

Palestinian History Tapestry Exhibition Report - a Great Success

The Oxford-Ramallah Friendship Association (ORFA) was founded in 2002, and the Association was delighted when Oxford and Ramallah became formally twinned in 2019. This reflected the success of ORFA's projects, which had received support from Councillors and Mayors of Oxford over the years.

In August 2020, ORFA established a formal partnership with the Palestinian History Tapestry (PHT) Project, which had also been initiated in Oxford, in 2011. In September 2021, ORFA and PHT collaborated in bringing 47 panels of the spectacular Palestinian History Tapestry to a special exhibition in Oxford Town Hall.

The Town Hall is at the civic heart of Oxford and civil society, with open access for the community. Over 20 volunteers helped to set up and staff the PHT exhibition, which was open for 4 days between 24 and 28 September and visited by over 350 people.



Ten original embroideries stitched by women in Al Amari refugee camp, Ramallah were displayed. Other parts of the exhibition used glicée prints - excellent photographic copies of panels, showing the detail of every stitch. Introductory information and handouts were available giving details of the Ramallah embroideries and the glicée prints.



Photo by Alexander Clovis

The prints were grouped as follows:

- Fourteen glicée prints showing historical eras in pre-1948 Palestine
- Ten glicée prints showing ongoing attempts to uproot Palestinian identity and steadfastness
- Thirteen glicée prints showing ongoing Palestinian steadfastness (sumud) and resistance in response to the continuing Nakba [Catastrophe].



There was a looped digital display showing all 100+ panels currently constituting the full Tapestry.

A short film made by the Pitt Rivers Museum featured Jihan Alfarra and Shaymaa Alwaheidi demonstrating traditional embroidery stitches. Another short film showed images of the Tapestry accompanied by the voice of Mahmoud Darwish, reciting his poem 'On This Land', and by music from the Trio Joubran.



Beautifully embroidered items, prints, books, and postcards were sold in support of the women embroiderers who stitch for the Palestinian History Tapestry Project.



Photo by Alexander Clovis

Some visitors' comments regarding the Exhibition:

"Beautiful and deeply moving." RM

"Thank you! Beautifully designed and exquisite and thoughtful craftsmanship" JK

"Thanks a lot for organising this exhibition. I am very interested and very happy to see that here - as a Palestinian - (Palestinian) women's lives in Oxford city. I'm grateful for that and thank you very much." HK



"A wonderful exhibition with beautiful work which conveys both facts and feelings very powerfully. Thank you to all the artists and organisers." ML (Museum of Oxford)

"Lovely to 'see' the voices of women of Palestine expressing their joys, fears, loves and history. A big thank you to all who have created this." PB

"Many thanks for the beautiful works and extensive project which reinforces the links between Oxford and Palestine and contributes to our education and understanding of an ongoing situation of oppression." BC

"Fantastic exhibition. Very enlightening and beautifully presented. I now understand" LJ

"..... An expression of a people's history through art is such a powerful tool. The information in the captions does not attempt to incite or judge, but presents the facts, leaving the reader to reflect and contemplate. Thank you. HA (University of Oxford Museums)

Opening Event and Speeches

To give context to the exhibition, speakers involved with ORFA and PHT gave short talks at an enjoyable opening event.

Nikki Marriott, secretary of ORFA, opened the event by introducing the speakers.



Tony Richardson, chair of ORFA, explained that the Tapestry is an important part of Oxford-Ramallah twinning. "We want to link people with people and the Tapestry helps us do that. The tradition of embroidery is at the centre of Palestinian cultural tradition."

Photo by Alexander Clovis

Jihan Alfarra, co-chair of the Palestinian History Tapestry (PHT) Project, explained that PHT had been inspired by the Xhosa people's Keiskamma Tapestry, now on display in the South African Parliament House. PHT has provided an opportunity for Palestinian women in Gaza, the West Bank, the Naqab, Jordan and Lebanon to contribute collectively to the PHT. Women have been paid for their work, an important help in their daily lives. Jihan pointed out that the Tapestry "is a living thing, 100 panels now, but still growing".



Photo by Alexander Clovis

She emphasised that these works of art "teach a lesson from history". The hope is to see the Tapestry on display in a free Palestine, just as the post-apartheid South African (Keiskamma) Tapestry is on permanent display in the Parliament House in Cape Town. For now, Oxford is the Tapestry's home.



Photo by Alexander Clovis

Steve Goddard (Deputy Lord Mayor of Oxford) formally declared the exhibition open. He remarked on the sheer length of history represented in the exhibition and the combination of many different styles of embroidery. He said that Oxford is "proud and honoured to be the current home of the tapestry".

Avi Shlaim (Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the British Academy). Prof. Avi Shlaim underlined the importance of the exhibition as a cooperative venture between PHT and ORFA. As a proud patron of both organisations, he explained that he shares in the underlying commitment to justice for the Palestinians. He described the challenging times facing Palestinians, confronted as they are by an extreme and vicious form of Imperialism in the guise of Zionist settler colonialism.



Photo by Alexander Clovis

He explained that support and sympathy for Palestine is more important than ever. Britain bears the largest share of the responsibility for the loss of Palestine.

Avi explained his view that: the best possibility for change comes from civil society, from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, for example. The BDS movement aims to end the illegal occupation of Palestinian land and to implement the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes. This is the proper context for the work of ORFA and PHT, which have provided connections within the West Bank, divided as it is into enclaves by the Apartheid Wall, it brings people together.

Some visitors' comments from the opening event:

"A wonderful learning opportunity! I am absolutely delighted to have been able to take part in such an informative curation of art and history. Excited to observe the future prosperity of this". AC

"A wonderful chance to learn more about the Palestinian History Tapestry project and hear the stories of all those involved. The artwork is beautiful and so full of meaning, passion and history." JE



Photo by Alexander Clovis

Acknowledgements

The PHT Project is indebted to ORFA for all the detailed and careful planning that made this exhibition the great success that it was.

Both ORFA and the PHT Project are grateful to the opening night speakers; LB's for providing Palestinian food; all the exhibition volunteers; Oxford Town Hall's Events Team; Complete Presentation Ltd (<http://www.completepresentation.co.uk>) for providing the display boards and for their support and efficiency; the Pitt Rivers Museum for permission to use its embroidery film; to Alexander Clovis for taking photos at the exhibition opening (<https://xanderclovis.squarespace.com>); and the visitors to the exhibition who gave such encouraging feedback.

Finally, we thank all those who created the Tapestry's beautiful and powerful embroideries.



ORFA and PHT Project Report dated: November 2021