

Collecting Palestinian History:
Create, Construct, Refurbish
Requesting Grants &
Endowments at
The Palestinian Museum





Create, Construct, Refurbish: Grants and Endowments at the Palestinian Museum
Nicolina Gallo, 2023

Museum: [The Palestinian Museum](#)

Location: [Birzeit, West Bank, Palestine](#)

The Palestinian Museum is registered in Switzerland as a non-governmental association, with its primary department located in Birzeit. It is the forerunner of the Welfare Association, a London-based humanitarian non-profit focused on education and development in the West Bank and Gaza.

Brief Description of Museum Collection: Unlike many modern institutions, The Palestinian Museum operates exclusively on donations and does *not* have an Acquisitions Committee. However, their permanent collections are nonetheless composed of a vast kaleidoscope of diverse cultural heritage, artwork, historical materials, and a massive digital archive. Their hands-on interactive “[Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Question](#),” also known as [PALQUEST](#) and [The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive](#) make up the bulk of their online collection. PALQUEST highlights a chronology of specific critical milestones and organizations, governmental, judicial, and military related advancements, in addition to vital elements within pivotal sociocultural and socioeconomic events in Palestine history. Composed of personal memoirs and biographies of various academics, artisans, performers, political leaders, and other key Palestinian figures, the project also displays a host of materials dedicated to over 400 obliterated Palestinian villages that existed prior to 1948. The museum’s Digital Archive is an open-access, online catalogue that is frequently renewed with an increasing number of additional images, film materials, audio, and other archival components in an effort to create a permanent record impervious to sabotage or annexation. Set up primarily for scholars, artists, and other interested community members, the Digital Archive connects the international community to the museum through many institutional partners throughout Europe. The final prominent branch of the museum’s archival collections is the [Conservation for Digitization](#), a project created by a partnership between the museum and the British Library. To preserve over 3000 individual damaged paper materials valuable to the

museum, such as maps, journals, images, letters, and more, the initiative combined to support the first-ever effort to establish a leading paper-conservation studio in Palestine. According to the Director of Collections and Restoration Unit, Bahaa Jubeh, the most important pieces in the museum's collections consist of an assortment of original Palestinian political posters documenting particularly noteworthy moments in the state's history, as well as a compilation of older, significant, historical documents particular to the fundamental history of modern Palestine. Recently, the museum had the opportunity to exhibit a group of Tatreez, or traditional Palestinian embroidered costumes, primarily traditional dresses (thobes,) along with some bridal gowns, headdresses, and other embroidery. These were donated by the Committee for the Preservation of Palestinian Heritage. To make initial repairs to the collection, the museum has thus far secured a contribution of \$480K from the [Aliph Foundation, the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas](#).

Proposed Acquisition: The museum does not operate on any type of budget, thus their acquisitions are all obtained exclusively by endowment, donation, and gifts. Nevertheless, they are currently attempting to increase the Aliph Foundation's initial grant for additional noteworthy repairs to the embroidery collection. Mr. Jubeh stated the museum needs approximately \$200K more for additional necessary refurbishments to the costumes to securely store them over a long period of time. Also, a properly regulated storage area for the materials is equally essential. In conjunction with the material reconstructions needed for the embroidery, the museum also hopes to develop the first "regional hub of excellence to meet textile conservation needs and to provide best practices training." (Ditmars, 2022, para. 4) In this effort, they are partnering with the [Victoria & Albert Museum in London](#)

For their newly acquired embroidery collection the museum has thus far secured a grant of \$480K but to complete the project but need approximately \$200K more to complete the project. According to Mr. Jubeh the museum also hopes to develop the first "regional hub of excellence to meet textile conservation needs and to provide best practices training" (Ditmars, 2022, para. 4) Mr. Jubeh stated repairs to the dresses are necessary to securely store them over a long period of time. Additionally, a properly regulated storage area for the materials is equally essential. In total, the ultimate proposal is for an additional \$200K for repairs to the embroidery, the creation of an appropriately temperature-controlled storage area for the dresses, as well as to assist in the development of a textile conservation and restoration project.

