

The Impact of Symbolic Motifs on the Cultural Identity of Palestinian Tatreez

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Abstract: Tatreez, or traditional Palestinian embroidery, constitutes a significant element of women’s cultural heritage in Palestine. Beyond its decorative function, it operates as a visual medium for expressing cultural and social identity. Rooted in local historical traditions, tatreez employs geometric motifs imbued with symbolic meanings that have historically conveyed women’s geographical origins, social status, and cultural beliefs through traditional garments. Following the political transformations of 1948, the significance of tatreez intensified. It transcended its role as a domestic craft and emerged as a powerful tool of cultural resistance, collective memory preservation, and national identity reconstruction. Through the use of diverse embroidery techniques, Palestinian women articulated personal and collective narratives in a durable and visually expressive form. This study aims to identify the symbolic and geometric motifs of Palestinian tatreez and to examine its cultural significance through a literature-based and interdisciplinary approach. The central research question addresses how Palestinian tatreez evolved from a manual craft into a culturally meaningful visual language. The findings, derived from a descriptive–comparative analysis of historical and contemporary examples, demonstrate that tatreez maintains an active presence not only in traditional dress but also in contemporary art, fashion design, and cultural activism. Serving as a bridge between past and present, tatreez offers new possibilities for reinterpreting heritage and generating contemporary meanings. Accordingly, Palestinian tatreez can be understood as a complex cultural system that simultaneously preserves long-standing traditions and inspires innovative creative practices.

Keywords:

Tatreez
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Cultural Heritage
Resistance

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1. Introduction

Traditional crafts in different societies serve not only aesthetic purposes but also function as carriers of cultural, social, and historical meanings. These practices are closely intertwined with everyday life, social structures, and value systems, and therefore provide valuable insights into the cultural identities and lived experiences of human communities. In many cultures, handicrafts, particularly those associated with clothing, have become media for conveying symbols, beliefs, and collective narratives, thus assuming communicative and identity-forming roles beyond mere decoration.

Within this context, Palestinian tatreez occupies a distinctive position. This traditional form of embroidery, characterized by geometric and symbolic motifs applied to local garments, especially women’s dress, articulates the history, beliefs, and lived experiences of Palestinian society. Tatreez is not merely a manual skill; rather, it constitutes a system of visual signs transmitted across generations and transformed within diverse social and geographical contexts. Over time, it became a defining element of Palestinian women’s attire and gradually evolved into an integral component of the community’s visual and cultural identity. The selection of motifs, color

combinations, and their placement on garments conveyed information about regional origin, social status, and cultural affiliation.

Women have played a central role in preserving and sustaining tatreez. Palestinian women, particularly in contexts of migration, forced displacement, and resettlement, continued to practice tatreez as a means of maintaining collective memory and expressing cultural identity. Consequently, this craft transcended its decorative function and emerged as a cultural medium that enabled connections with the past, the redefinition of identity, and symbolic resistance to cultural erasure. From this perspective, tatreez can be understood as a significant expression of cultural continuity in the face of historical and social ruptures.

In the contemporary period, Palestinian tatreez is no longer confined to traditional clothing and has gained an active presence in the fields of contemporary art, fashion design, and cultural activism. The reinterpretation of traditional motifs in new forms reflects the dynamism of this practice and its capacity to adapt to contemporary visual languages. The primary technique of tatreez, cross-stitch embroidery, is based on geometric order, repetitive patterns, and carefully balanced color schemes, endowing it with notable aesthetic and structural qualities. These characteristics have enabled tatreez to function as a visual language capable of conveying meaning through form and pattern.

A cultural analysis of tatreez demonstrates that this local practice plays a role far beyond that of a decorative or artistic activity. It can be examined as a mode of cultural continuity and identity reproduction within the context of Palestine's historical and social transformations. Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship has focused either on the historical and ethnographic dimensions of tatreez or has examined it solely within the framework of handicrafts. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to tatreez as a meaning-making visual system. Accordingly, the present study addresses the question of how Palestinian tatreez evolved from a manual craft into a culturally significant visual language. By identifying symbolic and geometric motifs and examining their cultural significance through textual sources and visual examples, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the role of tatreez in shaping and sustaining Palestinian cultural identity.

