The Contemporary Jewish Museum
Teacher Resource

Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress from the Israel Museum, Jerusalem
August 30, 2018-January 6, 2019

Teacher Resource for *Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress from the Colleciton of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem* on view at The Contemporary Jewish Museum August 31, 2018 through January 6, 2019.

About the Resource:

How does clothing represent culture? How can wardrobe be a tool for assimilation or distinguishing between groups of people? This vibrant exhibition highlights the fashions of Jewish communities around the world, from Afghanistan to Ethiopia to Morocco to Greece, to tell stories of migration, culture, and diversity of the Jewish diaspora.

This resource includes:

- Exhibition information
- Map depicting origins of clothing in the exhibition and silk road reference
- Images of selected ensembles from the exhibition with guiding questions
- Video: *Journeys and Threads*—oral history video connected to the exhbition.
- Additional RESOURCES (silk road ted talk, beit hatsufot website,)
- Touring Opportunties
- High resolution images of exhibition ensembles

About the Exhibition

"Each ensemble tells a story–the story of its creator or wearer, of the community to which it belonged, or of its voyage across multiple generations, families, and channels of transit"

Heide Rabben, Curator

Clothing exists to cover our bodies, but it can also uncover latent histories and personal narratives. To what extent does our choice of dress suggest individual taste or reflect influences from our surroundings? This exhibition invites us to consider the history and language of Jewish clothing in all its complexity, from cultural dress codes to modes of self-expression.

The variety of costume displayed in this exhibition attests to the diversity of Jewish communities across centuries and around the globe. In many cases, the clothes worn by Jews were similar or even identical to those worn by their non-Jewish neighbors, although at times special features distinguished them from the dominant culture. Through many sartorial symbols and signifiers, these items disclose information about gender, age, geography, background, and custom, while simultaneously leaving some meanings fluid or encoded. As such, the clothing presented both accentuates and conceals–at once acting transitory and timeless.

Regardless of origin, each ensemble here tells a story–the story of its creator or wearer, of the community to which it belonged, or of its voyage across multiple generations, families, and channels of transit. These garments, dating primarily from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are drawn from the Israel Museum, Jerusalem—the repository of the most comprehensive collection of Jewish costume in the world. Its holdings provide a unique testimony to bygone communities, to forms of dress and craft that no longer exist, and to a sense of beauty that still has the power to enthrall.

The extraordinary range of textile designs and clothing in the exhibition illuminates the story of how diverse global cultures have thrived, interacted, and inspired each other for centuries.

Jewish communities from Afghanistan, Algeria, Denmark, Egypt, Ethiopia, Germany, Georgia, Greece, India, Iran, Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Israel, Italy, Libya, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Tunisia, Turkey, the United States, Uzbekistan, and Yemen are represented with the majority of pieces originating from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

Approximately 65 items of clothing are on display, representing excellent examples from the much larger collection of Jewish diasporic clothing held by the Israel Museum. Foregrounding color, texture, function, artistry, and craftsmanship, Veiled Meanings offers an incisive and compelling examination of diversity and migration through the lens of fashion.

Amulets are symbolic ornaments that adorn the body. Believed to be endowed with protective powers, amulets date back as early as 25,000 BCE and have since been used by both secular and religious populations around the world, primarily worn for occasions such as weddings, childbirth, and burial ceremonies.

The concept of amulets entered Jewish tradition around the 2nd century, and was expanded upon in the Babylonian Talmud. Most amulets comprise texts containing holy names, incantations summoning angels, numerological signifiers, or symbols such as *hamsas*, menorahs, the tablets of the Law, or the Star of David. Inscribed onto metal or paper, or stitched into clothing, these amulets protected the individual wearing them from spiritual or physical harm. It was believed that the effectiveness of the amulet depended largely on the spiritual status of its maker. Similar to beliefs and practices surrounding Kabbalah, some Jewish populations considered the amulet to be governed by natural– and therefore divine– law. Others, however, viewed amulets as illogical and profane.