Date of Object(s): There are more than 80 individual dresses. Six are most in need of refurbishment. Two of these are believed to date from the 1890s. These are the most valuable within the collection. There are 2 additional dresses and a larger piece of embroidered fabric believed to be a lower panel of a long skirt or other embroidered dress. With the exception of the aforementioned two, all of the dresses relevant to this paper are from the time period between 1920 - 1950.



1



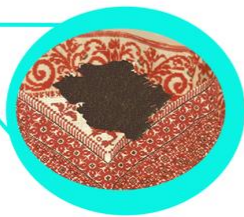
2



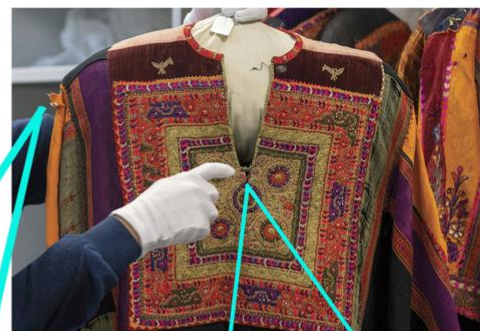
4



3



5



6



Dress 1 is hand woven with cotton, silk, and linen from 1930 with a significant stain on the right side. The pattern suggests it originated in Ramallah, and given the cotton fabric, it's comparably less valuable than the others, as cotton wasn't used in the embroidery until after the British began importing it.

Dress 2 is hand woven sheep's wool, silk, and linen from 1900 with a tear in the right sleeve's gold embroidery. Originating in Al Bireh and when refurbished, the dress is highly valuable.

Dress 3 is hand woven linen and silk from 1899, with a tear in the front embroidery panel. The origin is unknown, but, when restored, would be highly valuable.

Dress 4 is made of sheep's wool, with gold lined silk, date is unknown, with severe fraying on the right sleeve and a tear unraveling the silk embroidery. Given that this is a wedding dress, it's highly valuable despite the date being unknown.

Dress 5 is hand woven with sheep's wool and silk from 1890 with fraying and heavy staining on the right sleeve. This dress is heavy wool winter dress. The Museum couldn't confirm its origin, but it's presumed it originated in either Jericho or Nablus.

Dress 6 is made of sheep's wool, cotton, and gold silk from 1920, with damage to the front panel's gold silk threading and a tear on the right sleeve. The ornate threading suggests it originated in the Hebron area. Given that the dress has incorporated cotton, it's one of the lesser valuable in the collection.

Justification: The Palestinian Museum's Mission is "to support an open and dynamic Palestinian culture nationally and internationally. To present and engage with new perspective on Palestinian history, society, and culture, and to offer creative spaces for ventures, educational programs, and innovative research." (Palestine Museum, n.d) Their objective aims to create an authentic and essential culture of Palestine to inspire the various Palestinian communities and craft a sustainable identity for the portrayal of their history. These dresses represent a critical and fundamentally important point in the area's sociocultural history. They are the nucleus of the very definition of the museum's mission. The dresses were generously donated by the Committee for the Preservation of Palestinian Heritage (CCPH) with an expectation that the museum would care for and maintain them to the best of our ability. The organization is one of several that helped to craft their current reality. The CCPH graciously held onto these dresses after they initially arrived in the US in 1987 for an exhibition that never happened. After managing to purchase the collection (with some of the members even mortgaging their homes for the sale,) they were then meticulously gathered and safely stored for the next 30 years. (Prentis, 2020) Now, thanks to a crowd-funding campaign, the CCPH was able to return them home where the Aliph Foundation then supplied a substantial grant of \$Restoring the areas of damage to the dresses is essential, particularly in those from the late 19th century. These fabrics become more and more delicate as they age, and prior to securing them in appropriate storage they should be refurbished while preserving the original material as much as possible. Repairing the embroidery is particularly delicate as it's not only made of very fine silk, but it is also intricately wound in elaborate designs that can easily unravel. Specific expertise in some cases may be required to properly restore this type of damage. Additionally, UNESCO has added Palestinian Embroidery, or Tatreez, to the intangible cultural heritage in 2022. (UNESCO, 2022, para. 3) Thus, it is even more vital that they are protected and preserved.