2. Research Background

The earliest systematic efforts to document and archive Palestinian tatreez date back to the 1960s, a period during which Palestinian researchers and artists responded to the threat of cultural loss and discontinuity by collecting and recording traditional motifs. One of the most significant works of this period is *Dalil فن التطريز الفلسطيني* (1962), which compiled over 260 motifs from various regions of Palestine and laid the groundwork for subsequent studies. By emphasizing precise pattern documentation, color coding, and the preservation of decorative authenticity, this publication became a key reference in the documentation of tatreez. Nevertheless, its approach remains largely descriptive and archival, with limited engagement in the analysis of cultural meanings and social functions of the motifs.

In subsequent decades, historical–descriptive studies expanded, and works such as *The Art of Palestinian Embroidery* (2005) by Leila Al-Khalidi sought to situate tatreez within a broader historical and cultural framework. By examining the origins of techniques, the transmission of symbols, and the role of dress in expressing cultural identity, this study moved beyond mere documentation. However, its primary focus remained on historical narratives, museum collections, and descriptive accounts of garments, while a systematic analysis of tatreez as a visual language received limited attention.

Along similar lines, *Palestinian Embroidery Motifs: A Treasury of Stitches 1850–1950* (2007) by Kawar presented a classified archive of motifs based on region, historical period, and visual characteristics, thereby enabling comparative analysis of stylistic transformations. The significance of this work lies in its demonstration of stylistic change and the role of tatreez in the reproduction of cultural identity, particularly in the context of migration and separation from the homeland. Nonetheless, the study remains largely focused on data organization and historical

reconstruction, offering limited insight into the cultural significance of tatreez within the lived experiences of Palestinian women.

From the 2010s onward, research gradually shifted toward contemporary, educational, and narrative-oriented approaches. Works such as *Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora* (2018) and *Seventeen Embroidery Techniques from Palestine: An Instruction Manual* (2019) emphasize storytelling, intergenerational transmission, and technical instruction. These studies demonstrate how tatreez functions as a medium for preserving collective memory in diasporic contexts; however, their primary focus lies on individual experiences, practical training, and skill revitalization rather than on the symbolic structures of the motifs themselves.

More recently, cultural, semiotic, and political approaches have emerged that analyze tatreez within the frameworks of collective memory, matrilineal heritage, and symbolic resistance. Studies such as *Diaspora and Tatreez: Reflections in Stitch* (2021) and *Tatreez Companion: Palestinian Embroidery Study Booklet* (2024) examine motifs and colors as carriers of political, identity-related, and historical meanings, while also addressing issues of cultural appropriation and the importance of digital documentation. Although these studies open new perspectives on tatreez, they tend to focus primarily on contemporary contexts, cultural politics, or diaspora studies, leaving a comprehensive and independent analysis of the visual and symbolic components of tatreez within the Palestinian cultural context relatively underexplored.

Overall, the review of existing literature indicates that despite extensive research on techniques, historical development, motif classification, and even political dimensions of Palestinian tatreez, its cultural role as a visual language and a meaning-making system, through which geometric and symbolic motifs articulate identity, belonging, and collective memory, has not been sufficiently examined in a focused and analytical manner. Most studies emphasize documentation, instruction, or historical and contemporary narratives, while the relationship between visual structures and their cultural and social meanings remains underdeveloped. Accordingly, the present article seeks to address this research gap by analyzing the geometric and symbolic motifs of tatreez within the Palestinian cultural context, approaching tatreez not merely as a manual craft or decorative art, but as a cultural visual language and a medium for the reproduction of identity and collective narrative.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on a systematic review of existing sources, aiming to examine the cultural significance of Palestinian tatreez and to trace its historical development through archival documents, museum collections, and scholarly literature. To this end, books, peer-reviewed articles, and specialized catalogs related to Palestinian embroidery were carefully analyzed. In addition, visual materials and documented examples of tatreez were examined through reputable online platforms, particularly digital museum collections such as those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To clarify certain historical details, terminology related to embroidery techniques, and regional variations, correspondence was conducted with several specialists and researchers working in the fields of Palestinian heritage and cultural studies. These communications were consultative in nature and were not conducted as formal or structured interviews; rather, they served as supplementary sources to enhance the accuracy and contextual depth of the analysis.

