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A life, stitched in time

JULY 11, 2018 | DANIELLE VERMETTE(HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/AUTHOR/DANIELLE-VERMETTE/)

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I had the great pleasure recently to meet with Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim (https://feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com/), the master traditional embroiderer and newly named national folk art fellow, to discuss her life and work. Feryal, who was born in Palestine and lives in Milwaukie, Oregon, is one of nine artists named last month as winners of the 2018 National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship (https://www.arts.gov/news/2018/national-endowment-arts-announces-2018-national-heritage-fellows), the highest form of recognition for folk and traditional artists by the United States government. She received this tremendous distinction for her lifetime of work in the centuries-old art form of Palestinian traditional embroidery, or tatreez, which features detailed cross-stitch designs and adorns clothing, pillows, and wall hangings.

Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, in her Milwaukie home, with memories on the wall. Photo: Danielle Vermette

When I arrived at her home I was unsure of which entrance to use, and my misstep left me a little jangled. But once ushered inside by Carrie Kikel from the Oregon Arts Commission and Oregon Cultural Trust, who joined us for our conversation, I quickly fell under Feryal's spell. Soft-spoken, thoughtful, exceedingly kind, and with an uncanny ability to hear the questions within a question, Feryal offered a master class in her fascinating and endangered folk art form and a generous and moving look at her history and culture.

Feryal was born in Safad, Palestine, but never had an opportunity to grow up in her homeland. Forced from Safad in 1948 with nothing more than the clothing they wore, she and her family members were lucky to survive the harrowing event known as al-Nakba, sometimes called "the great catastrophe," when more than 700,000 Palestinians were exiled. The psychic losses persist to this day, and the dispossession's impact on Palestinian heritage remains unfathomable to most of us and truly incalculable to the culture.

"I was two years old," Feryal said, describing what her parents endured on that day. "They carry me all the way walking from Safad and we went to the nearest border of another country, walking three days and they did not take anything. It was raining. It was wet. They are soaking, and it was miserable." From that day forward, Feryal has identified as a Palestinian in diaspora, a word that sounded lovely as it rolled from her tongue—a terrible irony, I thought, how the word's melody was so incongruous to its meaning.

“This is what refugee means,” she said, explaining that the embroidery patterns passed down from mother to daughter for generations lay abandoned in houses that, after 1948, most would never see again. “We all lost everything in our life at the sudden. Imagine your house were taken by someone, every belonging, you can either leave or be killed, so what is your reaction to be?”

“My Family Tree after the 1948 al Nakbah,” tapestry and embroidery, 1991. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

The evidence of Feryal’s reaction can be seen adorning the walls, table, and furniture in the sitting area of her Milwaukie home. The evening I met her she wore a colorful, intricately embroidered vest and skirt. Also on display was her passion to keep this endangered folk art alive, a determination that accounts for her lifetime of mentoring younger generations and carrying forward the stories, skill, and history of the embroidery: “After diaspora, my daughters were born here; if I don’t teach them, they won’t know anything. Many people have to go to other countries, they don’t have time to do these things. That is why we call endangered art.”

As with many folk arts that are on the brink of extinction, modern life also plays a role in the fading of the form. People “can buy something from market made on a machine,” Feryal said. The knowledge of how to make things “started to fade a little bit; that is why I am trying to bring them to life again. The ones that I know. They are

limited. Since I came to America, I didn't see anyone else who knew them. It is sad that those women who created these, they died. I have lots of book about embroidery, none would mention what I am telling you about. They would just show you pictures."

Of the 431 NEA Heritage Fellows who have been honored since 1982, Feryal is the ninth from Oregon. She and the eight other 2018 winners each receive a $25,000 monetary award, and will be honored in a September 26 ceremony in Washington, D.C. A concert in their honor will be streamed live on September 28. This is the highest official honor Feryal has received, but there have been many others acknowledging her artistry and her key role in keeping a cultural tradition alive. Feryal has been named a Master of Traditional Arts and Culture Keeper by the University of Oregon's traditional arts program (formerly known as the Oregon Folk Life Program), and has been honored by the Oregon Arts Commission, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Oregon Historical Society. She has been the recipient of four Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program Awards, and her face brightens when she speaks of each student with whom she has worked, her daughters among them. Young women often travel long distances to learn from Feryal, and she has a waitlist of potential students eager to work with her. Even though their backgrounds and circumstances differ, the mentees seem to be answering a call they feel to connect with Palestinian culture and identity. Mastering the cross-stitch is likely the least of what they will take away from Feryal.