There are three organizations to which they could potentially reach with this appeal: the Alif Foundation, the organization that already granted the \$480, 298.00 that they are currently working with. This foundation focuses on prevention of damage and destruction, safeguarding from threats of destruction, and crisis measures of “post-conflict actions to enable local populations to once again enjoy their cultural heritage.” (Alif Foundation, n.d) Blue Shield International, is an NGO established to become the “cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.” (ICOMOS, n.d) They act to protect international cultural heritage from threats amidst armed conflict and secured after events of natural disasters. Additionally, the UNESCO’s Fund for the Protection of Cultural Property offers amounts anywhere from \$15,000 to \$50,000 in “financial as well as technical assistance in relation to emergency, provisional or other measures to protect cultural property during armed conflict, or for immediate recovery after the end of hostilities in the event of armed conflict.” (UNESCO, 2021, para. 1) To remain available to represent and signify the crucial role they now serve as components of cultural heritage, the greatest care possible must be provided. After careful assessment of the services and conditions required, it has been determined that not only will textile experts and restoration specialists likely be needed, but the process will also necessitate some construction of appropriate storage. Modification of several current facilities within the museum has been determined to be both the most ideal and most cost-effective route. Installation of temperature and humidity regulation controls, in addition to instituting the groundwork for protection from UV-light damage and acquiring appropriate physical storage receptacles are the primary areas of need. The museum is incredibly appreciative of the grant that they have already been provided for the initial needs the new collection and they subsequently feel an obligation to deliver the foremost custody and administration of both the garments *and* their new permanent housing. Unfortunately, despite the museum having several substantial storage facilities, they require some additional specialized framework installations to accomplish this goal. Minimal additional building will be necessary, but the services, provisions, labor, and expertise still required to create the most exemplary conditions possible for these precious items of cultural heritage is beyond the means of our humble institution. They aim to subsequently create the first textile education and exhibition facility in Palestine to allow the Palestinian people and our guests to explore our rich cultural heritage. Within this endeavor, they are striving to ultimately create a hub for Palestinian embroidery as a learning space wherein the creators in our community can feel safe to design, restore, and pass along this inestimable cultural tradition. The Palestinian Museum is consistently striving to strengthen the determination of our people, reconnect our fragmented communities, They reinforce global awareness of Palestinian culture, humanity, and our national prospects. They believe they have a duty to document, protect, advance, and incorporate both the intangible and the tangible elements of our heritage toward our community here in the homeland and across the world. They hope to provide inspirational learning opportunities that deepen and diversify our museum’s visitor base; develop our institution’s partnerships and improve our collaborations to maximize community participation and our global contribution; and ultimately aspire to sustain clear and unique solutions to effectively and completely encourage and maintain a living presence as a cultural institution for Palestine. Following through with the repairs the dresses and fabrics need, and construction of appropriate supplementary storage would allow for the museum to continue leading, safeguarding, and sustaining the special tradition of this region’s embroidery and enable us to act as a future haven in precisely the manner that our mission empowers us and with the support, they need to take us into the future.

