Pitt Rivers Museum
Anthropology and World Archaeology

Multaka

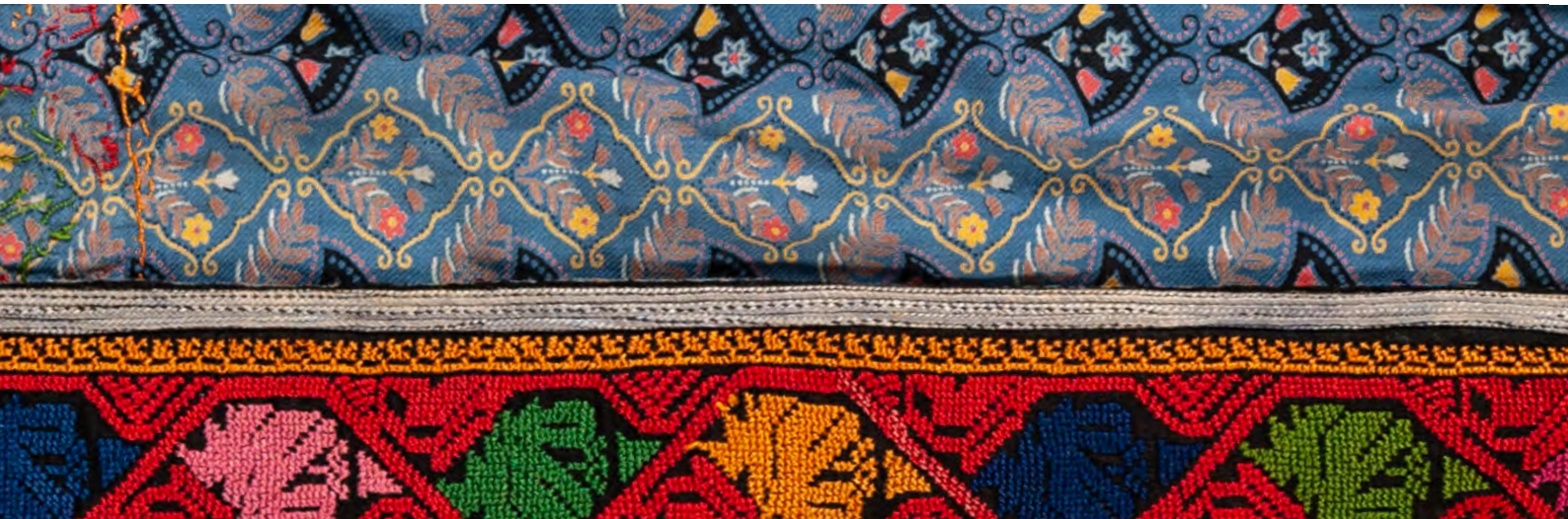
Weaving Connections

Local perspectives on collections from the Middle East, North and West Africa

Jenny Balfour-Paul Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

Printable Exhibition Guide



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> ***Museums conserve and serve human heritage, I am giving my story as part of this human, contemporary heritage, we are becoming part of this heritage but giving it a contemporary view..***

Mohammad Al Awad,
Multaka-Oxford Volunteer

Multaka translates from Arabic to English as ‘meeting point’, bringing people and museum collections together as a springboard for intercultural dialogue. ‘Weaving Connections’ unites the voices and perspectives of Multaka-Oxford volunteers with a collection of textiles and artefacts assembled by Jenny Balfour-Paul while living and travelling in the Middle East, North and West Africa. There are nearly three hundred objects in this collection as well as over two thousand photographs, with this exhibition focussing on a selection of highlight pieces.

This document is a printable handout for our online exhibition, which you can browse to learn about how people made, used and wore objects in the collection. Journey through places and times and find cultural heritage brought to life through cross-cultural connections and personal stories.

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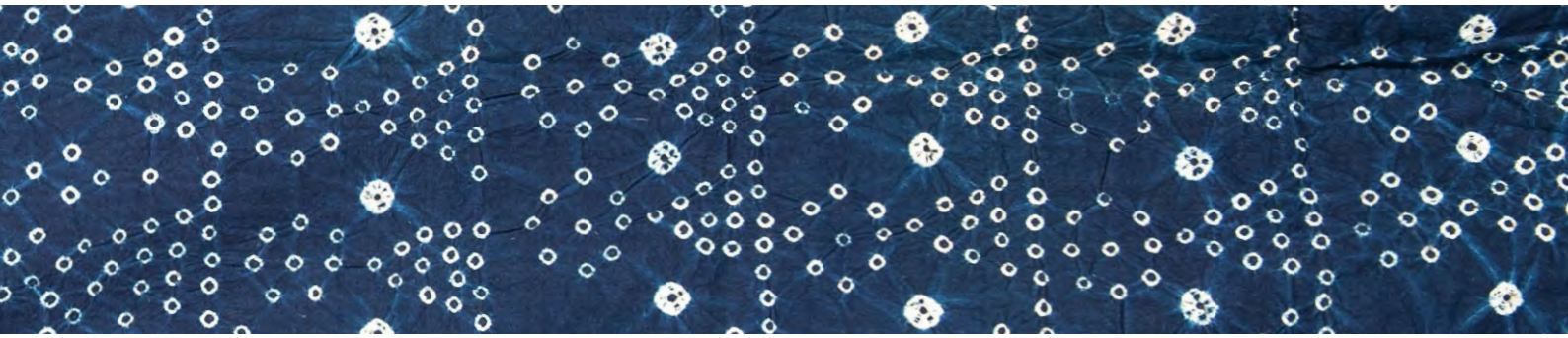
Syria



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Syria Saraqib

A traditional woman's dress or *thob* made of black cotton, hand embroidered with silk thread. The V-shaped embroidery at the front of the dress finishes in a pendant design called 'waterwheels', echoing the actual waterwheels prominent in the landscape. The designs also include birds, crosses and geometric forms.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Aleppo, 1985.
2018.37.4

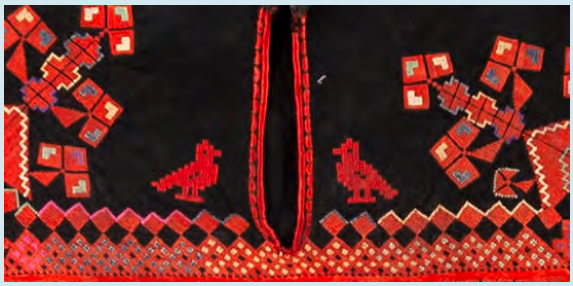
Detail of waterwheels

The embroidery is mostly of very fine cross stitch and is done by eye rather than counted thread, hence it is never fully geometric. Until the 20th century most Syrian embroideries were made using floss silk, produced in the Aleppo region of Syria. From the 1930s imported fine mercerised cotton produced by the French DMC company was widely used. Although a range of colours were included in embroidery, red was the most important.

Waed, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer noted that a dress like this would be for special occasions. She wore a dress like this to a family wedding. During weddings in her region, there are two main days: for the first, the bride and groom are separate - the bride gets together with unmarried women and there is tattooing with henna. The bride wears an engagement dress on the first day, then changes into a white bridal dress for the second day. The headscarves are just as beautifully decorated as the dresses.

Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Traditionally, women in Syria, as well as nearby Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, embroidered their clothes with natural silk threads. The silk they used, often in vibrant colours, was produced in Syria. Syrian civilisation has played a major role in the life and progress of the people of the world, through its place on the Silk Road. The convoys transporting natural silk products from China to the European markets passed through Syrian cities.' In particular, the city of Palmyra was the meeting point of convoys and was one of the richest and most well-known cities on the Silk Road.'