A panel from one of Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim's thoubs, or embroidered dresses. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

The traditionally embroidered garments are aesthetically pleasing, but their attractiveness and utility tell only a portion of the tale. More fascinating is that each pattern narrates its own story — "each dress has its own name," Feryal said. She described a design known as the "Mother/Daughter-in-Law," which depicts two birds at first facing each other and then facing back-to-back to indicate discord between a mother and her new daughter-in-law who would now be living in her house. Feryal offered an example of how this pattern would've been personalized by telling a story about her grandmother, who had a friend in a nearby village whose son had recently wed. Unable to send a letter (women did not write at that time), she sent a pillowcase with this pattern as a "gift" with her husband, and asked him to deliver it to her friend. Understanding the question immediately, Feryal's grandmother's friend embroidered back her response quickly — two birds facing back to back, indicating that there was a rift in the family.

Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, summer satin thoub. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

Feryal eagerly offered another pattern, one that demonstrated the pride Palestinian women felt for the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra (Feryal learned the story and dress of Cleopatra from her grandmother). "Women were considered half-minded. Or even less than half-minded," according to Feryal, so "the Palestinian women were proud of Cleopatra." Remarking on the different symbols on the fabric, she added, "This part shows how they are describing Cleopatra. Here is the crown … symbol of power. High heel … symbol of beauty. Here's face with jewelry … symbol of wealth. And here is the diamond in her ring which inside it has compartment where she put the poison in there, because when they attacked her she is prepared to suicide … better than them taking her all around Rome in chains."

The women who embroidered these visual tales were adept at communicating their external circumstances and their inner lives, with nothing more than thread and imagination. Little did their husbands comprehend the full bounty of their deliveries when their wives asked them to shuttle embroideries back and forth among the women in different villages.

Feryal's curiosity to embroider began as a toddler, when she and her five sisters watched and listened to her mother and grandmother embroider and tell stories. She learned to embroider in earnest when she was seven. Traditional Palestinian embroidery is not an art form that lends itself to improvisation. Due to the complexity and symmetry of the patterns, significant thought and preparation must go into every project, and projects may take years to complete. The traditional dress patterns exist already. The personal embellishment comes from other considerations, such as fabric selection and thread color. "The older women would know everything," Feryal explained. "If I want to make a dress, for example, the designs are already. It should be transferred from mother to daughter and so on … we have the designs from our ancestors."

Art to wear: Feryal's work in action. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

Not only was information conveyed through the "messages" stitched on each pattern or design, but every decision made about a traditional garment, from the fabric selection to the placement of the embroidery—even the color of embroidery thread—at one time carried a surprising amount of information, such as the woman's marital status, social standing, and overall situation. Today, with so many Palestinians in diaspora, there is no strict allegiance to the traditional rules. Different considerations, such as the occasion and the skill level of the embroiderer, compel the choices instead.