The analytical framework of this research is not confined to a single sample, region, or historical period. Instead, the study deliberately approaches Palestinian tatreez as a dynamic and transhistorical cultural phenomenon. Accordingly, the examined examples encompass works from diverse regions of Palestine and various chronological periods, as documented in written sources, museum archives, and visual records. This broad temporal and geographical scope enables the identification of recurring patterns, the continuity of symbolic motifs, and shifts in the cultural functions of tatreez over time.

During the analytical phase, textual and visual data were organized through a comparative method combined with thematic note-taking. Key themes, including embroidery techniques, visual characteristics of motifs, regional distinctions, social roles, symbolic meanings, and contemporary transformations, were identified and analyzed. The primary focus of the analysis was not on the quantity of samples, but on the recurrence of meanings, the stability of visual structures, and the ways in which cultural identity is reproduced across different sources. Through this source-based and comparative approach, the study seeks to present an integrated understanding of the cultural role of Palestinian *tatreez* and its function in articulating identity and collective memory.

4. Discussion

Since the Middle Ages, the principal cities of the Syrian–Palestinian region, such as Damascus (al-Shām), Aleppo, and Hama, have been recognized not only as major centers of textile trade but also for their distinguished traditions of weaving. By the fourteenth/twentieth century, small-scale looms could be found in most villages, producing simple fabrics that met local and personal needs. Prior to the Second World War in Palestine, the town of Majdal, located approximately thirty kilometers from Gaza, took pride in possessing nearly five hundred weaving looms, a distinction that was by no means unique to this locality (Baker, 2006: 185).

This longstanding appreciation extended beyond weaving to include *tatreez*, or traditional Palestinian embroidery (*Palestinian Tatreez*), which constitutes one of the most significant cultural and artistic expressions of the Palestinian people and is closely intertwined with their identity (Fig. 1). While *tatreez* may be compared to counted-thread embroidery techniques, it embodies a distinct cultural identity. This traditional art form is not merely a manual craft; rather, it functions as a powerful symbol of national identity, cultural resistance, and the historical creativity of Palestinian women. Typically executed on women’s traditional garments such as the *thobe* (Fig. 2), Palestinian *tatreez* displays remarkable diversity in terms of technique, patterns, colors, and meanings, each reflecting the culture, geography, and history of specific Palestinian regions.

The incorporation of *tatreez* into the traditional *thobe* is therefore not purely decorative but operates as a visual language. Through the selection of threads, colors, and motifs used to embroider and adorn her garment, a woman articulates narratives of her life, ancestry, geographical belonging, and relationship to the land through needlework. Each *thobe* thus signifies the village, tribe, or city to which its wearer belongs, while also conveying aspects of her marital status and the extent to which her life has been shaped by religious influence, colonial intervention, or warfare (Muaddi & Ghnaim, 2024, para. 3).



Figure 1. Detail of a Palestinian *tatreez* sample, highlighting stitching techniques and textile structure (Muaddi & Ghnaim, 2024).