One of the most common amuletic symbols is the *hamsa*, signified by an eye embedded in the palm of an open hand. It is thought to protect an individual from the "evil eye," the belief that the envious or malicious gaze of a person will bring bad luck upon the recipient of that gaze. Drawing from the Arabic word for five (khamsah) the word "*hamsa*" represents both the five fingers of the hand as well as the numerological significance of the number five as protection in Jewish spiritual interpretations. Symbols of the *hamsa* and evil eye can be found here on a Tunisian woman's belt, an Iraqi Kurdish groom's outfit, and a Moroccan child's ceremonial outfit, amongst others.

Gilt metal thread is a cross-cultural embroidery and weaving technique originating from Spain and used for centuries throughout Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa. A symbol of wealth and status, the gilt metal embellishments featured here are most prevalent in wedding or celebratory ensembles spanning various geographies, cultures, and traditions. While some of the designs are baroque or rococo in style–a reflection of the increased Western cultural influence during 19th and 20th centuries–other designs maintain closer ties to religious and regional imagery, depicting motifs such as the tree of life or the *hamsa* symbol.

Producing gilt metal thread involves the cutting and thinning of metal strips which are twisted around a natural or man-made fiber. These threads are then woven or embroidered into clothing, accessories, tapestries, and carpets. As a religious minority in many Muslim countries, Jewish populations mastered metalworking and were often the predominant practitioners of this craft due to Koranic restrictions on Muslims working with precious metals. One of the first written references to gilt metal thread is from Exodus 28, which details the priestly garments that were to be made for Aaron's consecration.

Many fine examples of gilt gold and silver embroidery can be found in this exhibition, notably two elaborate Polish breastplates, a luxurious Ottoman bridal gown, the Moroccan "Great Dress," and a pair of Tunisian bridal pants.

Ikat, from a Malay-Indonesian word meaning to "tie" or "bind," is an ancient thread-dyeing technique. The process consists of bundling individual threads together, and tying and resist-dyeing them, often numerous times, to create an intricate, polychromatic pattern that is then woven into cloth. Like many other textiles and fabric techniques, ikat migrated and dispersed along The Silk Road, and was adopted by many cultures along the way.

In Central Asia, Bukhara, Uzbekistan is considered the place where ikat was both popularized and perfected, due to the primacy of its location along The Silk Road. The creation of ikat dye patterns required several different communities to work together due to its complexity: The Uzbeks handled the weaving of cotton and silk, the Tajiks specialized in the hot dyeing of reds and yellows, and the Jews managed the cold dyeing and trade of the blue indigo dye.

Indigo is one of the oldest dyes used in textile production. Originating from the rare indigofera plant native to India, indigo was the most rare and expensive dye in Central Asia during the nineteenth century. Baghdadi Jewish merchants cultivated the plant in South India and traded with the Herati and Bukharan Jews of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, who would transport it from India over the mountains into Central Asia.

Because of its potent smell and consequence of permanently staining the dyer's fingers, indigo handling and dyeing was considered one of the lowliest professions in predominantly Muslim Bukhara, a culture where most people would eat from a communal plate with their hands. As a result, the Jewish minority was able to gain a monopoly on the trade and practice of indigo and ikat dyeing, establishing a lucrative business and enduring community in the region.

Nearly all the items in the exhibition from Uzbekistan are excellent examples of ikat, especially the colorful woman's *kaltachack*. Many examples of indigo-dyed fabrics, including the women's mourning scarves from Uzbekistan, a girl's amuletic dress and woman's *lulwi* from Yemen, and a groom's attire from Iraqi Kurdistan, highlight the vast distances and regions this dye traversed over time.

Map of Silk Road with Guiding Questions

What geographical features are at the ends of the silk road? Why might this be? What are the geographical features along the silk road?

What was this silk road used for? What years was it active?

