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Palestinian embroidery is Oregon artist's link to the past

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By [Samantha Swindler](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Some 6,800 miles from Palestine, [Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim](#) is keeping the culture of her homeland alive – in thread.

She's taught Palestinian hand-embroidery to her three daughters and to people across the U.S. Now, she's being honored for her lifetime of work.



Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim in her home.

Abbasi-Ghnaim, 73, of Milwaukie is one of nine recipients this year of the [National Heritage Fellowship](#) from the National Endowment for the Arts. The program honors folk and traditional arts "supporting ethnic and cultural diversity as a [national strength of character](#)."

She's only the eighth Oregonian to receive the fellowship since the program began in 1982. She'll receive a \$25,000 prize and a trip to the awards ceremony Sept. 26 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.



Embroidery is the art of decorating or reinforcing fabric with thread. For Palestinian women, it formed the basis of their social fabric as well. Techniques and patterns were passed down from mothers to daughters at a time when many women could not read or write, or rarely left the home.

"It's an unwritten language, it's transferred from woman to woman in silence," Abbasi-Ghnaim said. "But of course, every pattern, everything, has a story behind it."



In traditional Palestinian homes, one will find embroidery on everything: dresses, belts, bags, pillows, curtains and wall hangings. Pieces often incorporate shades of red: the color of life and love. There are common designs and motifs – snakes, flowers, a pattern called the “Tree of Life.”

There’s “The Mother and the Daughter-in-Law,” depicting two birds sharing a nest in harmony, and two birds turning away from each other in discord. A design called “The Missile” was used to document the British takeover of Palestine in the 1920s.



Feryal, second from the right, with her family in 1952.

Abbasi-Ghnaim learned embroidery from her mother and grandmother. Even as young as age 2, she remembers the feel of her mother's embroidery and being curious to learn more. By age 7, she was practicing tiny "X" stitches with a plastic needle. At age 9, she completed her first piece, with a peacock design.

"I was very proud, of course," she said. "I showed it to everybody, I took it to school and showed the teacher and the girls."



Abbasi-Ghnaim was born in Safed in northern Palestine – an area that is now part of Israel. She was 2 when her family fled the Arab-Israeli War in 1948.

She still has the antique key that once unlocked her family's Safed home. It hangs on the wall of her crafting room, next to a Palestinian flag.

“They thought they were coming back,” she said. “But they haven't after 70 years.”

