

UK Whitworth Art Gallery exhibits *Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery*, but is silent on Gaza genocide

Margot Miller
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Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery (November 24, 2023—April 7, 2024)

The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, England is hosting an important exhibition, *Material Power: Palestinian Embroidery*.

The introductory commentary explains that it “charts the evolution of embroidery in Palestine over the past century: from rich village tradition, transformed by modernity, to its politicisation in the 1970s and commodification in the present. Over the last 75 years, embroidery has become a powerful symbol of resistance.”

The Whitworth is home to a collection of over 60,000 works of art, textiles, and wallpaper. Its watercolours are the finest in the country outside the Victoria and Albert Museum and British Museum.

For the first time in more than 30 years, UK audiences can appreciate the beautiful Palestinian exhibits, including 40 dresses, or thobes, and embroidery pieces. Some of the thobes contain up to 200,000 stitches. The embroidery, with colours and motifs inspired by nature, and over the last 75 years reflecting the experience of occupation by Israel, is stunning.

In the words of curator Rachel Dedman, the “textiles sensitively reflect the changes in the social and political landscape in which they are produced.”

The exhibits are from the Whitworth’s own collection or on loan from collections in Jordan, Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Curator Rachel Dedman, a writer and art historian, is Jameel Curator of Contemporary Art from the Middle East at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The exhibition is based on her extensive research, compiled in her book, *At the Seams: A political history of Palestinian embroidery*.

Commissioned by the Palestinian Museum, Birzeit, in

the West Bank, the exhibition was first shown in Beirut, Lebanon. In 2016, it was exhibited as “Labour of Love” in Birzeit; from there to Kettle’s Yard Museum in Cambridge, England, and then to the Whitworth as *Material Power*.

The celebration of Palestinian art is particularly poignant today. The people who contributed to this segment of world culture are being slaughtered mercilessly in Gaza, with the backing of the NATO powers, who continue to fund and arm the Israeli government’s genocide as part of a widening Middle East conflict alongside NATO’s war in Ukraine against Russia.

The world’s population looks on in horror, disgust and anger as the death toll has mounted to over 31,000 Gazans—including 12,300 children. Some 25,000 children have been orphaned. The 1.5 million people crammed into southern Gaza, in and around Rafah, are being bombed and face an imminent ground invasion. The 400,000 who remain in the north are starving and deprived of medical aid.

The Palestinians in the West Bank will likely suffer the same fate, and the Palestinian Museum that commissioned the exhibition and which houses many cultural treasures could be razed to the ground.

The Whitworth stands on a main thoroughfare into Manchester city centre and is passed regularly by anti-war demonstrators waving Palestinian flags, denouncing the genocide and its perpetrators and demanding an immediate ceasefire. However, the most the Whitworth—part of the University of Manchester—can muster in reference to one of the most heinous crimes of the 21st century is a timid statement on its website by Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, president and vice-chancellor of the university.

She writes, “The violence and loss of life that has affected innocent people in Israel and Gaza since 7 October is truly heartbreaking”, while appealing for “mutual understanding and tolerance” in “these very difficult times” and concluding, “Our hope is that peace will soon be restored to the region.”

The Whitworth makes no mention on the display boards at the entrance to the exhibition of the genocide being perpetrated against the Palestinians in Gaza.

The exhibition itself, however, does not shirk from the truth as to the historic oppression of the Palestinians. It testifies through the ancient art of embroidery to the suffering of the Palestinian people, ethnically cleansed from their homeland in the Nakba when the state of Israel was founded in 1948 as a military outpost for US imperialism.

During the first Nakba, between 750,000 and one million Palestinians were driven from their homes and became refugees, and about 15,000 were killed.

Included in the exhibition is a film, commissioned by Dedman, by artist Maeve Brennan, with the title *The Embroiderers, 2016*. It is informative and moving, comprising interviews with five Palestinian women who live in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan and keep the age-old tradition of embroidery alive.

One embroiderer, an elderly woman, explained how embroidery, which began as a labour of love bringing joy to the creator, has now become a source of livelihood. She sometimes works on embroidery from 10 am to 10pm, saying “embroidery brings income and resistance.” Another who lives in a refugee camp said her “husband couldn’t find work, so I embroidered and grew vegetables” to sell.

Embroiderers are superexploited, receiving, according to the infographic, only “10-25 percent of the sale price for a piece of embroidery,” while their work is sold all over the world.

Expressing the spirit of resistance reflected in their art, another embroiderer lamented “all the things Palestine has lost... they’ve stolen everything from us. I’m unable to fight with a rifle—so I’ll do this [embroidery]” to keep the Palestinian heritage alive.

In response to the banning of Palestinian flags and colours, women “made intifada dresses” incorporating the Palestinian national flag and colours.

In February 2022, the University of Manchester capitulated to the lying campaign spearheaded by the Labour Party that conflated anti-Zionism with antisemitism when it removed Alistair Hudson from his

post as head of the Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery.

A blatant act of censorship, this followed the controversy surrounding the showing at the Whitworth of a significant 2021 exhibition, “Cloud Studies”, by Turner Prize-nominated investigative agency Forensic Architecture (FA). Cloud Studies, part of that year’s Manchester International Festival, came under attack from Zionist organisations.

Among the exhibits exposing imperialist crimes was *Herbicide Warfare in Gaza, Palestine*, an FA investigation into the use of herbicides by the Israeli army that destroyed arable land in Gaza. Another exhibit bore witness to *The Bombing of Rafah*, “the deadliest and most destructive day in the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza,” on August 1. FA declared its partisanship: “Forensic Architecture stands with Palestine,” praising those who, during the attack on Gaza in June 2021, “continue to document and narrate events on the ground and to struggle against this violence, apartheid and colonization.”

The Whitworth Art Gallery withdrew an online statement of support for the Palestinian people at the time after receiving objections from the Zionist organisation UK Lawyers for Israel.

While the Blairites, including Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, promoted the antisemitism witch-hunt, nominal left winger and supposed friend of the Palestinian people Jeremy Corbyn capitulated miserably, throwing some of his own supporters under the bus. To this day, Corbyn will not name Starmer as an accomplice in the Israeli crimes, thereby strengthening the hand of those who declare it is antisemitic to oppose genocide by Israel.

With its present silence on the Gaza genocide, the management of the University of Manchester and Whitworth Art gallery have clearly fallen into line.

More and more artists, however, are defying censorship and lifting their voices against what is happening to the Palestinian people. Art and artists have an important role to play as allies of the working class in the struggle against oppression, tyranny and poverty, whose source lies in the capitalist system.



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