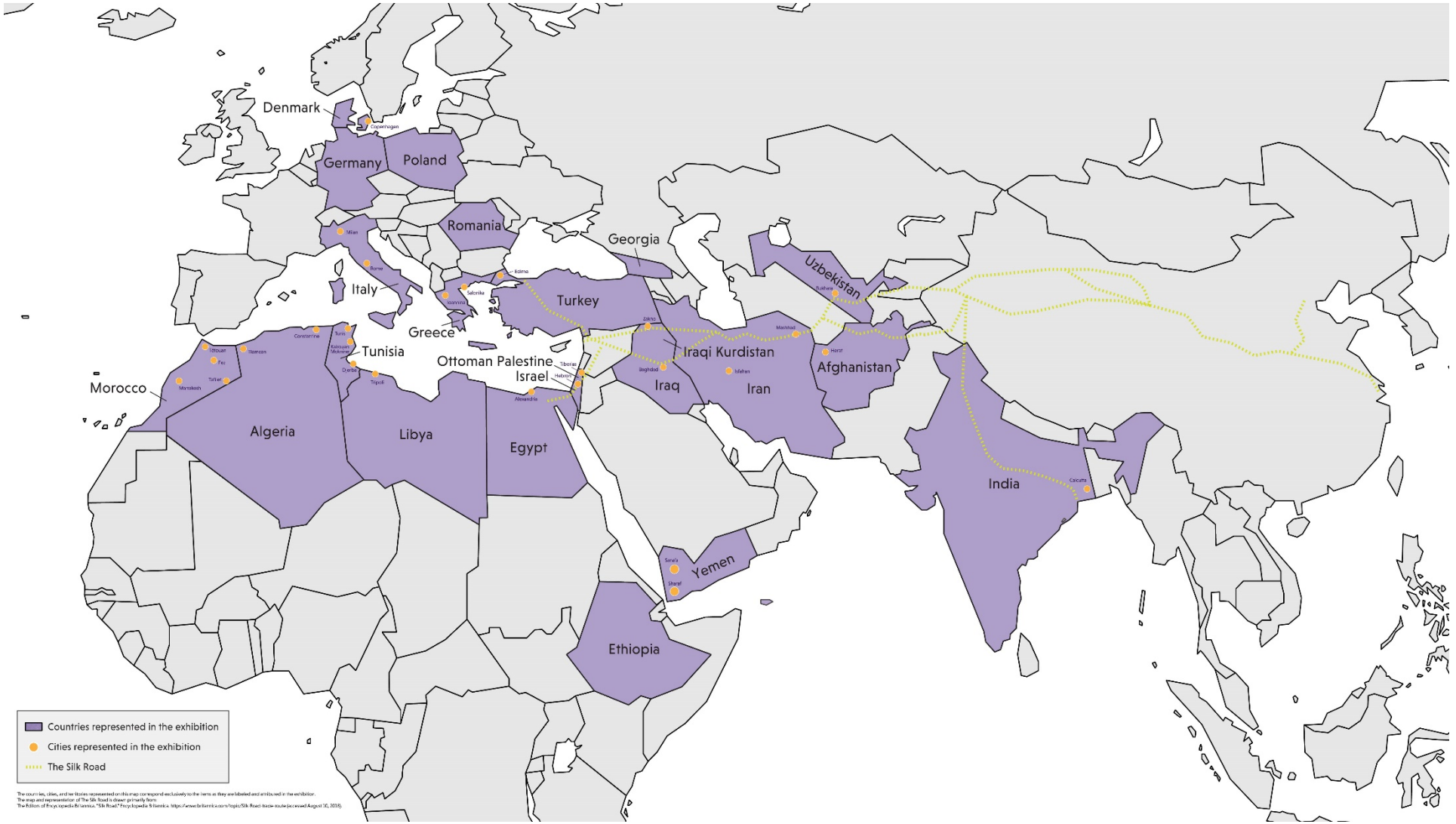
What resources/items may have been traded along the silk road?

What other types of things may have been shared along this international trade route?

Who were some of the different communities along the Silk Road and what did they specialize in?

Are there communities along the Silk Road where one can see different people working together? Where?

Using the map, locate the origins of the garments provided.



The countries, cities, and territories represented on this map correspond exclusively to the items as they are labeled and attributed in the exhibition.
The map and representation of The Silk Road is drawn primarily from
The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Silk Road." Encyclopaedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route (accessed August 31, 2018).