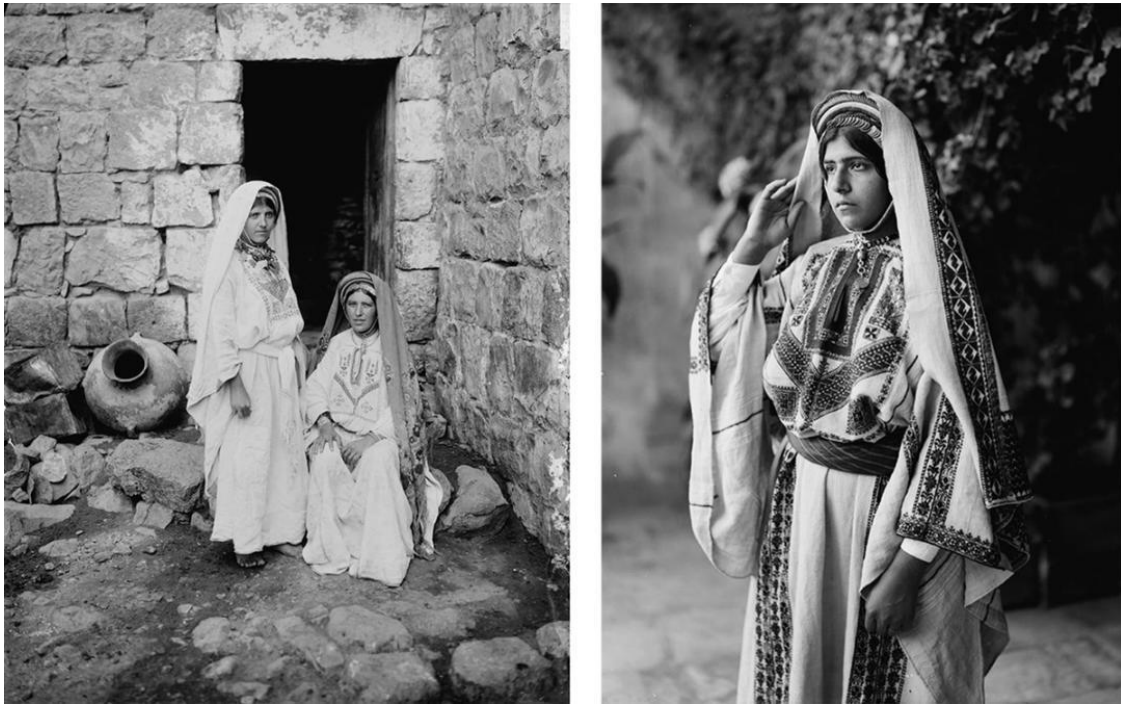


Figure 2. Right: Young woman wearing a white *thob* as a bridal garment, early twentieth century. Left: Women from Ramallah wearing white *thob* as everyday dress, late nineteenth century. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection ([Ghanian, 2024](#)).

It is also possible to trace the passage of time through the types of decorative elements used in clothing; accordingly, bridal robes up to approximately a decade before 1930 differed in form and construction, featuring front seams that were concealed and ornamented with internal stitching, whereas after the war, the tailoring of these garments underwent a noticeable transformation ([Baker, 2006: 186](#)) (Fig. 3).

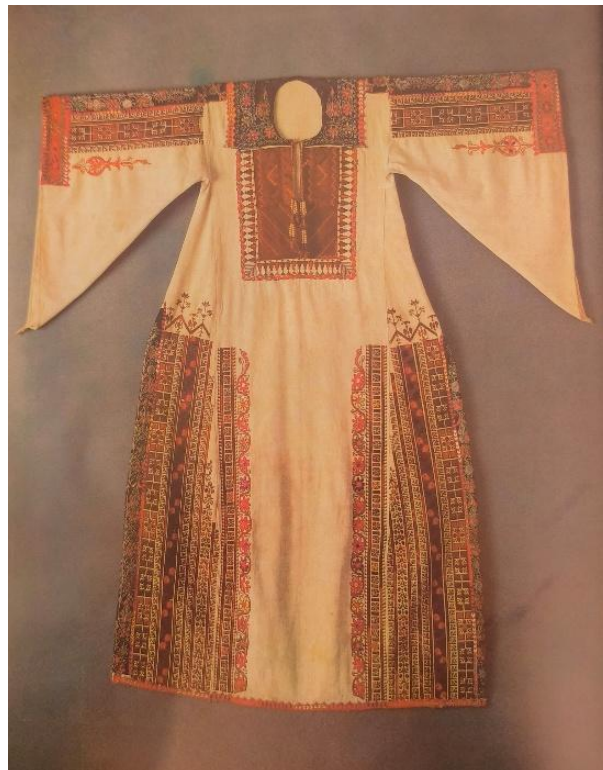


Figure 3. *Thob al-Na'ani*: Palestinian garment featuring couching and metallic embroidery on the sleeves, shoulders, and side seams, with cross-stitch motifs on other sections, early 1930s ([Baker, 2006: 187](#)).