Detail of embroidered birds

Nav, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The 10th century is the height of Islamic dominance, a time of relative stability. Representative objects such as birds and flora became more prevalent during this period, which was later overtaken by the rise of calligraphy.'

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Syria Saraqib

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Aleppo, 1985.
2018.37.4

Syria's history of fine embroidery goes back 3000 years to the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun. Analysis suggests that a tunic from the tomb with complex embroidery stitches was made by the Mitanni people from northern Syria. It may have been a gift from the Mitanni royal court to the Egyptian court.

Suheer, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'I looked at this dress with another volunteer who said she had worn something very similar as a guest to a family wedding. I found it exciting as we shared wedding customs in both Syria and my country of Sudan. In both countries, a head scarf would also be worn by women attending a traditional wedding. In Syria, the headscarves would be decorated with embroidery. In Sudan lots of gold jewellery is worn, especially by the bride, who would wear jewellery gifted by the bridegroom.'

Abdullah, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Traditionally the colours in Syrian embroidery change with the age of the woman. Younger women tend to have deep reds prominently featured, then moving to pinks and corals and later more orange and yellows.'

Sarah, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The back of the dress features three plants, which look like a crop, stitched in gold thread. This could be a tribute to the 'Golden Age of Islam' and its developments in agriculture.'

Hussein, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Embroidery is an ancient craft used to decorate clothing and add artistic touches to cloth. It used to always be done by hand, today it is often done either in a factory or on hand-held machines. This dress is mostly made by hand. Women could spend months preparing an embroidered garment like this dress for a special occasion or for a girl in the family. On the back of the dress is a panel made by machine. The lines of the machine part go over some of the hand embroidery. I think this was added later to cover an old piece of cloth or to change the size of the garment. The shapes embroidered on the dress are mostly geometric, which makes it easy to calculate the layout and number of stitches for each part. I noted how similar the left and right sides are, showing the skill of the embroiderer.'

Nav, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The collector often detailed what she paid for pieces, which shows an ethical exchange not always present in museum collections. Jenny Balfour-Paul provided the museum with items from her travels, as well as field notes about cultural context and production techniques. Acquiring this kind of information would require, not just spending time with the people who made and wore these items, but a respect for their knowledge.'

Syria Hama

Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

The city of Hama is truly the city of ***noria***, as it contains the most famous and largest ***noria*** in the world, some of them more than twenty metres in diameter, spread along the banks of the Orontes River. In the past, they transported water to the orchards on both sides of the river via a system of aqueducts.

From the towns of Qadiriya to Jabriya, waterwheels along the river are distinguished by their distinctive sound during their rotation, from which they took their name which means '**growler**'. The history of the waterwheels of Hama is echoed in songs, poems, books and stories. Waterwheels still rotate and decorate the city centre of Hama along the Orontes River, as well as elsewhere in Syria. Today, waterwheels are manufactured to decorate villas, residences, parks and gardens in Syria.

Syria, Hama, 1975
Noria (waterwheel) in motion on the Orontes River.
Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul.
2018.137.219

Noria (Waterwheels) in Hama
Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Do you know that people in Hama cannot sleep if they don't hear the sound of the waterwheels!'

Watch videos of the waterwheels in motion and a working model:
https://vimeo.com/499014785
https://vimeo.com/496816973

Syria Hama

Indigo dress, patterned with a tie-dye resist where the tied dots were made with a thread bound tightly around millet seeds.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Damascus, 1985.

2018.37.9

A note from Widad Kawar, area and textiles expert, states ‘The ladies would hold the [millet] seeds in their teeth to wind the thread around.’

The Syrian cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Homs were famous for their woven, resist-dyed and printed cloths throughout the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

‘The most important dye was often considered to be indigo, especially in countries such as Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Japan. The darker the indigo blue, the greater the effort put into it and therefore the more precious it was. For the fabric to be a dark shade of indigo, the process of dipping the fabric had to be repeated over and over again.’

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

‘A traditional and folkloric dress. Women from Hama (a city in Syria) wear it on special occasions, especially brides.’

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Syria Aleppo

Man's coat made of a silk warp-faced fabric with a tie-dyed ikat design - a speciality of Aleppo. The threads were dyed different colours before weaving.

2018.37.1

Aleppo had been well-known for indigo dyeing for hundreds of years. The French traveller Jean de Thévenot writes about an indigo vat in Aleppo more than three centuries ago:

'The Dyers of the Countrey make a most excellent blew dye. They put in it, as we do, Indigo and Pomegranat-peels…'

Nuha, Multaka-Oxford Community Ambassador:

'My grandmother has a similar coat which she would wear on special occasions. These included celebrations like birthdays, weddings, welcoming a new child, parties or visiting family. Northern Syria is very cosmopolitan with people from all kinds of religions and backgrounds. It is my experience that this type of coat is worn by Muslim people and often made by Jewish and other artisans.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'Indigo dyeing in the Levant had completely died out by the 1980s. It remained however very much in recent memory in Syria as the craft dyers of Aleppo...could still easily recall their former indigo dyeing days.'

'In 1985 groups of dyers in three areas of Aleppo described their former use of indigo. Dyers were of all denominations – Catholic, Armenian, Muslim and Jewish.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'In the city of Aleppo, where as many as sixty dyeworks were recorded just before the First World War, there were numerous dyeing areas, the most important extending along the entire length of the Suq as-Sabbaghin. In one surviving dye shop in 1985 could be seen an outsize stone vat ... and about twelve earthenware vats.'

A study of ikat weaving in Aleppo by Moser in the 1960s and early 70s found the last dyers still using indigo to dye tied yarn. The dyers formed one part of a chain of nine specialist artisans needed to manufacture an ikat cloth; there was much to-ing and fro-ing between the ***rabbat***, who tied the threads, and various dyers as the yarn was usually untied and retied several times to form the distinctive multi-coloured patterns.

Syria Aleppo

Working man's outfit comprising ***dara'a*** (jacket) and ***sirwal*** (trousers). Made of ***kham*** (handwoven coarse cotton cloth) in Darat Izza, and later dyed in indigo by the collector, Jenny Balfour-Paul.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Aleppo, 1986.
2018.37.3

Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'This shirt and trousers remind me of denim indigo-dyed clothes as developed by Levis and others for hard work – farm work/ranching etc.'

Nav, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Indigo has many useful properties, ladies working in indigo production delayed washing their hands afterwards because the indigo blue was thought to be beneficial to their skin's health.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Dyeing clothes with real indigo has many advantages. In Japan, Samurai wore indigo-dyed clothes because they can help prevent the infection of wounds. Japanese firemen also wore indigo-dyed clothes because they are fire-retardant. Clothes are also stiffer and odour and dirt resistant. This could explain why factory workers and manual labourer workers wore blue, in case of wounds, fire or other accidents.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul:

'The outfit was woven by hand in Darat Izza in 1986. The dyers of Bab Antakya no longer use indigo, so I dyed this outfit in indigo at home in the UK.'

Syria Damascus

Three-tier ***sarfartas*** (food container), made of copper with incised patterns. This type of tiered metal tin is often called a 'tiffin' tin in India.

2018.37.222 & 2018.37.223

Photographs taken by Niran's cousin from his antique shop in Damascus.

Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Syrian heritage is full of industries and handicrafts, among them the manufacture of copper household appliances. This is an ancient and historical craft that has been passed down for generations but is about to disappear. One of these copper products was ***safartas*** "a travel vessel". They often consist of three or four consecutive plates stacked on top of each other. Each section is dedicated to a different type of food cooked with love and tenderness.'

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'This is a type of lunch box used to carry food from one place to another. The three tiers are used to separate the type of food. For example: the first-tier used for rice the others for vegetables and meat.'

Poem by Antoinette, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

White Rice, A Poem About Lunch and My Vietnamese Father

'Ba, can you cook some rice?
the al dente way like the Italians do
don't put too much water
we don't have to run away anymore
we can let it sit overnight and eat it tomorrow too
the spirits are dancing tonight, Ba
they're mingling in smoke clouds up to the ceiling
why do they have to leave us, Ba?
I want them to come for dinner at least
and eat with us one last time
and stay here forever.'

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Syria Damascus

Modern silk brocade scarf with gold thread.

Donated by Niran Altahhan in 2019.

2019.26.1

This scarf was made in Damascus, one of the famous centres in Syria for the production of luxury textiles. The word 'damask' which has become part of the English language has its origins in Damascus.

Brocade Scarf donated by Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

Piece of home to my second homeland

'When memory stands on the threshold of the homeland and you are at the top of longing and longing for it, you remember all the things that were there, and you enjoy them despite their simplicity. The war leaves you behind all your memories, dreams, past, future and all the beautiful things you used to have. In the midst of all this darkness, a dear friend surprises me by sending a gift from my homeland to become a precious treasure.'

Nav, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'To this day royal ***tiraz*** (embroidered) garments are given as gifts and viewed as status symbols and stores of wealth, as with gold bullion for example. This gesture came to be a tradition as old as Islamic history and the Old Testament. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have set the precedent by giving his mantle to the poet Ka'b ibn Zuhayr.'

Hiba, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The origin of Damask silk scarves dates back three thousand years. Syria was an important station on the old silk road, it was here silk thread was imported to Syria from China. Syrian craftsmen also used silk produced by the Syrian town of Dreikish, which was famous for rearing silkworms and feeding them with mulberry leaves. The silk produced here was sent to Aleppo, treated, twisted, bleached and then dyed upon request to be ready for weaving in Damascus.'

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Palestine

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Palestine Ramallah

Dress of hand-spun and hand-woven natural linen with a square chest panel. Decorated with ***tatreez*** embroidery in red silk and couching.

2018.37.19

In 1843 a European-owned factory started to manufacture so-called 'Syrian' silk thread on Mount Lebanon. As a result, between 1843 and 1914 'Syrian' silk and the export of silk cocoons became an internationally traded cash crop, of paramount importance in the economy of the mountain. The silk factory reached its height in the 1880s, accounting for about 80% of total exports. However, it all but disappeared by 1914.

Floss silk thread used for embroidering Palestinian women's costumes was produced in Homs and Mount Lebanon (sometimes from imported cocoons) and dyed the range of required colours in Homs and Damascus.

Abigael Flack, Former Multaka-Oxford Collections Officer:

'This dress shows many of the features of traditional Palestinian costume, including the rich colour of the threads and the ***Qabbah*** (square chest panel) with embroidered motifs.'

Abigael has also written a short jounral article about this dress in Asian Textiles.

Refe, Oxford Ramallah Friendship Association (ORFA) commented that much embroidery in the old days would have been done by the water to make use of the reflected light.

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Palestinian clothing is extremely rich in embroidery and each city has its own tradition. Each city and village has distinctive and unique outfits which express their environment.'

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Palestine Bethlehem

Woman's ***thob*** or ***jillayeh*** (dress) made of silk and linen fabric. The long tapered sleeves, full skirt and detailed embroidery are typical of Southern Palestine. The ***irdan*** (extravagantly pointed sleeves) indicate that the wearer is a woman of wealth and leisure, as such a garment cannot easily be used while carrying out manual tasks.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in London, 1978.
2018.37.18

Bethlehem was famous for its embroidery, particularly couching, which was normally the work of professional female embroiderers. The couching, often of thick silver gilt metal or silk cord, was often used for the panels on women's dresses.

Niran, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'I took this photo two years ago while visiting Turkey, it was really just for fun with my friends. I never thought that one day I would match it with an object from a museum in Oxford. I matched it with one of Jenny Balfour-Paul's textiles because it has a similar design with its wide sleeves and embroidery. This fashion appeared to be similar across the Middle East at that time.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'This beautiful Palestinian dress is from the city of Bethlehem. The uniqueness of this dress lies in its fabric, which is handwoven silk and linen that is made in Bethlehem. The silk and linen come in stripes of black, red, green and orange. The different pieces of fabric are then connected with ***manajel*** (connecting stitch) in silk thread of many colours.

The pointed sleeves were sometimes tied behind the neck for ease of movement. The luxury materials used for decorating Palestinian garments were imported from the great Syrian centres of textile production: Homs, Aleppo and Damascus. These included silk yarns and embroidery threads as well as cords of silk, silver and gold.

Watch a video of a performance by Palestinian Dabke Dancers here:
https://vimeo.com/488027726

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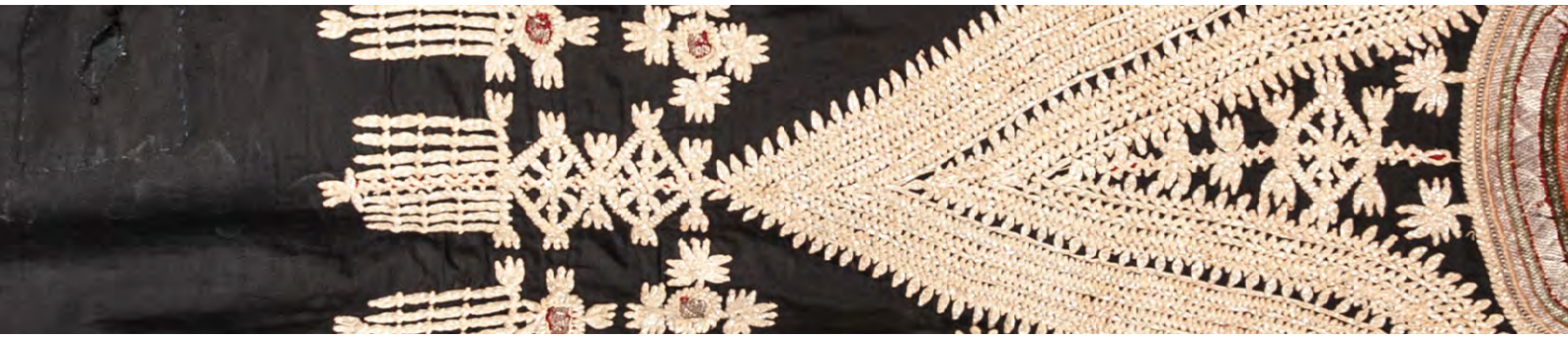
Yemen



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Yemen

Bayt al-Faqih

A traditional fitted woman's ***korta***, (dress). Made of black cotton fabric with embroidery and appliqué of couched silver bands, white braided cotton and silver thread. These festive dresses are normally described as wedding dresses, which are afterwards worn on important occasions.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Bayt al-Faqih, 1983.
2018.37.67

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'This black-coloured dress was made after 1960, because before that time the ground cloth would have been indigo-dyed cotton. Such dresses were mostly worn for special occasions, but some women wore them daily, sometimes turned inside out to protect the embroidery.'