Provenance: The dresses were originally owned by Abd al-Samih Abu Omar, a collector and antique dealer from Jerusalem. In 1987, he traveled to the US for what was to be an exhibit of his

approximately 80 individual dresses at a DC based museum. However, after arriving Mr. Abu Omar realized that the museum had closed. At that point, a group of Palestinian and Arab women, determined to secure the beautiful and valuable heritage, formed the Committee for the Preservation of Palestinian Heritage, and managed to purchase Mr. Abu Omar's entire collection. (One of the women even mortgaged her home to do this!) (Prentis, 2020, para. 1) Mr. Abu Omar is also a specialist in Palestinian Embroidery and published [Traditional Palestinian Embroidery and Jewelry](#) in 1986. Some of the dresses in the Palestinian Museum's current collection are featured in Mr. Abu Omar's publication. Baha Jubeh, the curator at the Palestinian Museum was unable to provide me with detailed provenance records. Though he indicated that there is a research team currently looking into every one of the dresses. Many are identifiable by their patterns, though confirming which familial lines they stemmed from is another matter. There is more detailed information on the provenance within the email exchange that I provided in the attachment.

Legal and Ethical Considerations:

Mr. Jubeh pointed out several pertinent issues. Some legal considerations could potentially be: cultural property laws relating to ownership, provenance, import and export; liability and appropriate insurance for the collection, as well as responsible collection practices such as creating and maintaining proper storage, preserving as much of the original collection as possible while also maintaining it in good condition, ensuring transparency by publishing information about their funding sources. Verifying that work done to create suitable storage doesn't unduly redirect resources that may be needed elsewhere. Maintaining fair labor practices. Assuring that their use of the funds is appropriate given other needs that may exist because of the conflict. Confirming they accept only funds after careful review of their source and confirmation that no affiliated conflicts of interest exist. They should continually operate with their mission as the core of their activities.

Palestinian Museum Exhibition History: -Going from most recent to earliest available:

From October 2022 to January 2023: *Labor of Love,* "an exhibit of Palestinian History. This was a traveling exhibition that toured the surrounding MENA regions. It was an exhibition of a portion of the Embroidered Dresses – those in good condition. Baha Jubeh is curator, and the exhibit traversed the sociocultural history of Palestine, as seen through Tatreez (Palestinian Embroidery). Various periods within the nation's history were outlined within the multiple realms of the embroidery. From personal to national and from domestic to celebratory, the numerous roles the embroidery has played throughout the centuries of Palestine's cultural heritage were displayed through the beauty of these ancestral gowns. (Palestine Museum, n.d)

غَزْلُ الْعُرُوق
LABOUR OF LOVE

حياكة تاريخ
فلسطين
EMBROIDERING
PALESTINIAN HISTORY



معرض مستضاف من المتحف الفلسطيني
A Palestinian Museum Travelling Exhibition

From September of 2021 until June of this year: *Palestine – A People by the Sea*

This is a comprehensive exhibit, focused on the many geographical areas of the land, their individual societies, the history of their cultural development, with an exploration of agriculture, architecture, politics, and art. The exhibit featured photographs, videos, and most of all, narratives that connect the many people, now dispersed throughout the world, within this one incredibly vibrant and distinct identity. This exhibit was curated by Innass Yassin and Ahmad Al Aqra (Palestine Museum, n.d)



From 2020 until the museum's re-opening in September of 2021, Dr. Adila Laidi-Hanieh, a former Birzeit University professor and the founder of the one-of-kind Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center became the museum's

appointed Director General in 2018. She was subsequently key in creating the framework for the first five years of the museum's exhibits, (Morelli, 2019, para. 2-4) As of 2020, due to the COVID19 pandemic, she formulated an entirely online exhibit, building up their extensive online library and many online exhibits. Her work remains available and is continually updated to this day. The forefront of the online exhibits was: *Museum From Home – Palestine Preserves*, a virtually exhibition consisting of video narratives, images, historical documents, artwork, political posters, and photos, in addition to an exceptionally unique tool, where visitors were encouraged to share their own thoughts and experiences on Palestine and its history – with some even being integrated into the exhibit.

