention and activation, even in

the face of the challenges posed by globalisation. The adaptability of these patterns within localised and outward-facing discourses can be enhanced by strategic integration in everyday graphic design practice. It would help internal audiences to re-acknowledge the provenance of these motifs and their significance to Palestinian heritage and provide further visibility to the craft and its practitioners as knowledge and heritage assets.

Explaining and interpreting these symbols will encourage workers and youth to enter and learn the craft form while fostering a mutually advantageous dialogue between traditional and contemporary creative practices.

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