'I loved seeing the amazing braid being made for these incredible dresses, that were once dyed with indigo that is now replaced by black sateen.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The golden embroidery on this dress could reflect the love of Yemeni women for jewellery. The placement of this embroidery directs our gaze towards the face, hands and waist of the woman wearing it. Revealing beauty standards of the time and the body parts upon which beauty emphasis was placed.'

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'This is a traditional Yemeni dress of Bayt al-Faqih. There are two versions of the dress, one for daily use and the other for festivals and special occasions. The festival dress is more heavily embroidered and colourful.'

Yemen, or the 'Land of the Queen of Sheba', has been famous for thousands of years for its textiles. The Old Testament book of Ezekiel mentions the abundance of 'embroidered work, fine linen, corals and rubies' in Yemen.

The trade in fine textiles and fibres in Yemen can be found in pre-Islamic and medieval writing. Yemen was an important trade link between China, India and Indonesia with the Mediterranean, and, from the 17th century onwards, the English, Portuguese and Dutch.

17th-century trade documents refer to textiles, floss silk and gold thread produced in Persia, China or India traded through markets in Yemen. The town of Bayt al-Faqih is located along a pilgrimage and trade route.

Yemen Sana'a

Multistorey houses in the Old City of Sana'a.
Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul in 1982.
2018.137.631

Matti, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'A sophisticated civilisation flourished in ancient Yemen that reflected human ingenuity in building, engineering and architecture. When you mention the city of Sana'a, its distinctive style houses come to mind decorated with gypsum and stones of different colours.'

Eva, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The lack of timber in the region, where cultivable land is in short supply, prompted the locals to build in a sustainable fashion, resorting to stone and mud bricks to build impressively tall buildings. Some are up to nine stories high, with each building occupied by a single family. The façade is decorated with white gypsum patterns and the windows, once made of translucent alabaster, now mostly feature colourful stained glass.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The architecture of Yemeni buildings varies according to their geographical location. In the uplands, the high buildings with thick walls have large glazed windows which benefit from the winter sun. In the coastal lowlands, the windows have shutters with small holes in them, instead of glass, to allow a cooling breeze to enter the building and to block the sun's rays.'

Yemen

Indigo-dyed ***qamis*** (dress) where the fabric has been beaten to give it a sheen.

2018.37.87

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

‘Brass sequins and pieces of mother-of-pearl were often added to dresses to act as lucky charms or offer protection from the evil-eye. When worn on a sunny day, this dress would shine brightly. The lucky woman wearing it would literally glow in the streets of Yemen.’

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

‘Garments of shiny new indigo-dyed cloth would be reserved for weddings and feast days. The sheen gradually wore off through everyday use, but plainer dresses could be re-dyed and beaten in order to recover it.’

‘Finally, yet more neat indigo paste was rubbed into the cloth with a towelling brush...before the beaters, elderly men working in pairs, beat the cloth with heavy wooden mallets (made of tamarind and weighing at least 18 kilos) until it shone... The beaters had an array of mallets at their disposal, choosing [sic] the heaviest ones when feeling most energetic.’

By the end of the 1980s Bayt Abud workshop was the only indigo-dyeing establishment left in Zabid, once an important centre for the indigo industry. Here two workers engage in one of the finishing processes for dyed cloth, after it has undergone several stages of dyeing, been coated in a starch solution, and then rubbed with neat indigo paste. They beat the cloth with heavy mallets of tamarind wood to produce the metallic sheen so desirable across Arabia and West Africa. This process of beating textiles to produce a finish is also known as ‘calendering’.

Two men at Bayt Abud workshop beat indigo-dyed cloth with heavy wooden mallets to make it stiff and shiny. Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul at Zabid, in 1989.

2018.137.902

Yemen Zabid

Wooden printing block with horse and foal design, for printing on indigo-dyed cloth. Gold pigment is still present on the design.

Gifted to Jenny Balfour-Paul
by Muhammad Ali Abud, 1989.
2018.37.90

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'Even in the 1980s Yemeni men could be seen wearing new turbans arranged to ensure the gold factory mark was clearly visible.'

A gold factory mark from a Zabidi indigo workshop signified the high quality of work associated with the town. Here the owner of Bayt Abud demonstrates this last step in the production of indigo-dyed cloth. He rubs the carved wooden printing block in a mixture of gold powder and resin and stamps the bundled and tied cloth. The designs on the blocks could include animals, plants, and often a pair of scissors, and would usually be carved with a family name or other inscription.

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Yemen is well-known for having pure-bred Arabian horses. This is reflected in the horse and foal design of this engraving (xylography).'

Muhammad Ali Abud, owner of Bayt Abud indigo-dyeing workshop, demonstrates the stamping of a design onto a finished cloth.

Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul at Zabid in 1983.

2018.137.909

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Yemen

Pair of earrings decorated with embossed, plaited metal foil and silver decoration.

2018.37.104

Silver headdress decorated with silver pendants and bells.

2018.137.105

Jewish silversmiths in Yemen were known for their skill in filigree and granulation techniques. Such finely worked silver was worn by both Jewish and Muslim women. Silver jewellery was once used as a way of retaining family wealth. Women had control over this wealth because wedding jewellery became the property of the bride upon marriage.

Hiba, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Silver is a source of strength and beauty in Yemen. Yemen is well known for its silver manufacture and jewellery which has been one of its most important crafts for hundreds of years. Silver jewellery in Yemen, with its delicate decoration, is represented by bracelets, necklaces, anklets, chest pieces and earrings that adorn traditional costumes of Yemeni women.'

Matti, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Silver is the chemical element Ag and atomic number 47. Silver with distinct colour located between white and grey has many distinctive properties. It has one of the highest values of electrical and thermal conductivity, as well as reflectivity among metals.'

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Oman

Oman

Khanjar (curved dagger). The handle and ferrule are decorated with repoussé and filigree silverwork in fine geometric and foliate patterns.

2018.37.217

Khanjar with sheath and belt.

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'***Khanjar*** are believed to represent the 'spirit of the Omani man'. Nowadays, they are worn on special occasions to celebrate the beauty and tradition of Omani culture. However, in the past, they were crafted as weapons and not as works of Omani art.'

Nav, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'A dagger of this nature, short curved blade, is referred to in Arabic as a Janbiya. Usually worn by men from their early teens as an accessory. Culturally therefore they are a form of rite of passage. They are also seen as a status symbol. The most significant part of the knife is the handle. This part is usually made of expensive material such as silver or ivory.'

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'***Khanjar*** are a symbol of belonging, masculinity, magnanimity and tradition. They are also part of traditional Omani dress; being placed in the middle of the belt.'

Salim bin Rashid al-Sawwad, last indigo dyer of Ibri, stands in front of a newly dyed cloth. His ***khanjar*** (curved dagger) is displayed prominently in his belt.

Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul at Ibri in 1985.