The history and origins of Palestinian tatreez date back several centuries and have traditionally been prevalent among rural women in Palestine (Fig. 4). This art form served as a means to decorate both everyday and ceremonial garments and, in many cases, conveyed information about social status, family position, and even the economic condition of the wearer. Palestinian women were introduced to embroidery skills from early childhood, and the practice was transmitted intergenerationally as a form of inherited knowledge. Each region of Palestine, including Hebron (al-Khalil), Nablus, Jaffa, and Gaza, developed its own distinctive styles and patterns, reflecting the cultural and geographical differences of each locality. Techniques and materials commonly used in Palestinian tatreez primarily involve colored threads applied to plain or cotton fabrics. One of the most prominent features of this art is the use of red and black threads, which dominate the majority of patterns; however, depending on the region and the artisan's preference, other colors such as blue, green, yellow, and white are also employed (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Rural Palestinian women wearing tatreez garments (Droeshout, 2023). Mother and child dressed in Palestinian tatreez, 1930s, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut (Ghanian, 2024).



Figure 5. Front and reverse views of a nineteenth-century Palestinian tatreez sample made of cotton and silk, Collection of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (Guner, 2023).

The techniques employed in Palestinian tatreez include cross-stitch, running stitch, and floral embroidery. Each of these techniques contributes to the creation of a distinct texture and visual effect within the patterns, enabling the production of intricate and diverse designs. A defining feature of Palestinian tatreez is the variety of motifs and their embedded symbolic meanings. These motifs can be geometric, vegetal, or represent animals and birds (Fig. 6). For example, geometric motifs, such as lines, squares, and triangles, are commonly used along the borders of garments and shawls. Vegetal and floral motifs symbolize nature and fertility and are frequently observed across many rural areas (Fig. 7).



Figure 6. Use of bird motifs in Palestinian tatreez decoration (Droeshout, 2023).



Figure 7. Examples of common motifs in Palestinian tatreez (from right to left): cypress, oak, grapevine, and duck (Mansour & Anani, 1960: 3–66).

Some motifs in Palestinian tatreez represent local elements such as mountains, rivers, or olive trees, reflecting the geography of the artist's environment. The social and cultural significance of Palestinian embroidery extends beyond decorative purposes; it also conveys cultural and societal messages. For instance, the eight-pointed star, frequently cited in multiple sources, is not merely a geometric design. It functions as a regional and geographical marker, indicating the area or locality from which the piece originates. Palestine is among the few regions that have preserved this ancient symbol within a wider corpus of global indigenous arts (Muaddi & Ghnaim, 2024, para. 12). Some motifs indicate an individual's social or religious status, while others symbolize Palestinian resistance and national identity.

Historically, Palestinian women have used tatreez to preserve their cultural identity. In the context of migration, occupation, and adverse conditions, this art has become a symbol of resilience and a tangible connection to their land and culture.

One of the primary applications of Palestinian tatreez is the decoration of traditional women's garments, particularly the *thob*. These robes are typically long and loose, worn in everyday life as well as during festive occasions. The motifs and colors employed in each *thob* can convey information about the wearer's village of origin, marital status, age, and even political affiliations. Sleeves, collars, and hems usually contain the most elaborate embellishments, and in some cases, the entire garment is adorned with intricate and detailed patterns.

In recent years, Palestinian tatreez has entered the realm of contemporary fashion and global handicrafts. Palestinian artists and designers have sought to combine traditional motifs with modern styles, applying them to contemporary clothing, bags, scarves, wall hangings, and shoes. This approach has elevated tatreez beyond a traditional art form to a tool for cultural and economic empowerment. Numerous organizations and international brands utilize this art to produce

culturally valuable products, providing Palestinian women with opportunities for income generation and global cultural representation.

Each motif in Palestinian tatreez carries specific cultural meanings. For example, olive tree patterns symbolize peace and stability, floral motifs represent fertility and life, and certain geometric patterns convey resistance and national identity. In this way, tatreez transcends visual artistry to function as a visual language, allowing Palestinian women to communicate stories, emotions, and cultural messages (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of Motif Diversity in Palestinian Tatreez and Their Symbolic Meanings (by Author)

