

Pieces of Palestine

On show in Melbourne – Australia



"People without Land" collage

INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2005, there has been very little good to write about on the happenings in Palestine: if anything, the situation is getting worse with no independent state of Palestine in sight, or even any hint of reviving the roadmap for peace. Israel, as usual, is doing its utmost to carve up large chunks of Palestinian land and to divide and separate the individual towns and villages, not only from each other, but also in two. It is beyond the realms of most people's imagination to feel what it would be like to live in one part of their city or town and not be able to visit friends or relatives or go to work, school, or shop in the other part because a great wall cuts across the city preventing any movement between the two halves.

These are the fragmented pieces of Palestine that are being ruthlessly created by the Wall, the expanded settlements, the land appropriations, the razings and the bulldozings, and the apartheid conditions, under which the Palestinians are expected to live. Of course, this fragmentation of Palestinian land began as soon as Israel was created more than half a century ago. Since then, Palestinians have fought desperately to hang on to the pieces of their homeland in any way they can, and while parts of their homeland have forcibly slipped out of their grasp, they have found other ways of hanging on.

SHOWING THE PIECES

In Melbourne, Australians saw an exhibition of Palestinian embroidery and artefacts that gives the lie to Israel's claims that the Palestinians have no history or culture. Anyone seeing the few really old dresses on display would have found it impossible to accept that the rich colours, symbols and meanings stitched into patterns and designs more than 200 years ago could be anything other than a people's continuous history spanning generations. Also, one would have to ask why women would continue this arduous task under the most terrible conditions in which they now find themselves unless there was already something burning in their veins that refuses to accept the monumental disaster inflicted on their people? The answer soon revealed itself in various ways throughout the exhibition.

The calamitous events of 1948 and 1967 are important to any understanding of the Palestinian situation and we simply could not show the beautiful works emerging from the tragic Palestinian narrative without finding a way of giving that narrative expression. For this reason, we included the panels of collage entitled "Dispossession: Parts of a Whole" which were put together by Melbourne artist Dora McPhee for *Women for Palestine* in 2002. Many people were drawn to the powerful narrative as they made their way up to the exhibition space. By the time visitors saw the embroidered items on display, they could better appreciate the desperate circumstances that have driven so many

women to embroider the language of their heritage into works for sale. More importantly, this was not just selling for gain, but a way of preserving their fragile heritage, which is even now, under attack.

We were gratified that Australians were keen to see and learn more. Both men and women were equally interested in the history of cultural development in pre-1948 Palestine and the subsequent struggle to preserve Palestinian traditions under Israel's 57-year siege and occupation. Siham Abou-Ghazaleh, the founder and

a director of the Centre for Palestinian Culture in Amman, Jordan soon had an audience for her explanations of the language hidden in each embroidered piece and how one could easily identify from which region of Palestine the various designs had come. It was fascinating to watch people - the men particularly - scan the pieces on display to see how well they could read what had been stitched in such intricate detail into the various items. And, we knew that the exhibition had sparked more than the usual interest when some Australians returned with samples of their own

embroidered pieces they had collected on their travels. Very few people left without buying at least some embroidered items, and surprisingly, some of the most traditional dresses and jackets, as well as the most costly ones, were bought by Australians.

The exhibition provided a rare opportunity to see early 19th century costumes from Ramallah, Beersheba, Bethlehem, Galilee, and Beit Dajan. The girls who modelled them during the exhibition's opening brought them to life again and it was not difficult to imagine the Palestinians who had worn them all those years ago little suspecting then that their clothes would become the pieces of Palestine that would document their very existence. In her talk, Siham Abou Ghazaleh showed photographs of Palestinians living in cities and towns long before they were destroyed or occupied and it was evident from the richness of the costumes that Palestinian society had evolved over centuries. She also explained how those traditions had nearly vanished, when a whole generation of Palestinian women lost sight of their cultural heritage because their world had been turned upside down. Every day became a fight for survival and having to deal with displacement and total dispossession as Israel hunted them out of their homes and their communities forcing them to live in permanent exile as refugees.

Women for Palestine wanted to show Melbourne audiences pieces of the past and pieces of the very best embroideries being worked on by the Palestinian refugee women in the camps in Jordan and elsewhere. This meant that a lot of work had to be done by women on both sides of the world.



WFP members setting up the exhibition