2018.137.1118

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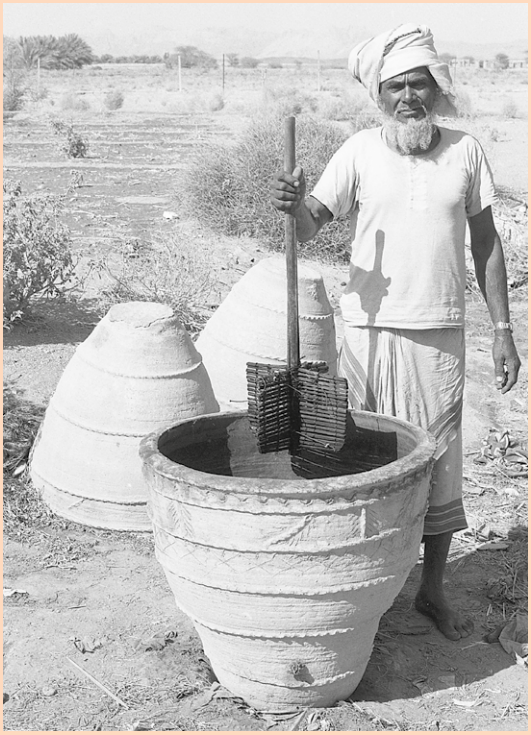
Oman Ibri

Earthenware ***khabiya*** (extraction pot) for making indigo. It is used with a ***ma'saj*** (whisk) of wood and palm frond to make indigo dye.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Oman, 1985.

2018.37.36.1 & 2018.37.36.2



Sunaidi bin Salem al-Ghafiri, indigo farmer and dye manufacturer, holds a ***ma'saj*** (whisk) over a large earthenware ***khabiya*** (extraction pot). Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul. Oman, Dariz (near Ibri), 1985.

2018.137.2019

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'In 1985 two lone farms maintained the traditional supply of indigo dye for the last indigo dyers at Ibri and Bahla...At Ibri there were twenty dyers at work prior to 1979, but within ten years this number had dwindled to three and in the mid 1980s the only surviving dyer was Salim bin Rashid al-Sawwad, who inherited the trade from his father.'

The solution of indigo leaves and water was whisked for several hours using a *ma'saj,* before excess liquid was drained from the bung hole at the base of the *khabiya*. The resulting paste was collected with a smaller pot called a *kawz* and then dried in the sun to produce lumps of the dried indigo dyestuff.

'This reminds me of ***Al zeer*** which are earthenware pots used to keep water cool in the summer. This industry is ancient and part of Iraqi heritage. In fact, there was no Iraqi house without ***Al zeer*** which are made of pottery by a craftsman called ***kawazin***. This ***zeer*** belongs to my grandmother. My grandmother does not drink fridge water, she says that ***zeer*** water has a special taste and wonderful sweetness.'

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Multaka

Oman Ibri

Earthenware ***khabiya*** (extraction pot) for making indigo. It is used with a ***ma'saj*** (whisk) of wood and palm frond to make indigo dye.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in Oman, 1985.

2018.37.36.1 & 2018.37.36.2

Photograph taken by Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Here I am dyeing using the natural pigment indigo that I bought from an exhibition. In the buckets you can see the yellow/green of the indigo dye which changes to have a metallic surface, and which only turns the cloth blue once the cloth is drawn out into the air and reacts with the oxygen.'

Antoinette, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The magic of indigo is that it turns from yellow to blue because of the oxidation process. The notion that indigo dyeing was 'inherited' is an important nuance to understand, where these practices are not simply the colouring of fabric, but the active process of maintaining a tradition to create a beautiful, effortful deep blue that is representative of the entire community.'

Photograph taken by Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'On a visit back to Mali, I was given two balls of dried indigo. The woman indigo dyer from a Dogon village of Ende who gave them to me was working from the indigo vats here.'

Photograph taken by Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Here is my attempt to harvest the UK's plant source of blue colour which is from woad (***Isatis tinctoria***). I had no real recipe so just improvised the pounding of leaves and drying of the woad into balls and trying to ferment them but this didn't work as the blue colour later dyed my nails and fingers, but I didn't find the right chemical balance to fix the dye in the cloth, so it washed out!'

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Multaka

Tunisia

Tunisia Nabeul

Earthenware bowl with bright yellow and green glaze, achieved by using iron and copper.

2018.37.236

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Tunisia has been famous for pottery and ceramics industry, and this craft has been passed from one generation to the next.'

Family Vase shared by Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Nearly every Tunisian family owns ceramics from Nabeul. My two Tunisian aunts certainly do. Modern ceramics have diverged from the traditional yellow and green colours.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Nabeul is known for its high-quality clay and its unique pottery-making techniques influenced by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Imazighen*, Andalusians and Djerbians. This bowl was made in a traditional way and belongs to '***motli***' pottery. The colours used in '***motli***' pottery are yellow and green and are believed to represent the luscious greenery of North Tunisia and the Sahara Desert of South Tunisia. The additional brown motifs could symbolise the earth.'

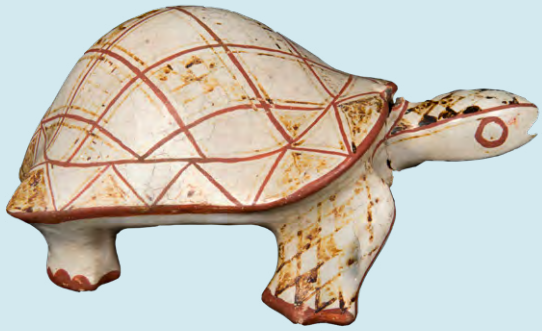
*Amazigh (plural Imazighen) is the autonym or self-name of the North African people commonly known by the term 'Berber'.

Tunisia

Photograph showing Jenny Balfour-Paul with Amazigh* potter Juma bint Mohammed. They each hold a ceramic item made by Juma, who wears a distinctive Amazigh tunic held up by two large silver fibulae.

2018.137.486

*Amazigh (plural Imazighen) is the autonym or self-name of the North African people commonly known by the term 'Berber'.



Earthenware tortoise made by potter Juma bint Mohammed.

2018.137.230

Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The tortoise is seen as a bringer of good fortune and used as a symbol of protection to keep harm away.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'What does a tortoise symbolise? Well, it is usually associated with longevity. It serves to some extent as a lucky charm, a symbol of wisdom and good health. Tortoises are also famous in Tunisia for the unique species discovered there, the 'Tunisian tortoise'. Discovered in 1990, it is a relatively small tortoise and is among the most brightly coloured.'

Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'I took time to look at Juma the young woman potter in the photo and what she was wearing. It is impossible not to think of Roman togas being held on by brooches (also called Fibulae) and the history of colonisation (of what is now northern Tunisia) by the Romans.'

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Multaka

Tunisia

Pair of silver crescent-shaped brooches, with incised decoration.

2018.37.118

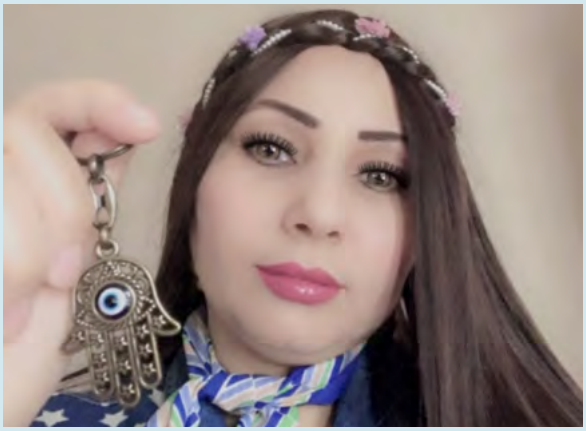
Silver ornament in the shape of the Hand of Fatima.