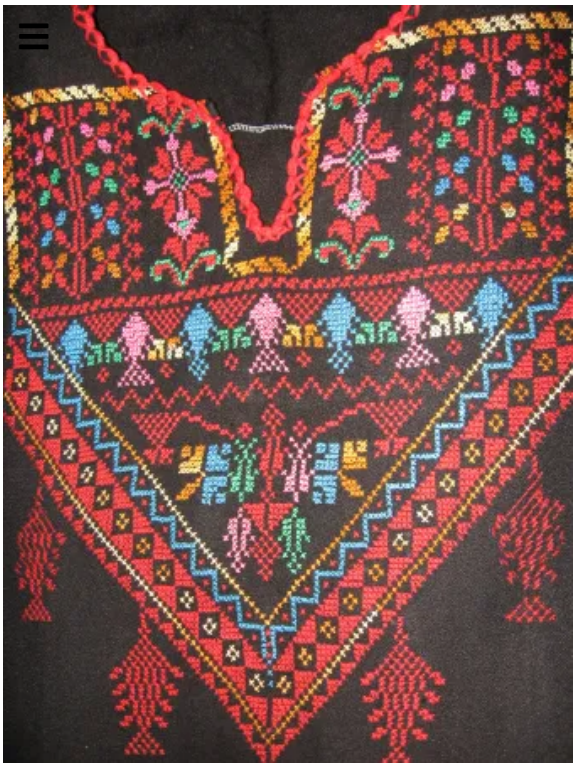
The fabrics used for Palestinian embroidery vary, depending on the piece one is creating (a dress, wall hanging, pillow, etc.) and its purpose. Embroiderers assemble traditional dresses (thobes) for many occasions, such as marriage, mourning, and the announcement of impending motherhood. Some common fabrics include: cotton, etamin, burlap, silk, velvet, and aida. In Islam, to draw the human body is considered a sin, so the patterns represent animals and objects by cross-stitching geometrical shapes, although there are no differences in the designs by Muslim or Christian Palestinians, and Muslims and Christians often practice embroidery side by side. The patterns, stitched on different panels, are symmetrical, complex, and exquisite in detail. For example, a dress that Feryal completed with her daughters came to be known as "the dress of a million stitches" and spent time on display in former Governor John Kitzhaber's office. Feryal suggested that the stitch count far exceeded one million, and probably more accurately neared the multi-millions.

Menajel seam stitch. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

While many of the traditional designs were influenced by nature—flowers, vegetables, animals—some were political, a silent form of opposition created by women who felt powerless to express views or inform policy. Consider Feryal's description of a dress called "The Missiles," which details a period in Palestine after World War I. Feryal pointed out each section of the pattern as she told me the story: "The British mandated Palestine and French mandated Syria and Lebanon. This will effect tradition. Instead of making flowers, (embroiderers) started documenting the events. British brought weapons and those weapons affected the people. They are destructive. They ruin everything. Everything was peaceful but now there are new weapons. Women wanted to demonstrate those weapons. They put them on the dresses. The dresses have missiles." Feryal showed me the geometric missiles. "It shows destruction. The trees are upside down, meaning everything … nature … was different where the missiles … but they also put further away some flowers because they are away from the missiles. But it shows exactly how the women thought at that period of time."

"Every tradition in embroidery has its own stories," Feryal replied when I asked how Palestinian embroidery differs from embroidery elsewhere. "When I look at Native American, as example, there are some colors that they use, so I recognize more than other colors. Like Czech Republic, they have embroidery, also different. We use cross-stitch, maybe they use another stitch with the color with designs, maybe they do geometrical designs, still different than … so, all of that together, and also the places on the dress. Czech, they like to put them around the skirt …"

After exile, Feryal's family settled for a time in Syria and then Jordan, where Feryal eventually attended boarding school and was further encouraged by an art teacher who gave her free reign to use the art department anytime she wanted. Beginning in 1964, through the United Nations Relief and Work Agency, she taught English and arts and crafts to middle school children.



Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, chest part of a thoub. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

Feryal's daughter, Wafa Ghnaim, published *Tatreez & Tea (https://tatreezandtea.com/),* a beautiful book about her own journey as a Palestinian in diaspora born in the United States and trying to reconcile identity and heritage. In it, Wafa documents her mother's journey extensively, while also offering patterns for tatreez and beloved family recipes for tea, noting that both tatreez and tea are fundamental to Palestinian culture and history. She describes the difficulty her mother faced teaching refugee children: how they were constantly drawing pictures of war implements, of planes dropping bombs, and the visible devastation the children had undergone; how they were robbed of childhoods and lacked the opportunities we often associate with children. Perhaps it was during this formative period that Feryal began to see her art and her advocacy for peace as two sides of the same coin.

Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, back panel of a thoub. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

In 1968, Feryal and her family moved back to Damascus after her father's death. She attended the university there and began teaching in a junior high school, where she continued after graduating. For a time she supported her family while her brother completed medical school, an accomplishment she is proud of. All of her siblings had an opportunity for an education. In 1975, she completed her Bachelor of Art and History at Damascus University while working full-time and continuing embroidery and painting. During this period, Feryal completed a painting

project involving thirteen life-sized panels showcasing traditional village costumes, only to discover later that the pieces were destroyed or lost in transit to a museum in Baghdad. She is working currently to recreate these as embroideries.

She left Damascus for Amman in 1976 and began working in the revenue department for Royal Jordanian airlines in 1977, where she met and married her husband, Mohammad, in 1979. The couple immigrated to New York in 1980 to continue graduate studies. After four months they moved to Boston, where Feryal joined the Oral History Center of Cambridge and eventually met Cindy Cohen, with whom she co-led a workshop series and a sponsored exhibition titled *A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Woman*. The project was groundbreaking and controversial. It featured the artwork of eight women, including Feryal's, and toured nationally. In 1985, the Women's Peace Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, featured Feryal's "Dove of Peace" tapestry, which depicts a woman releasing a dove with an envelope in its mouth. A zippered pocket contains a message written in Arabic and English: "Sitting down with people is the only peace. We are mothers and fathers and children—we have had enough dying. I ask you for true peace."

"A Letter to the Women of the World," tapestry, 1985. Photo courtesy Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, feryalabbasighnaim.wordpress.com

Frightened by the death threats that resulted from her peace advocacy work in Boston, Feryal and her family relocated to Oregon in 1989, where they have since remained, in the same neighborhood, the same house. This journey, with eerily distant echoes of her journey as a two-year-old that also lasted three days and many miles, brought Feryal and her three young daughters to Oregon by bus. Feryal laughed as she recounted the arduous bus ride, while I marveled at her tenacity and courage attempting such a far journey on her own with only the uncomfortable pleas of three young children to keep her company, while her husband remained in Boston to wrap up work.

When I asked Feryal how she liked Oregon, she responded with exuberance, citing the lush greenery, the kindness of neighbors and families, and the moderate temperatures (which bring to mind her Palestine; the Oregon climate has even afforded a beloved quince tree that grows in her back yard). Feryal and her family have indeed made a remarkable life here. She has family here, and friends throughout the greater Portland area, many of whom live on the west side, closer to the mosques. As I think of her, though, imagining her near a window on some quiet Oregon morning – for natural light is necessary for one's eyes with tatreez — I am filled with an overwhelming sadness as I consider the one thing so many of us take for granted every day: home.

In the final picture I snapped of Feryal, behind her on the wall you can see a Palestinian flag, a wooden carved map, a mosaic of a plant, a strand of red lights, and a key to her parents' house in Safad. Most Palestinians who fled in 1948 locked their doors when they left, hoping one day to return. Feryal has heard that her parents' house still stands, and she keeps the key as a symbol of hope and home. On her person as she speaks is a beautifully embroidered red vest. "We use red because it says love — the love — and we Palestinians, we like to live," Feryal said. "We love each other. We love people."

Feryal the artist, hands at work. Photo: Danielle Vermette

Danielle Vermette (https://www.orartswatch.org/author/danielle-vermette/)

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Danielle Vermette is a writer and actor. She arrived in Portland in 1998 with a BFA in theatre from the University of Central Missouri and has been an Imago Theatre company member since 1999, appearing in a dozen shows and touring nationally and internationally for many years in Imago's show Frogz. She was a student in PSU's MFA fiction program and writes fiction, poetry and non-fiction. She works in the Abdominal Organ Transplant Department at OHSU as the Hepatobiliary Coordinator.

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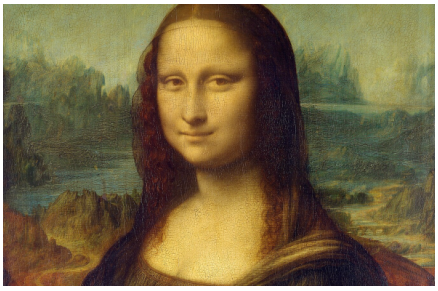

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