
TRADITIONAL COSTUMES OF THE ARAB WORLD

Costumes generally play an important role in Arab culture. In the everyday life of the men and women it is a symbolic expression of personal affiliation, ethnic or religious, and of social roles.

The folk costumes of the Arab World are famous for their diversity. The reasons might have been because many cultures, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Crusaders and Turk, had passed through.

The climate also played its part in shaping the Arab costumes. Before the advent of Islam the basic outlines of Middle Eastern garments were loose and flowing and the religion encouraged a continuation of that style. Islam laid some emphasis on modesty of behavior and appearance both for men and women.

An aspect of clothing that seems to have fascinated people is face veiling in the Arab world. Face veiling was practiced long before Islam in the Arab peninsula. Desert life demands the protection of the face and eyes from dust storms, gusty winds, and harmful exposure to the sun. Veiling was also common amongst Christians in the Levant. The tradition there goes back to the Greek period when only respectable women could wear veils.

With its ornaments and magnificent colors, embroidery on clothing items is also an important means of emphasizing social status, ethnic and religious notions.

The ornamentation and style of embroidery is influenced by Anatolian, Greek, Balkan and European embroideries. However, patterns such as 'prayer niches', 'minarets', 'vases', and 'trees of life', connect them with the Islamic Orient.

The embroideries are predominantly executed in red thread on black or dark-colored cotton or mixed-silk sateen fabrics. The gilded threads (silver or gold) are used on formal costumes. However, today this type of embroidery has become rare and is more often performed by industrial machines.

Today, even in their countries of origin, many Arabs wear western fashions. Nevertheless, they tend to show a strong will to preserve their heritage by wearing their traditional costumes on special occasions.

The information in this flier was compiled by Rima Houssami for educational use only

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