2018.37.125

Sarah, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The overall shape of each brooch is a crescent, which is a key symbol of Islam. These brooches also feature two birds facing each other, which, here, look similar to depictions of the falcon, an Islamic protective symbol.'

Drawing by Rawan, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:



Dhamyaa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'My friend gave this to me because she knows that I love these talismans, not because I believe in them but because they represent our Iraqi heritage.'

'The hand of Fatima is a talisman to ward off envy and magic and the symbol of a female hand is present in Islamic, Jewish and Christian heritage and can be found in the Middle East and North Africa. The hand of Fatima is named after Fatima Al-Zahraa, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. While in Judaism there is a hand of Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, and Christians in Iraq and Syria have the hand of Mary in relation to the Virgin Mary.'

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

The ***Hamsa*** is a historical symbol pre-dating Abrahamic religion. It is a symbol of protection and its name is derived from the five fingers of the hand. This is a talisman for protection from the evil eye and attracting health, fertility, fortune, wealth, and abundance to the owner.'

Antoinette, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer: 'Born from a fiery pit, the vat of lava-like molten metal pours into the mould. It is pounded into place. Nail after nail to cut each unique ridge. Methodically, it is done. He is an artist and a metalworker. The designs are intricate, religious. A token, a talisman, a reminder of hope.'

Tunisia

Shawl from southern Tunisia woven in a combination of white cotton, white wool and black-tinted wool and dyed red.

2018.37.150

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The cloth pictured here seems to be an '***ajâr***', a large shoulder cloth woven using natural wool. The motifs on it are derived from traditional silver jewellery, henna body painting and tattoos. The quality of the shawl and its colour reflect the social status of the wearer. For example, a silk shawl was reserved for the rich elite. After the shawl was woven it would be dyed red for newlywed brides and blue/black for older women. For young women of marriageable age, the beauty of their shawls anticipated the degree of prestige of their future marriage and the size of the dowry.'

After the weaving was complete, this shawl would have been dyed red, black or indigo. As the cotton resisted the dye, only the white wool accepted the tint.

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Egypt

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Egypt Siwa Oasis

Asherah nauak (bridal tunic) and ***srawelin khatem*** (trousers), part of wedding outfit from Siwa Oasis.

2018.37.42 & 2018.37.45

Siwa is a remote oasis in the Egyptian desert, not far from the Libyan border. The first road was built to the Mediterranean coast in the 1980s, but before that the main link to the outside world was by camel. This isolation fostered a unique and rich culture, particularly in clothing, jewellery, pottery and other crafts.

Jenny Balfour-Paul:

'These dresses are extraordinary, so is the jewellery and basketry from Siwa. Visited this oasis several times, loved it, fascinating and such friendly inhabitants.'

Designs that represent sharp objects or shapes with sharp corners are incorporated into embroidery on clothing, such as 'scissors', 'crescent' or 'seal'. 'Seal' incorporates triangles and is often placed at the neckline of wedding tunics or cuffs of trousers- seen as vulnerable openings for evil spirits.

Detail of embroidery on bridal tunic.

In the Western Desert of Egypt, the women of Siwa Oasis use mother-of-pearl buttons called ***tutintfukt*** in their embroidery. The sun is a common motif in Siwan embroidery with ***tutintfukt*** meaning 'eye of the sun' being deliberately chosen for their iridescence. This capability to reflect the sun's rays is thought to create a protective barrier of light over the wearer.

Silk thread is used to embroider 'hand', 'fish', 'star' and 'sun' motifs. These symbols of protection and fertility radiate from the chest like the rays of the sun.

Belief in 'the eye' is a system of thought which attributes ill-fortune, illness or other calamities to the harmful or involuntary gaze of another person. To protect themselves from the 'evil eye' people use embroidery motifs, decorations, amulets or reflective surfaces.

Srawelin khatem (trousers) are worn beneath a knee length ***asherah nauak*** (bridal tunic). Protective and solar motifs are embroidered on the trousers however the cuffs have a different design. ***Khatem*** (embroidered squares) on the cuffs are made up of twelve triangles in dense cross-stitch needlework.

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Egypt Sinai Peninsula, El Arish

Face veil ornamented with silver, gold coins, amber beads and beaded tassels.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in El Arish, 1989.
2018.37.41

Left Bedouin woman wearing a face veil ornamented with silver and gold coins. Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul, El Arish, 1989. 2018.137.1343

Right Dhamyaa at the Multaka-Oxford Festival Fashion Show.

Sally, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The local name for a face veil is Niqab and Hijab for headdress. Women use it to cover the lower part of the face (cheeks, nose, lips and chin).'

Dhamyaa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The veil has many forms, and studies have shown that the veil is present before the advent of Islam with Jewish and Christian women also wearing veils. Women have worn the metal veil in Basra, southern Iraq, for thousands of years. Some women wear it for the purpose of showing the country's heritage, but women in western Iraq wore the veil from fabric to cover their faces because they think that this is a duty imposed by Islam.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul:

'Had a fascinating trip by bus from Cairo with my family to visit this well-known market in 1989. Bought this off a stall, the seller also wearing one like this.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Not only are they considered to be beautiful, headdresses also have more practical advantages. For example, they protect the face and body during high temperatures and strong sun exposure. They also protect hair from wind and sand.'

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Egypt El Arish

Child's coat of black cotton cloth with embroidered decoration, predominantly in cross stitch.

Purchased by Jenny Balfour-Paul in El Arish, 1989.
2018.37.22

Jenny Balfour-Paul:

'I think one of the most delightful and telling designs on this child's coat is the camel and truck side by side, because at that time trucks were replacing camels for crossing desert land.'

Haf, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The embroidered patterns on this specific garment's body, consisting of a visual language of stars, trees, squares, flowers and triangles could be seen as vibrantly coloured veins that criss-cross the clothes' form, indicating lines of energy that radiate from and circulate around the wearer's physique.'

Detail hem of dress

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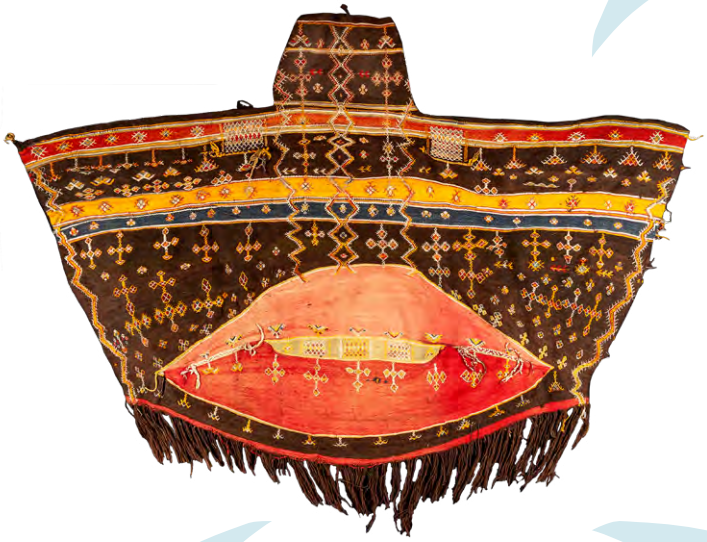
Multaka

Morocco

Morocco Anti-Atlas, Draa Valley

Hooded shepherd's ***akhnif*** (cloak) of wool and goat hair.

2018.37.207



Detail of back of ***akhnif*** cloak.