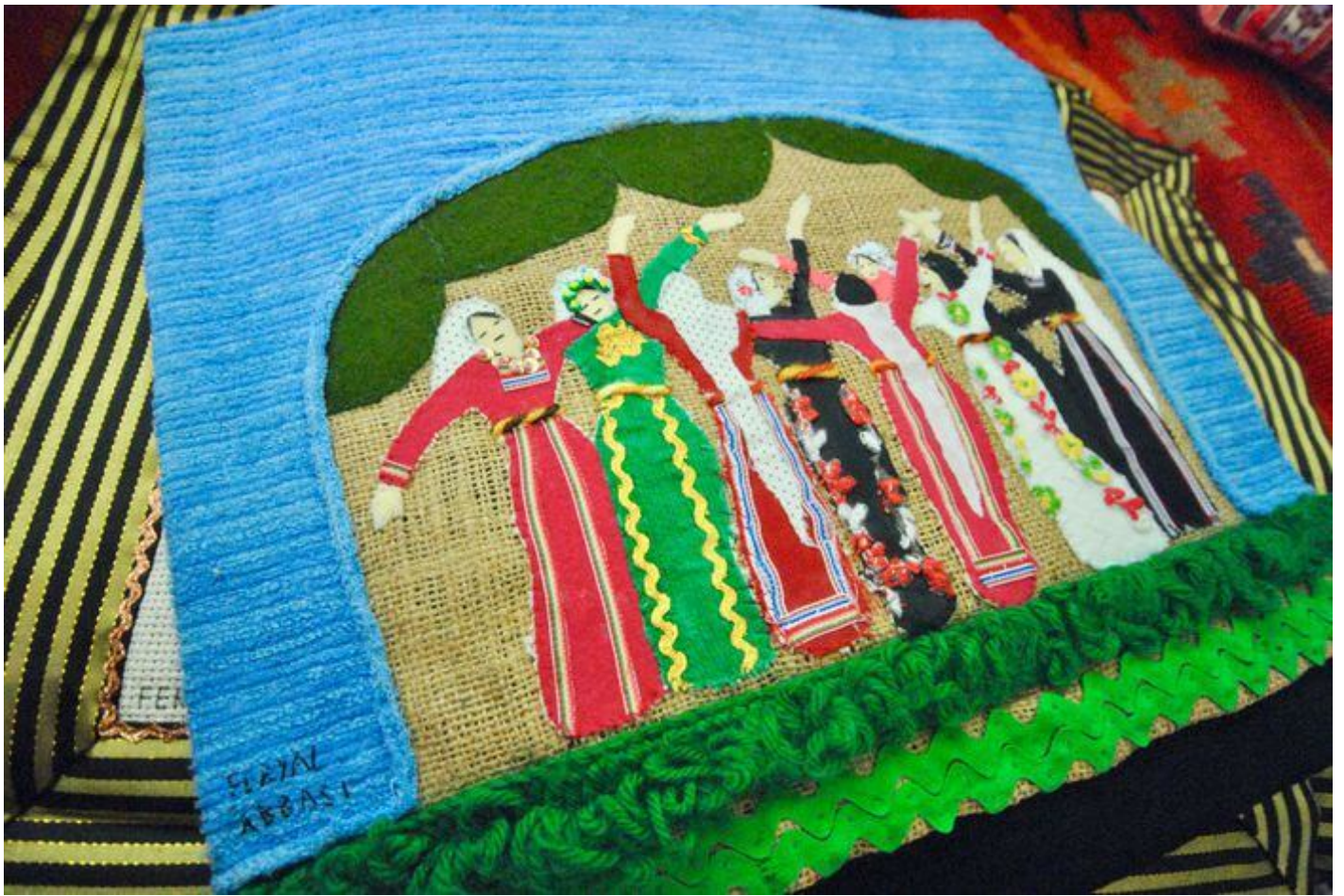


Dolls in traditional clothing.

Her family fled first to Syria and later, in 1952, to Irbid, Jordan, where Abbasi-Ghnaim spent most of her childhood.

As a teenager, Abbasi-Ghnaim taught art and embroidery to children in a United Nations Relief Works Agency [Palestinian refugee camp](#). She was inspired to study art history at Damascus University, with an interest in preserving Palestinian culture.

"We lost our land. We lost our houses," she said. But the artistic tradition? "We are trying to hold tight onto it."



In 1980, while pregnant with her first daughter, Abbasi-Ghnaim immigrated to America. She and her husband settled in Boston. Far from family, embroidery remained a way for Abbasi-Ghnaim to connect to her culture.

In Massachusetts, Abbasi-Ghnaim worked with the Oral History Center of Cambridge and co-created a project called "Passion for Life," sharing stories of Jewish and Palestinian women.



In 1985, one of her tapestries was displayed at the World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya. It was a call for peace, showing a woman with a Palestinian flag flowing from her hair reaching up past barbed wire borders to a white dove.

Abbasi-Ghnaim said she doesn't like to talk about the conflict that forced her family from their home. And yet, the diaspora of the Palestinian people is a recurring theme in her needlework.

"Do you think you'll see peace in your lifetime?" I asked.

"I doubt because am not young enough now," she said. "I doubt, but I hope."



After the family moved to Oregon in 1989, Abbasi-Ghnaim signed up for the [Oregon Folklife Network's](#) Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. As a master folk artist, she taught her daughters, as well as other teens and young women, the art of embroidery.

"If we don't bring it back to life, we will lose it," she said.



With the help of her daughters, then in their teens, Abbasi-Ghnaim created a traditional long dress called a thobe, intricately embroidered with flowers and vines. Five hearts around the collar represent Abbasi-Ghnaim, her husband and their three daughters. Four hearts at the foot of the dress symbolize the women who constructed it.

They worked on the dress, titled "The Gardens," over the course of two years. When it was complete, it went on display in the Oregon State Capitol as "the dress of a million stitches."



It was important to Abbasi-Ghnaim that her daughters learn the art of embroidery.

“My daughters were born here in America, and I wanted to teach them about our heritage, our background,” Abbasi-Ghnaim said. “Everybody in America, they’re looking for their background, who they are. I want, while I am alive, to show my kids who they are and what is their heritage.”



The tradition is certainly alive in her middle daughter, Wafa Ghnaim, who travels the country leading workshops on Palestinian-style embroidery. She authored the book "[Tatreez & Tea](#)," "tatreez" being the Arabic word for embroidery. Part biography, part tutorial, the book contains stitching patterns and family recipes, mixed with stories from her mother's life.

Tradition held that only the girls learned embroidery. At the time, that was because girls rarely went to school and were kept at home. But times are changing.

Ghnaim has a son, now 18 months, to whom she plans to teach the art.

After all, it's his heritage.

-- *Samantha Swindler*

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