

Toolkit: Textiles and Fashions from the Islamic World - 2021

TRADITIONAL FABRICS AND COSTUMES OF THE NEAR EAST

By Hana Chidiac, Curator of the Middle and North Africa Department of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum in Paris

Traditional female costumes from the Middle East are distinguished by their variety of materials and richness of decorations. These garments differ from country to country and region to region, and very often, we find a great variety within the same village. Worn by women from urban, rural or Bedouin contexts, these clothes are drawn from a thousand-year-old heritage indebted to sartorial art. It was indeed in the Middle East where man began, in the 9th millennium before our era, the spinning and weaving of plant and animal fibres, and where the first fabrics were made in simple looms. It is there, in the Fertile Crescent, where they created the first outfits that draped the body and gave mobility to the pieces that conformed it, this was done by giving form to fabrics via folds of different lengths. The use of long fabrics, covering the left shoulder, indeed, served as ancestors of the Greco-Roman and Byzantine *chlamydes*, and of the *tcharouka*, the famous shawl with which the Christian women of Qaraqosh, in Iraq, are draped until today. These drapes progress into more elaborate clothes over time, such as tunics sewn in a T-shape, which can be seen in many sculptures and bas-reliefs of Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.

Of straight shape, with sleeves going up to the elbow, these tunics will be consistent throughout different eras, and will be influenced by distinctive regional trends. Slowly these are accompanied by shawls, headdresses, veils and much later by long caftans and baggy pants—borrowed from the nomadic horsemen of Persia. The use of these tunics continued over the centuries. Discovered in large numbers in Coptic burials from Egypt, these were adopted during the Islamic period and then became the outfit *par excellence* of the rural and Bedouin women in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Palestine and Yemen.

What is distinctive about these pieces is that these are cut from linen or cotton fabrics, sometimes dyed with indigo, or other natural dyes. Subsequently, these fabrics are enriched with passementerie, but the most distinctive element is above all embroidery. This embroidery is variegated, but in general is warm and made with bright and shimmering colours. We do not know the date in which the needlework was first used to adorn clothing and everyday items. The discovery at the prehistoric site of Tell Aswad (Syria) of an embroidered fabric contained within an accidentally baked earth piece has been dated between 8200 and 7500 BC, and provides an important milestone in the history of embroidery. The existence of embroidered fabrics in the Middle East is also reported to us by ancient texts, in particular in the Bible. In the 7th century, after the Arab conquests, the history of embroidery is closely linked to Caliphal power. The luxury of the courts and the splendour of the princely ceremonial and protocol, stimulated the production of sumptuous clothes richly embroidered with gold and other materials. The practice of embroidery intensifies in the eastern Mediterranean from the 11th century with the arrival of the Turkish peoples—Seljuks, Mamluks then Ottomans. Distinctively the embroidery of this time is made with metal thread (silver or gold) which is adhered to a natural animal membrane. Nonetheless, the most common fabrics, those from the rural areas, used cheaper threads of dyed cotton. In 1991, similar tunics to those still worn by some Syrian and Palestinian village women today, were discovered in Lebanon, in the Qadisha valley. They are dated back to the 13th century and feature embroidery with geometric patterns, a clear influence of Turkmen. This fashion of complex embroidery continues under the Ottoman Empire, as the fashion of Constantinople was adopted by women of the upper and middle

bourgeoisie, as well as in the aristocracy, continuing the luxurious style of the Byzantine court. Baggy pants, dresses, chiffon shirts, and boleros become women's ceremonial costumes. These pieces are distinguishable by the heavy use of gold threads creating plant and floral motifs (see 71.1989.25.140.1 and 2)

Further Reading

- Mémoire de soie, *Costumes et parures de Palestine et de Jordanie*, catalogue de la collection Widad Kamel Kawar présentée à l'Institut du monde arabe, Paris, 1988
- Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costume*, The Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1989
- Yedida Kalfon Stillman, *Palestinian Costume and Jewelry*, University of New Mexico Press 1979
- Frank Bliss, *Artisanat et artisanat d'art dans les oasis du désert occidental égyptien*, 1998
- L'Orient des femmes vu par Christian Lacroix*, catalogue d'exposition, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, 2011
- Musée du quai Branly, *La collection*, Paris, 2009, pp. 132-135, fig. 48
- Egypte, Oasis d'Amun-Siwa*, Musée d'ethnographie
- Reines de Saba, itinéraires textiles au Yémen*, Musée du tapis et des arts textiles de Clermont-Ferrand, 2003



