

**Ancestral Artisanry**  
**Natalie Shukur** discovers the heartwarming and eye-catching beauty of *Kissweh*, a homewares label that is preserving *Palestinian folk art*, one hand-stitched cushion at a time.



Holy Mounts and Ensaï embroideries, Beirut.  
Image by Claudia Martinez Mansell

“Contemporary heirlooms,” is how Claudia Martinez Mansell describes the intricately hand-embroidered cushions produced under her Los Angeles-based label Kissweh.

Mansell, who works in humanitarian relations for the United Nations, founded Kissweh in 2017 in collaboration with the secular NGO Beit Atfal Assomoud, and her team in Beirut, which oversees 38 women embroiderers in four refugee camps across Lebanon. By exposing their exquisite artisanship to a new, international audience, Mansell is reviving and preserving a centuries-old craft that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Kissweh is named after the eponymous Palestinian folk art, which Mansell first encountered 20 years ago while volunteering at a refugee camp in Lebanon. Derived from the Arabic word for trousseau (the items collected by a bride before marriage), a kissweh was traditionally prepared by hand-stitching clothing and household linens with motifs that commemorated each woman’s history. Embroidered with symbols denoting fauna, precious objects, religious tokens, and vignettes of rural life, the distinctive designs were associated with the maker’s village and region, and expressed her dreams and aspirations.

“I knew they were struggling to sell their embroidery and that there was a lot less work available, as refugees are not officially allowed to work in a wide range of professions,” Mansell says. “And to lower costs they were embroidering on synthetic materials.” Mansell longed to restore the craft back

to its original glory, conserve its lineage and help the women earn a stable livelihood. “There is also a kind of political motivation,” she says. “News about Palestine is always very negative and dehumanizing, and we forget to see the rich history and connection to the land that these people had—and are struggling to keep alive.”

Beginning with the finest linens and cotton thread, a Kissweh cushion takes two to three weeks for one woman to embroider, and each artisan is given a color palette that she interprets in her own way, making many of the pieces one-of-a-kind. Taking inspiration from earlier Palestinian embroideries that were more abstract and geometric, Kissweh’s designs represent everyday tableaux such as “chickpeas and raisins,” “bottom of a coffee cup,” and Mansell’s favorite, “old man’s teeth.” “We have adapted the traditional embroidery, which was usually in red or blue hues, by changing the colors,” she says of her contemporary take on kissweh in shades of aqua, coral, bright green, lilac, and gray.

Over in Beirut, Kissweh’s operations coordinator Hanan Dabdoub is proud of the recognition the women’s work is getting overseas and the culture it upholds. “It’s not only a handmade embroidery, it is a story of a woman who has never seen her homeland, yet she is still able to learn this craft as part of her identity,” she says. “And Kissweh is not just a project, it’s a family. We live inside a camp and it’s common for us to learn from each other and to have a strong bond. This project is giving recognition to this beautiful heritage and the women who devote their time to do it with passion.”



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