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'An '***akhnif***' is a cloak worn in Morocco by Jewish and Amazigh* men. The eye shape in its back is thought to be a protection against the evil eye. The woollen material helps to keep the shepherd warm in mountainous regions and the shape of the cloak allows for the arms and the lower part of the body to move freely.'

*Amazigh (plural Imazighen) is the autonym or self-name of the North African people commonly known by the term 'Berber'.

Eva, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'Two regions in Morocco are known for the production of carpets in particular, the Atlas Mountains and the Sirwa. Here entire families are involved in the production of carpets. Women pass down their craft from generation to generation, with girls learning to weave at the handloom at a young age, often at the expense of their education, and sought after as brides for their skills. Recently, several initiatives devoted to empowering women weavers of Morocco have emerged, putting women at the forefront of their own businesses.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul:

'This shepherd's cloak is woven in a single piece with wool embroidery all over the cape. The large half-moon shape is said to represent a river flowing through a garden of flowers.'

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Multaka

Morocco Fez

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The numerous stone vats are filled with different coloured dyes and white liquids. The white liquids are made from various mixtures of cow's urine, pigeon faeces, salt, water, etc. Hides are processed by first soaking in the white liquids in order to clean and soften the tough skins and prepare them to readily absorb the dyes.'

Morocco, Fez, 1977
Large stone vats at a tannery in the city of Fez. Men sit within the vats, immersing animal hides in the red dye.
Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul.
2018.137.304

Morocco, Fez, 1977
Animal hides drying in the sun after being dyed red.
Photograph taken by Jenny Balfour-Paul.
2018.137.301

Eva, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The city's Old Medina is home to three ancient leather tanneries, where the skins of cows, sheep, goats and camels are washed, treated, smoothed and coloured. The process, remaining virtually unaltered for centuries, is extremely strenuous, with men standing waist deep in the pits under a scorching sun, kneading the hides with their bare feet while a nauseating stench fills the air. Visitors to the tanneries are given sprigs of fresh mint to overcome the smell.

'Old tanneries still use natural vegetable dyes made of poppy flowers for red, indigo for blue, henna for orange, cedar wood for brown, mint for green and saffron for yellow, as well as pomegranate powder, rubbed on the skins to turn them yellow, and olive oil to make them glossy.'

Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'After the dyeing, the hides are dried under the sun. The resulting leather is then sold to other craftsmen, who use it to produce Morocco's famed leather goods.'

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Mali

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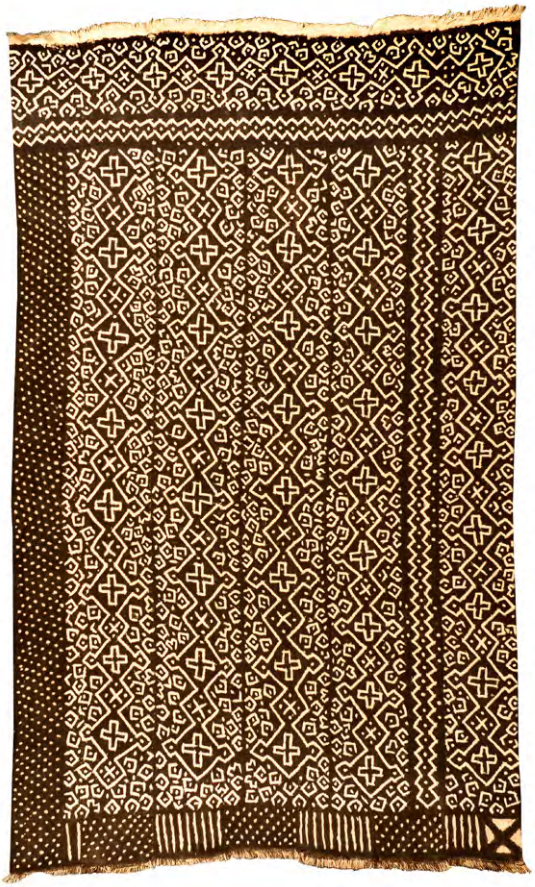
Mali San

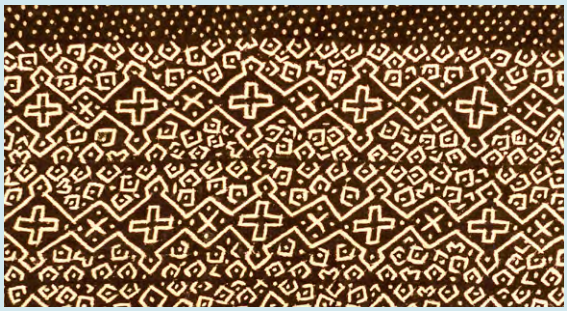
Woven cotton ***bògòlanfini*** (mud cloth).

2018.37.204



Sanâa, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'The ***bògòlan*** was first commercialised in the 1970s in Mali before acquiring worldwide fame through the fashion shows of Chris Seydou in the 1980s. Nowadays, we have seen the traditional Malian cloth worn by some of the most famous African American celebrities such as Michelle Obama and Beyoncé. The ***bògòlan*** has become a symbol of African culture, power and beauty.'



Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'***Bògòlanfini*** is a traditional highly symbolic cloth of earthy colours produced by spinning cotton, then weaving long strips of white cotton which are sewn together. The strips are then dyed with a mordant or fix made from the leaves of the ***n'gallama*** and ***n'tjankara*** trees, and painted with fermented mud to make patterns in negative relief. The unpainted yellow or white designs are later retraced with a bleaching solution made from peanuts, water, caustic soda and millet bran.'

'***Bògòlan*** cloth is produced mainly, but not exclusively by the Bambara/Bamanan community. The cloth speaks its own language of ritual and symbolic significance within the local belief system, for those who can read the images and understand the stories and knowledge the patterns are conveying.'

Haf, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'What I find fascinating is how the cloth is reflective of the land and environment from which it has blossomed. Earth, plants, the heat from the sun and sweat from labour help create these beautiful and tactile textiles that are individually as unique as any painting or sculpture.'

Bògòlanfini (mud cloths) dry in the sun after being washed in a lake near San. Photograph by Jenny Balfour-Paul in 1997.

2018.137.1623

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Mauritania & Senegal

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Mauritania Kaédi

Boubou (cotton tunic) dyed with indigo.

2018.37.180

Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'I have a similar garment at home made in 1989 in Bamako the capital of Mali, one of the countries which borders Mauritania. This boubou is made from a single piece of imported damask cotton cloth which has then been dyed with indigo using stitch resist to keep some parts of the pattern white during the dyeing process. The bottom section is given extra dips into the indigo vat to produce a deeper colour. This becomes even more metallic-looking after it has been heated during the blows of traditional ironing, hammering and starching to make the finished cloth.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'Factory made cotton is cut into strips and patterned by a pleated and tied resist before dying in indigo and joining the strips together.'

'This stitch resist piece was bought at Kaedi, across the river by canoe from Senegal. This big dress is at least 25 years old and worn for special occasions. Dyed by Soninke dyer Habibata Kanyé at Yusuk Jagang.'

Lynn, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer:

'This garment from Mauritania shares some of the characteristics of garments worn by other desert and pastoralist people (such as the Tuareg and the Fulani) as they are cool, which allows air to blow through them, but at the same time they protect from the sun.'

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Senegal Bakel

Stitch-resist indigo-dyed cotton cloth.