Title: Festive dress, *thob*

Date and place: Palestinian Territories, Hebron, circa 1935

Material: Linen, satin, cotton canvas

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum
70.2006.32.1

This long and loose dress is cut from a thick linen canvas. Its triangular sleeves are made from a dark blue fabric with fuchsia stripes produced in the workshops of al- Majdal, a small town in the Gaza region. The chest panel (*qabbé*) is embroidered vertically with square and star patterns. The centre of the skirt is lined with a panel terminating in a point embroidered in cross stitch and two lateral bands decorated with taffeta applications.

These dresses were worn on the occasion of traditional festivals, and would have been accompanied by a cap embellished with coins and a linen shawl embroidered in cross stitch.





Title: Festive dress, *jellayeh*

Date and place: Palestinian Territories, Ramallah, 1880

Material: Linen, silk

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum 71.1953.2.1 D

Ramallah dresses were generally cut from either *ecru* or dark blue cloth, a colour obtained by dyeing the fabric with indigo. The former were usually worn in summer, the latter during the winter season. This dress, with short sleeves, is distinguished by its attached plastron adorned with geometric patterns as they were appreciated before the 1870s, the date which marks the arrival of the Quakers in Palestine.

This type of dress, split at the front, was characteristically worn in the late 19th century alongside long underwear costumes. This fashion, criticised by men as being provocative, fell into disuse at the end of the First World War .



Title: Dress

Date and place: Yemen, Rayda, 1st half of the 20th century

Material: Cotton, silk, indigo dye

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum 70.2012.34.3

This cotton dress from the Tihama region is distinguished by a straight T-cut. The abundance of decoration is exceptional. Richly embroidered with polychromed silk and metallic threads, this material adorns the front, the back and the sleeves creating intricate patterns: five-pointed stars contained within squares, sawtooth patterns, lines extending into three-pointed shapes, and so on. This abundant decoration is characteristic of ceremonial dresses. Therefore, we know that often such dresses were made on the occasion of a marriage.





Title: Wedding dress
Date and place: Yemen Saada, early 20th century
Material: Silk, cotton
Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum 71.1980.67.2

This dress with long and broad sleeves is cut from a black and yellow striped silk cloth. In addition to the silver thread embroidery which underlines the slit, the dress is decorated at the level of the chest with two triangular appliques decorated with silk thread pompoms. These are lucky charms originally intended to contain aromatic herbs. A square of multi-coloured machine-stitched fabrics is attached to the end of each sleeve. The dress was worn on the day of the wedding ceremony, but was subsequently used on important religious and social ceremonies and gatherings.



Title: Dress, *chuyta*
Date and place: Iraq Qaraqosh, early 20th century
Material: Cotton, silk
Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum 71.1971.92.1

This dress is worn during festivals and ceremonies by Christian women in the city of Qaraqosh, a city in northern Iraq, whose name means "the black bird". Its cut is reminiscent of Palestinian and Syrian dresses. Unlike the top, which is completely emptied of any decoration, the bottom of the dress is richly ornamented. The motifs present in the embroideries reveal the attachment to nature of the woman who made them. There are flowers (chrysanthemums, anemones, carnations, jasmines), birds, sheep, goats but also crosses, which evidence the attachment of the inhabitants of Qaraqosh to their religion.





Title: Shawl, *Tcharouka*

Date and place: Iraq, Qaraqosh, early 20th century

Material: Wool, silk

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum

71.1967.100.77

This square shawl is made from a black woolen fabric. It is worn over the robe or *chuqta* by women as well as by young Christian girls in the city of Qaraqosh. Young girls would tie it on the right shoulder or on the left shoulder depending on whether they are right-handed or left-handed. The shawl is covered with rich stitch embroidery forming plants, animals and anthropomorphic motifs. Within this abundant decorative scheme, two crosses reveal the beliefs and superstitions of the person who wears it.