| Motif Type | Examples | Symbolic, Cultural, and Social Elements |
|--|--|--|
| Geometric | Lines, squares, triangles, stars | Reflects national identity, regional or geographic origin, resistance, visual order, and harmony |
| Vegetal | Flowers, branches, leaves, nature-inspired motifs | Symbolizes nature and fertility, life and continuity, aesthetic beauty, and connection to rural environments |
| Animals and Birds | Birds, local animals | Represents a connection to nature and the local environment and reflects cultural and regional characteristics |
| Local and Geographic Elements | Mountains, rivers, olive trees | Reflects geography and the artist's environment, local and cultural identity, symbolizes peace and stability |
| Social and Religious Symbols | Composite motifs associated with age, marital status, or political affiliation | Indicates the social, religious, or political status of the individual |
| Resistance and National Identity Symbols | Often geometric or composite motifs | Expresses resistance, preserves cultural identity, and maintains connection to Palestinian heritage and land |
| Modern Designs | Adaptation of traditional motifs for contemporary use | Preserves and transmits cultural identity to new generations, generates income, and promotes Palestinian culture internationally |

5. Conclusion

Palestinian tatreez transcends mere decorative art; it is a symbol of national identity, culture, and resistance. This traditional art form not only reflects the craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities of Palestinian women but has, over time, evolved into a visual and cultural language through which women narrate stories, values, and historical connections. Tatreez has functioned as a tool for cultural preservation, social messaging, and reinforcement of national identity, maintaining its relevance amidst migration, occupation, and globalization.

The expansion of tatreez into modern domains has facilitated its global recognition, conveying Palestinian cultural and resistance narratives to a wider audience. The preservation and promotion of this art contribute not only to aesthetic value but also to safeguarding cultural heritage and sustaining Palestinian identity.

An analysis of visual and compositional elements in tatreez reveals its reliance on a diverse array of geometric, vegetal, animal, and environmentally inspired motifs, each contributing significantly to meaning-making. Geometric patterns, including lines, squares, triangles, and particularly the eight-pointed star, are among the most common visual elements, frequently appearing on collar, sleeve, and hem edges. Beyond creating visual rhythm and order, these motifs carry symbolic significance and often serve as indicators of geographic origin and regional identity.

Vegetal and floral motifs also hold a central place in tatreez's visual structure. Comprising flowers, branches, and leaves, these motifs are often rendered in simplified, repetitive forms and exhibit a direct connection to nature and the everyday lives of Palestinian women. Symbolically, these patterns represent fertility, life, growth, and continuity, with their prominent presence, especially in rural areas, reflecting a deep connection to land and agriculture.

Certain motifs depict local and geographic elements, such as mountains, rivers, and particularly olive trees, appearing in symbolic and stylized forms. These motifs reflect the artist's environment and convey concepts such as resilience, stability, peace, and connection to the land. The olive tree, in particular, occupies a central role in expressing the historical and cultural identity of Palestine.

Moreover, some motifs carry social, religious, and even political connotations. The type, color, and placement of a motif on a garment can indicate marital status, age, social standing, or regional affiliation. Consequently, tatreez functions not only as a decorative system but also as a visual language that communicates identity and cultural messages.

Throughout history, Palestinian women have relied on this visual language to preserve their cultural identity, transforming tatreez into a medium of resistance, collective memory, and enduring connection to their land and heritage. The interplay of visual elements and symbolic meanings in Palestinian tatreez elevates it beyond decoration, establishing it as a cultural medium capable of expressing identity, history, and lived experience through pattern and color.

6. Recommendations and Prospects

Tatreez, beyond being a cultural heritage, holds significant potential for active participation in modern and contemporary art. As a living visual language, it can be increasingly utilized in fashion design, branding, and creative industries. By incorporating traditional motifs and colors into modern garments, accessories, and artworks, Tatreez both preserves cultural identity and generates new meanings and values within contemporary contexts. Integrating Tatreez into contemporary fashion and design allows for creative reinterpretation of traditional symbols and patterns, transferring them from the framework of historical heritage into everyday life, galleries, and global markets. This approach not only strengthens the international cultural presence of Palestinian art but also demonstrates that traditional art can simultaneously modernize while reflecting its messages and identity, inspiring innovative creativity in design and fashion (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. An example of integrating Palestinian Tatreez into contemporary fashion design (Droeshout, 2023)

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

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Data Availability

Access to the data supporting the findings of this study is available upon reasonable request through correspondence with the author.

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