2018.37.177

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'The most astonishing stitch-resist work of all was created for ceremonial use by Soninké and Wolof people along the Senegal river. They embroidered fabric in intricate detail before dyeing it in indigo. When the embroidery threads were removed after dyeing, patterns appeared like embroidery ghosts floating on a backdrop of midnight sky.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'Stitch resist cloths from the compound of Habibata Diachité and Mana Traowé (her mother) at Modinkané quarter of Bakel. The dyeing was done by Assa Kebbé in a different compound nearby. It takes 5-8 days to make the vat. Then the cloth is soaked about 6 hours, dried in between and resoaked about 3 times.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul writes:

'Cotton reached Senegal in the eleventh century, and indigo-dyed threads from the twelfth century have been found in textiles from Mali. When the Portuguese arrived in West Africa in the fifteenth century, they found an active indigo industry which they promoted, and many indigo dyeing techniques seem to have spread from further north into the rest of West Africa via Senegal.'

It is only in Bakel that ***gara*** (indigo) is still being actively cultivated locally.

Indigo plants are grown annually from seed, sown in the rainy season and harvested three months later.

Decoration is formed using stitch-resist. This is achieved by hand stitching directly onto cotton cloth, which is then repeatedly immersed in a vat of indigo dye. Once the indigo shade is dark enough immersion is halted and the stitches are unpicked revealing intricate white detailing.

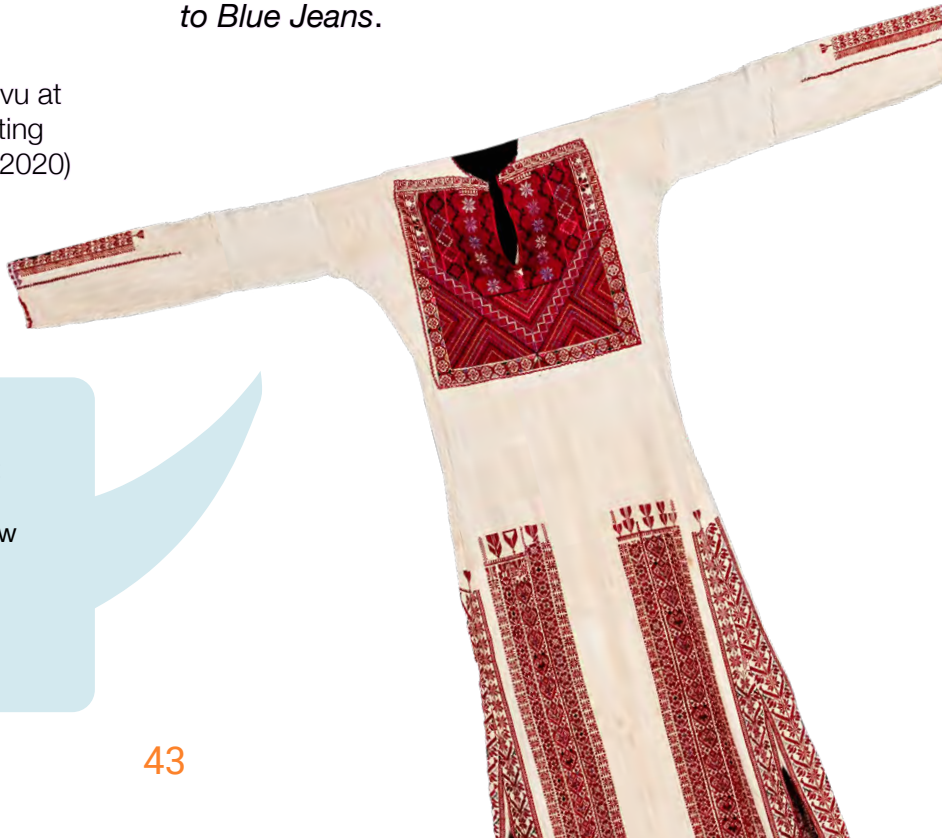
Dr Jenny Balfour-Paul

> *Travels and textiles have for me been interwoven ever since this first long journey East on an overland anti-hippy trail to India in 1970.*
>
> Jenny Balfour-Paul

Photograph of Jenny Balfour-Paul and Multaka-Oxford Volunteer Navigator Ndholvu at the opening night of the 'Multaka: Connecting Threads' exhibition (April 2019 – February 2020)

Dr Jenny Balfour-Paul is a researcher, artist, dyer, curator, collector of worldwide textiles and a renowned expert on indigo dye. She has been publishing, lecturing, exhibiting and broadcasting on indigo and related subjects for thirty years.

In 2016, she donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum a collection of textiles purchased while living and travelling around the Middle East and North Africa in the 1970s with her late husband Glencairn Balfour-Paul, returning there and to West Africa in the 1980s and 90s while working on her PhD 'Indigo in the Arab World' and British Museum publication *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*.



Jenny Balfour-Paul

'This is another favourite - believe it or not I used to wear this to parties in the 1970s! By the 1990s I was keeping it safe and now the museum is doing so, and others are interpreting it and enjoying it.'

Dress from Ramallah, see page 14 for more information. 2018.37.19

What is the Multaka-Oxford project?

> *Here at the museum, we see we share a human history and culture. We see we are similar. Through similarities, we meet together.*
>
> Multaka-Oxford Volunteer

Multaka-Oxford is a collaborative project delivered by the Pitt Rivers Museum and the History of Science Museum at the University of Oxford. The programme has been running since 2016 and has supported over sixty local people, many of whom have recently settled in Oxford.

Multaka is about creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue. As part of the programme, staff and volunteers develop events, activities and exhibitions that open up ways of connecting museum objects with the rich histories and cultures they represent.

Multaka-Oxford Collections

The Multaka-Oxford team work with two main collections:

The Jenny Balfour-Paul collection of 'Textiles from the Arab World' at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Islamic scientific instructions at the History of Science Museum.

Multaka-Oxford Partnerships

Multaka-Oxford works in partnership with the following community partners:

Asylum Welcome
Connection Support
Refugee Resource
Syrian Sisters
Aspire
Iraqi Women Art and War

Weaving Connections

Acknowledgements

Online Exhibition Curators, Pitt Rivers Museum

Joanna Cole, Multaka-Oxford Project Assistant
Navigator Ndholvu, Multaka-Oxford Volunteer
Julia Nicholson, Curator and Head of Object Collections
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Hiba Korial
Antoinette Nguyen
Lynn Taylor
Suheer Toubein

With special thanks to

Nuha Abdo
Reem Alalaf
Jenny Balfour-Paul
Faye Belsey
Abigael Flack
Widad Kawar
Sheila Paine
Margaret Mary Vale
Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood
Shelagh Weir

Exhibition Production

Nicola Bird, Multaka-Oxford Project Manager
Creative Jay, Exhibition Design
Tim Myatt, Web Design
Suzy Prior, Textile and Artefact Photography

Generously supported by

Claire Barnes
Dr Laura Fan

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Key Publications

Jenny Balfour-Paul, *Indigo in the Arab World* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997)

Jenny Balfour-Paul, *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*, new edn (London: British Museum Press, 2011)

Akram Fouad Khater, '"House" to "Goddess of the House": Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (August 1996), pp. 325–48.

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Christopher Spring and Julie Hudson, *North African Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1995)

Margaret Mary Vale, *Sand and Silver: Jewellery, Costume, and Life in the Siwa Oasis* (Layerthorpe, York: Kelim Press, 2011)

Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)

Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Embroidery: A Village Arab Craft* (London: British Museum, 1970)

Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costume* (London: British Museum Publications, 1989)