Exhibition Images and Guiding Questions

Examine the photographs of the clothing, Use the following questions for discussion. They may be written down or discussed aloud.

What do you notice about the piece? What type of material is being used?

What type of embellishment, technique, or decorative elements do you notice?

Do you think this item was made for the wearer to blend in or stand out? Why?

What would it be like to wear this item? How would it feel and why?

What type of clothing does it remind you of?

If you were interviewing this piece of clothing, what questions would you ask?

Create a personal narrative about the item of clothing. Describe its journey and who may have owned it.

Woman’s coat (*kaltachak*)

Bukhara, Uzbekistan, late 19th century. Brocaded silk; ikat-dyed silk and cotton lining. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

B64.12.4226. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

A collarless outer coat with pleats gathered under the arms, the *kaltachak* was popular in Uzbekistan among both Jewish and Muslim women for various holidays and special occasions. It was also a custom that when a woman died, a colorful *kaltachak* would be spread on her coffin. This luxurious example is made of Russian brocade and local warp-*ikat* (thread-dyed) fabric.

This coat’s combination of textiles and the specificity of which fabric lines the interior and which adorns the exterior reflects political and social changes in Bukhara following the Russian conquest of the region in 1868. Under Russian rule, Jews were able to immigrate to Ottoman Palestine, establishing a Bukharan quarter in Jerusalem where many thrived. Based on its vibrant colors and rich fabrication, this *kaltachak* likely once belonged to a wealthy woman from one of the quarter’s first families.

Coat of Rabbi Saliman Menachem Mani

Hebron, Ottoman Palestine, early twentieth century. Broadcloth and gilt-metal-thread couched embroidery. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift of the Mani family descendants in memory of the Mani and Hasson families, Hebron.

B70.1009. Photo at left © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani. Photo at right: Rabbi Ya'akov Meir. Jerusalem, early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Altalef family. Photographic Archive of The Isidore and Anne Falk Information Center for the Jewish Art and Life, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

In the nineteenth century, the Chief Sephardic Rabbi in Ottoman Palestine also wore the attire of the Chief Rabbi of Turkey, as mandated by the Ottoman government. Starting in 1835, the Ottoman government provided this official uniform to non-Muslim religious functionaries (Christians and Jews) who were appointed as religious chiefs of their communities. Sewn from black broadcloth with wide sleeves and a narrow collar, the robe's characteristic feature is the dense, stiff, couched metal thread embroidery that adorns its collar and front opening. The embroidery follows the typical Ottoman style and also shows the influence of European officers' coats from the late eighteenth century.

In contemporary Israel today this robe continues to serve as the model for those worn by Israel's chief Sephardic rabbis, distinguishing them from the Ashkenazi chief rabbis. Former Sephardi chiefs continue to wear these robes as symbols of authority, distinction, and tradition for many years even after they have left their posts.

“Great Dress” (*berberisca* or *al-kiswa al-kabira*)

Fez, Morocco, early twentieth century. Silk velvet, gilt-metal cords, braided ribbons, and embroidered tulle sleeves. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift of Perla Ben-Soussan, France; gift of Armand Amselem, France; gift of Elise and Eli Davis, Jerusalem.

B66.07.1099, B66.12.1551, B71.0267, B79.0460, B78.0132. Photo at right © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani. Photo at left: Two women dressed in different styles of the Great Dress. Morocco, late nineteenth century. Gift of Gérard Lévy, Paris, Photographic Archive of The Isidore and Anne Falk Information Center for the Jewish Art and Life, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. B07.0147.

The Great Dress is a traditional urban Jewish garment brought to Morocco following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. The cut of the dress retains Spanish elements such as the gilt-embroidered plastron or bodice at the front. The ensemble has five components: waistcoat, plastron, sleeves, skirt, and belt. A bride wore this dress at her Henna* ceremony, wedding, and on festive occasions thereafter. Not all of the gown’s features are visible: under their festive wedding clothing, the bride and the groom both wore white linen shrouds, embellished with motifs echoing those of the bridal outfit. The shrouds, part of the bride’s dowry, were thought to have protective qualities, and would eventually be used to cover their bodies after their death. This rare early example displays the fine craft of gilt-thread embroidery, practiced in Morocco by both Jewish women and men, and also Spanish in origin.