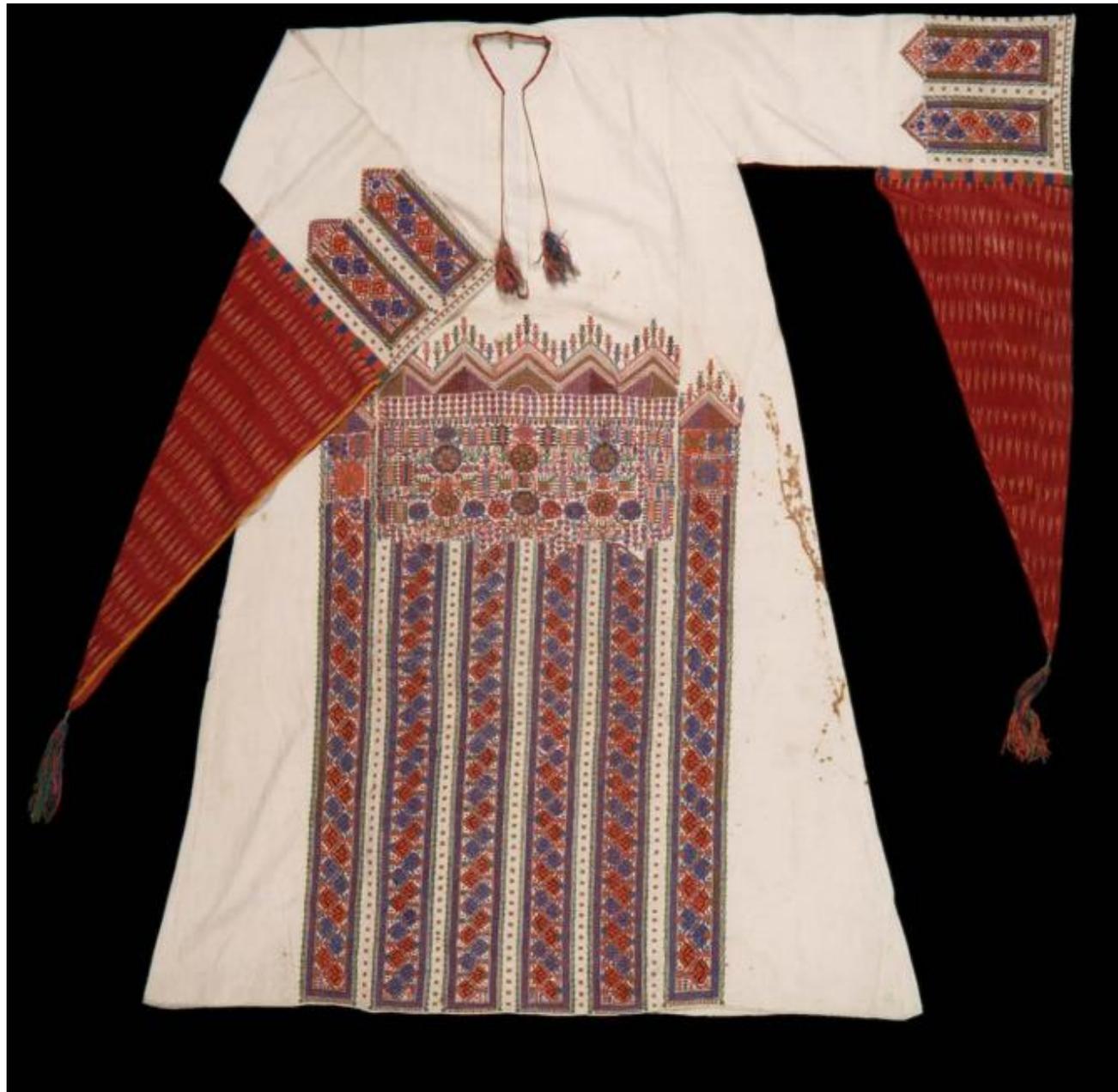
Title: Woman's coat, *darra'a*

Date and place: Syria, Idlib, 1850-1880

Material: Linen, silk, indigo dye

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum 70.2009.52.2

The coat is made from an indigo-dyed linen canvas. Rich polychrome silk cross stitch embroidery frames the opening of the dress at the chest, cuffs, side openings and covers the entire front of the coat. The motifs are essentially floral. We find in particular strands of carnations, called *qurunful* in Arabic. Some emerge from a basket with a handle which adorns the upper parts of the sides of the mantle. This beautiful coat was worn by the villagers of the Idlib region over their dress.