Even before the pandemic, the museum had already formulated its incredibly diverse and extensive online platforms: the [Palestinian Museum Digital Archive](#) and *Palestinian Journey*, respectively. This was a joint venture with the *Institute for Palestine Studies* and was developed in English and Arabic covering the area and people's history from the 4th Century to the present day. This is the zenith of their exhibitions and includes chronologies, official documents, photographs, journals, past newspaper articles, sketches, and a myriad of artwork in other amazing digital repositories. From 2017 until present: The museum's longest-lasting exhibit has been *Jerusalem Lives*, a 3D tour of Jerusalem. (Detaile, 2020, para 8-10)

Interpretive Analysis of Aliph Foundation Grant

The \$480K Aliph Foundation grant is not only financial relief but also a development opportunity for acquisition-related solutions that will shape the long-term stewardship of the museum and its embroidery collection. Using refurbishment & preservation techniques, I suggest the following:

- **Textile stabilization:** Employ conservation stitching and fine net overlays to preserve fragile silk embroidery without over-restoring.
- **Fiber-safe cleaning methods:** Use micro-suction and deionized water baths for stain removal where applicable, ensuring minimal fiber stress.
- **Thread and dye analysis:** Apply spectroscopy and fiber microscopy to identify original materials, guiding selection of appropriate conservation threads.

For the museum's environmental storage solutions, I propose:

- **Regulatory compliance:** Align storage upgrades with ISO 11799 (archival storage requirements) and the textile recommendations outlined in FADGI (Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative)
- **Climate control:** Maintain consistent temperature (18–20°C) and relative humidity (50% ±5%), with HEPA filtration to reduce airborne pollutants.
- **Light management:** Use UV-filtered LED lighting and restrict exposure during display to <50 lux for historic textiles.
- **Storage furniture:** Acquire inert, acid-free storage cases and padded textile supports, ensuring flat storage of dresses to prevent structural stress.

Utilizing provenance strategies, I suggest the following recommendations:

- **Enhanced provenance research:** Cross-reference dress patterns with historic publications (e.g., Abu Omar's Traditional Palestinian Embroidery and Jewelry) and oral histories.
- **Digital cataloging:** Incorporate detailed metadata using CIDOC-CRM standards for cultural heritage objects.
- **Transparency measures:** Publish provenance records online to enhance scholarly access and mitigate disputes.

The ethical implications of the associated material deterioration require a delicate balance between authenticity and intervention so that the repairs don't compromise the historical integrity of the original material. Equitable stewardship should be ensured with labor practices and sourcing of conservation materials that adhere to fair-trade and ethical procurement standards. All affiliated decisions should honor the CCPH's role and involve community dialogue, maintaining the garments' symbolic weight as the national identity markers they are.

By leveraging the Aliph Foundation's grant with acquisition-focused solutions, the museum positions itself to not only restore these textiles but to create a regional benchmark for textile conservation. This project will enhance global awareness of Palestinian heritage, safeguard fragile artifacts under internationally recognized preservation frameworks, and set a precedent for ethical stewardship in conflict-affected regions.

Conclusion:

Overall, the Palestinian Museum is a unique institution atypical of the academic and artistic worlds. It stands out within the world of cultural heritage as precariously balancing that fine line between truth in reality and fantasy in imagination. In a world where life is singularly dangerous, the museum represents the most fundamental quality in the people of Palestine: endurance. It symbolizes the timeless nature of their civilization within the era of history wherein life is decidedly brief. The museum is filled with generosity and amazing collections, infinite stories, and the picture of a people perched at the very tip between life and death. The acquisition process at the Palestinian Museum is, like everything associated with them, distinctly different than your average US-based or European museum. Involving a significant number of endowments and donations, the process is also one of immense value. The process, like most matters associated with Palestine, is integrated with more than simple economic strategy; it's a framework with international organizations and a complex set of international and national standards, institutional and cultural mores, and a social obligation to properly care for priceless collection items within the middle of a war zone. But as with all things Palestinian, it is an endeavor infused, more than anything, with heart, and commitment, to create an invaluable space for collections, rich in history, heritage, and clearly, home.

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