

CULTURE

Wafa Ghnaim Uses the Traditional Craft of *Tatreez* to Preserve and Share Palestinian History

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Wafa Ghnaim Photo: Carlos Khalil Guzman

There's a photograph of Wafa Ghnaim, as a toddler, helping pull the excess canvas from her mother's embroidery project. In the photo, which was taken in Massachusetts, she's the same age that her mother, Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim, was in 1948, when a radio broadcast told her family to leave their home in the mountain village of Safad, near the Sea of Galilee, for a few days. Thinking they'd be back, Ghnaim's grandparents left behind their nicest clothes, including dresses intricately embroidered with *tatreez*, traditional Palestinian cross-stitch. When it became clear that they wouldn't be returning home anytime soon, Abbasi-Ghnaim's mother and grandmother began teaching her the techniques, and the stories, behind each of the embroidery patterns. In turn, Abbasi-Ghnaim passed the tradition down to her three daughters.



Wafa Ghnaim, as a toddler, working on a tatreez project. Photo: courtesy Wafa Ghnaim

Today, [Ghnaim](#) has carried the tradition even further—passing her knowledge of tatreez down to thousands of students across North America. The author of *Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora*, an oral history of her family and the tatreez patterns her mother passed down, Ghnaim currently teaches workshops at the [Smithsonian Museum](#) and serves as an [artist in residence](#) at the [Museum of the Palestinian People](#) in Washington, D.C. She’s also hard at work on her second book, documenting tatreez patterns in the collections of major museums and private collections. For her, teaching tatreez is a way to preserve her family’s culture and humanize the Palestinian experience.

“If you know nothing about Palestinians besides what you’ve heard on the news and you attend one of my classes, you will have just stitched with me for two or three hours and heard my stories,” Ghnaim says. “There’s a humanity there.”

The story of how Ghnaim and her mother became two of the world's leading guardians of tatreez tracks closely alongside Palestinians' history. Abbasi-Ghnaim was just a toddler when her family left their home and walked to the Jordanian border, during what Palestinians call the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe"), following the 1948 war of the end of the British Mandate for Palestine. A bus took them the rest of the way to Damascus, Syria, where they lived for a few years before joining family in Irbid, Jordan. In Jordan, Abbasi-Ghnaim's mother and grandmother began embroidering again and Abbasi-Ghnaim started learning tatreez in the school she attended, run by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). She still has the first project she ever finished: a peacock she embroidered in the first or second grade.

By the time Abbasi-Ghnaim graduated from school, she was an expert embroiderer working on her first *thobe*, a dress decorated with a wheat pattern, which she would eventually pass down to Ghnaim. When her father died unexpectedly, Abbasi-Ghnaim started working as a teacher in the refugee camps to support her family, teaching tatreez to Palestinian children "to make them connected to their tradition, to their culture," she says, from Milwaukie, Oregon, where she now lives.

Photo: Bryanda Minix

Eventually, Abbasi-Ghnaim married, and in 1979 she and her husband immigrated to the United States. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, those first few years, Abbasi-Ghnaim was lonely and afraid to tell anyone that she was Arab and Muslim. But then she joined a women's group called [the Cambridge Women's History Oral History Center](#) and began to teach tatreez to other women from across the world who had come to call Massachusetts home, with her three young daughters acting as her assistants. There, she led the women in embroidering tapestries detailed with experiences from their lives. The tapestry Abbasi-Ghnaim embroidered would eventually be exhibited at the [United Nations' 1985 World Conference on Women](#) in Nairobi, Kenya.

Later, after the Ghnaim family had moved to Oregon and their daughters had grown into teenagers, Abbasi-Ghnaim received support from [the Oregon Folklife Network](#) to formally teach her daughters tatreez. When her girls were little, she had begun

embroidering another thobe but found she never had time to work on it. Now that they were older, she pulled the dress out of storage and guided her daughters through the design, teaching them the stories of each pattern.

Tatreez “is unwritten language, transferred stories between woman and woman in silence,” says Abbasi-Ghnaim. When formal schooling in reading and writing was limited to men, Palestinian women learned to tell their stories through embroidery. “We want to keep the stories alive.”

In 2016, when Ghnaim sat down to begin writing *Tatreez & Tea*, the experience of embroidering with her mother over a cup of tea while learning her people’s stories was at the front of her mind. “I had this very strong calling to write a book that documented all of the lessons that she had spent her life teaching me and my sisters,” said Ghnaim. With funding from the Brooklyn Arts Council, she began photographing and researching patterns to create an oral history that emphasized the stories behind the motifs. By the time Ghnaim published *Tatreez & Tea* in 2018, she had been teaching tatreez classes for about a year. That same year, Abbasi-Ghnaim was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts, making her the first Palestinian woman to receive the award.

Photo: Bryanda Minix

Fashion designer [Suzy Tamimi](#), whose work incorporates vintage tatreez, has taken some of those classes. “I really learned a lot of the symbolism and the history from Wafa,” said Tamimi. Understanding the time that goes into each stitch and the stories behind the patterns has enriched her work, she says. “Every time I touch any tatreez, I feel so connected, like I could feel my ancestors,” she adds. “Being able to create something beautiful and explain your culture or share the beauty of your culture with others is such a blessing.”

Ghnaim and her mother share a common interest in the ways tatreez patterns have evolved over time, especially as Palestinians have continued to embroider in the diaspora. Historically, tatreez patterns varied from village to village because of limited transportation, says Abbasi-Ghnaim. But after 1948, when people from different areas started living together in refugee camps, the distinctions began to fade. “Now people are wearing whatever they like from any village,” says Abbasi-Ghnaim. “It’s important for us to preserve our story,” says Bshara Nassar, founder and director of the Museum of the Palestinian People, “to claim that as Palestinian, to show that rich history going back centuries.”

“The majority of the patterns that we stitch on our garments are adapted from traditional motifs,” says Ghnaim. “But in *Tatreez & Tea*, I encourage Palestinians in the diaspora to try to stitch motifs that reflect their current context.” Ghnaim says that innovation has always been central to tatreez: “The spirit of our tradition is to be creative and expressive.” The title of *Tatreez & Tea* hints at Ghnaim’s dual interests: documenting tatreez patterns and creating space to pass down the tradition through conversations, perhaps over a cup of tea. Her current work, teaching and researching her next book at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is all in service of that goal.

Photo: Bryanda Minix

Despite the pandemic, Ghnaim and her mother have kept busy. Abbasi-Ghnaim has embroidered several wall hangings, based on oil paintings of different villages' thobe patterns that she made in her 20s. (The paintings were destroyed while being exhibited in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.) And Ghnaim has taught hundreds of new workshops, her practice expanding with the advent of Zoom events. She's also made good progress on her next book.

"The first book was to document my mother's stories and the oral history in my family," says Ghnaim. "The next book is to document the stories of Palestinian women in history who have been dispossessed of dresses"—garments that are now in museums or other collections. She hopes to digitize the dress designs, making the patterns available to others to be reproduced and built upon. That process—of turning to traditions of the past and bringing them into the future—is essential, she says, to "keep them alive."