Title: Dress, *thob*

Date and place: Al-Qutayfah, Syria, early 20th century

Material: Cotton, silk

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum

71.1934.11.1

This dress is formed by a white canvas, flared down, with straight and long triangular sleeves finished in red and gold satin. The front is richly adorned with multi-coloured embroidery, predominantly red, light blue and green. Embroidery forms a rectangular panel composed of vertical strips containing floral and geometric patterns. The dress would have been originally worn tight at the waist by a wide belt. This outfit was completed with a long, dark blue or red, cotton jacket called " *qumbaz* ".



Title: Tunique Wedding

Date and place: Egypt, Siwa, 1st half of the 20th century

Material: Cotton, silk

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum

70.2001.1.16

This tunic is made from a black cotton fabric woven in Kerdasa, a city in the Governorate of Giza, renowned for its textile crafts. It features broad rectangular sleeves and a wide opening at the level of the chest. The embroidery that adorns it is of extraordinary beauty and complexity. From the center of the plastron, framed by small embroidered squares, stand out an infinity of lines embroidered and stitched with mother-of-pearl buttons called "eye of the sun." This dress was worn by the 7th day of the marriage by the women of the oasis of Siwa, where Alexander the Great made himself known pharaoh of Egypt and son of the god Amun



Title: Girl dress

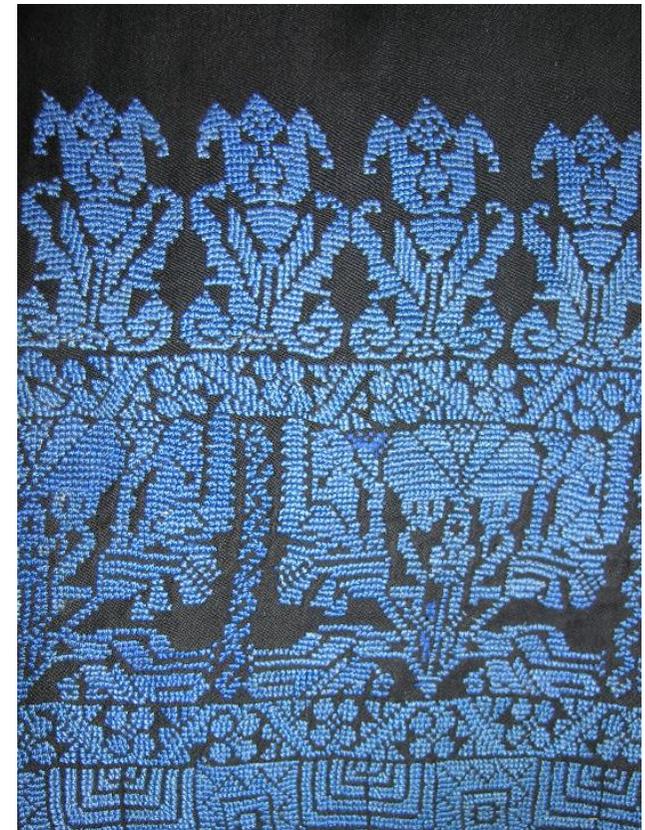
Date and place: Egypt, Sinai, first half of the 20th century

Sawarka tribe

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum

70.2012.6.1

The black dress is slightly flared from the waist and the sleeves are long and narrow. It is distinguished by its rich embroidered decoration. The chest plate and sleeves are embroidered with floral patterns in vibrant colours: Indian rose, turquoise blue, orange and purple, the fashion of which began in 1970. These non-traditional patterns were copied from notebooks of European models. The skirt is adorned with an upholstery decoration with floral and geometric patterns. The colour blue, reserved for young girls, was considered a symbol of virginity, thus these type of dresses, with blue embroidery, was reserved for young girls before marriage. This use disappeared in the 1980s.





Title: Wedding dress

Date and place: Egypt, Cairo, 1880

Material: Satin, gold thread and cannetilles

Accession number: Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum
71.1989.25.140.1 and 2

This white satin wedding dress consists of a straight skirt extended by a rounded flare on the back. The bodice features broad sleeves tightened at the cuffs. The fabric is enriched with complex embroidery made with gold threads on cardboard. Closely related to the art of saddlers, this technique consists of stretching gold threads over cardboard shapes to achieve the desired shapes. This was considered a difficult art, and gold embroidery was generally done by men and required a long apprenticeship. Made in Cairo in 1880, this wedding costume intimately mixes Eastern and Western styles.



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