*Many religious groups around the world including Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, and Zoroastrians practice Henna ceremonies—events held prior to the wedding where the palms of the bride, groom, and other ceremony attendants are painted with elaborate henna dye designs. In Judaism and in other faiths, these symbols intended to bless the bride for fertility as well as to protect her and the groom from evil.

Jewish woman's wrap (*chador*) and face veil (*ruband*)

Herat, Afghanistan, mid-twentieth century. Cotton wrap; netted veil with silk-thread embroidery. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, purchased through the gift of Dr. Willy and Charlotte Reber, Switzerland

B77.0466, B71.0526. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

In Herat, the traditional everyday attire of Jewish women differed from that of Muslim women only in their street wear. The latter wore a wide, colorful one-piece wrap (*chador burka*) enveloping the entire body, with a netted opening for the eyes. Jewish women also wore a *chador*, but it was typically black or of a very dark monochrome, with a white, silk-thread embroidered veil. Crypto-Jews, who continued to practice Judaism in secret after their community was forced to convert to Islam in 1839, brought this type of garment to Afghanistan from Mashhad, Iran. Later, these Jews adopted the colorful Muslim *chador burka*.

Wedding sari

India, mid-twentieth century. Made for a member of the Bene Israel community. Brocaded silk and silver and silk thread. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

B84.0629. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

The sari was the accepted everyday and festive wear for the women of the Bene Israel Jewish community in India, just as it was for local women. Saris played a major role in the various wedding-related events, especially in the henna ceremony; the marriage ceremony itself; and the bride's parting from her parents. Under European influence, however, some Bene Israel women wore white saris at their weddings, as opposed to the customary Indian red ones. A white sari was likewise worn on Yom Kippur, while a simple white one indicated mourning, as is customary throughout India.

Textile Lab: Journey and Threads Video

https://vimeo.com/287087790

Bay Area community members Adam Eilath, Asal Ehsanipour, Rabbi Tsipora Gabai, and Isaac Yosef, share their family's journeys and reflect on the centrality of their respective heritages. Their unique stories originate from Middle Eastern and North African countries including Iran, Iraq, Israel, Morocco, and Tunisia. These personal reflections touch on rituals, melodies, tastes, and textures, bringing lesser known Jewish histories to the surface. Woven together here, the interviews provide a glimpse into the diversity of the Jewish experience.

Guiding Questions for Video

Name a few of the ways the people in the videos actively connect to their parents/grandparents birthplace?

What rituals/practices do the interviewees share?

Each of the interviewees no longer live in the places where their parents and grandparents grew up. Do you have a similar experience? What are your own ways to connect to your parents/grandparents birthplace if it is different than your own?

If you were to move, what clothing item would you take with you and why?

Additional Resources

Looking for further information about specific Jewish communities? The Beit Hatfutsot Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv has excellent resources. Just search a specific community for both primary and secondary sources.

https://dbs.bh.org.il/search

Silk Road TED Talk

https://youtu.be/vn3e37VWc0k

Veiled Meanings Tours

Interactive tours of Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress examine textiles as primary sources to provide insights into histories and cultures of Jewish communities around the world. Interactive, conversation-based tours explore clothing through the lens of immigration and migration, rituals, assimilation, and the relationship between clothing and identity. All tours include a visit to the hands-on Textile Lab, newly installed for this exhibition.

Tours may be combined with an art-making workshop in which students will create identity-based designs.

Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

Rabbi Ya'akov Meir. Jerusalem, early twentieth century. Courtesy of the Altalef family. Photographic Archive of The Isidore and Anne Falk Information Center for the Jewish Art and Life, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Mauro Magliani.

Two women dressed in different styles of the Great Dress. Morocco, late nineteenth century. Gift of Gérard Lévy, Paris, Photographic Archive of The Isidore and Anne Falk Information Center for the Jewish Art and Life, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. B07.0147.

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