

# New directions for the Palestinian Museum

Interview with director Dr Adila Laïdi Hanieh



Writer and academic, Dr Adila Laïdi Hanieh [Yousef]

Naima Morelli

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Since its inaugural exhibition “Jerusalem Lives” in 2017, the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit has presented new perspectives on Palestinian

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history, society and culture. Founded and developed by the Taawon-Welfare Association, an independent Palestinian non-profit organisation, over the past few years the space has launched a number of educational programmes and artistic research.

Since October 2018, the museum has been blooming under the guidance of its director, the writer and academic Dr Adila Laïdi Hanieh. A former professor at Birzeit University, she was also the founder of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre. Her work marries aesthetics, ideology theory and postcolonial studies, and transports them into the everyday reality of people.

“My work at Sakakini was developed around the ideas of culture for everyone, visual arts and Palestinian cultural identity,” she told me. “This still informs my work at the Palestinian Museum, where our cultural programmes address all segments of society.”

Indeed, with an eye towards local development as well as international relevance, Dr Hanieh is building her programmes around Palestinian cultural identity, supporting the development of the visual arts in the region.

Only few weeks ago she started developing a five-year programming strategy for the Palestinian Museum. “I’m trying to take stock of all the activities and projects in the programming pipeline, as well as looking at what has been already created,” she explained. “My work consists of rationalising, harmonising, expanding and deepening the successful programme developed by my colleagues since the opening of the museum.”

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What specific function does culture have in a place like Palestine? Hanieh replied that in Palestine in particular culture is connected to the struggle for emancipation. "I don't look at culture as a mere ornament. For me, it is tied to political, historical and social structures. This idea informs all of our work and all our projects at the museum." Her job, she explained, is to produce new perspectives and to disseminate that knowledge about the Palestinian condition and history. "I look at culture in a holistic manner, considering history and anthropology as well, which are not strictly artistic subjects."

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I asked if her academic background influences the way that exhibitions are conceived, and she pointed out that it does when it comes to building the exhibitions, which are always based on in-depth research. "Of course we are not a university or a think tank. Our role is not to produce pure knowledge, but to develop and provide learning experiences. We do that in the form of panel discussions, virtual reality tours and workshops."

While definitely not speaking exclusively to the people in the realm of culture, the museum is very grateful for their participation. Students, inter-generational groups, children, teenagers and designers are also involved. "One of my aims was to attract an audience more interested in intellectual debate, and in knowledge programmes, and so we are developing that part of the portfolio." Her priority is that everything that she and her staff are doing must have an expanded geographical footprint.

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*Dr Adila Laïdi Hanieh stands in-front of a dress exhibition, 'labour of love. New approaches to Palestinian embroidery' [Lena Sobeh]*

According to Dr Hanieh, it is important to consider that despite the challenges being faced, the museum is here to stay. "In that sense, we do not have to be all things to all people in every exhibition or project that we provide. We are here for the long run, so we take the time to prepare quality programming that explores issues in depth, vertically rather than horizontally, to tick all the boxes."

Public engagement in Palestine is being tackled through the organisation of symposiums and discussions about the margins of the museum's exhibitions. "This is not something special in the art world, but in our area of the world it is." The lack of funding, poverty of resources and censorship, she noted, are real issues.

"We don't look at ourselves in isolation, but very much as being part of the fabric of the institutions. We are looking to build partnership with big organisations as well as smaller community projects." In partnership with the government, for example, students are provided with private tours of the Palestinian Museum. "We also have a booklet of activities to do at the museum, including creative tasks. Finally, we

make sure that every teacher can undertake activities in the classroom after visiting the museum.”

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The museum seeks to connect Palestinians worldwide through local, regional and international partnerships and affiliate centres. It does this by having a “transnational identity”. Dr Hanieh and her colleagues are trying to develop partnerships because this needs resources and physical outreach. “We are developing programmes connecting to the Palestinian Diaspora, Arab countries, Europe and South America, and we are already developing contacts.” The first step in this direction is creating a virtual reality version of the museum’s first exhibition to share with other international institutions. “After we develop further, we are planning to have our exhibitions travel the world to represent the museum and the Palestinian narrative.”

There are already two very important programmes with an international reach. “One is the ‘Palestinian Journey’ project. It’s a timeline of Palestinian history, an amazing reference point which is already up and running. And then there is another massive project called the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, where we are digitalising 145,000 items of history from below. We have been focusing on Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, collecting objects from everyday life, called digital ephemera. We have gone into local communities and the next step is to expand the digital archive programme in other areas of the world with a Palestinian presence, such as Chile.”

Dr Hanieh has stepped into the role of a civic leader in Ramallah and is an active participant in the city as well as the Palestinian cause at large. How is she embodying this role? “I think what Palestine needs is to overcome fragmentation, whether it’s geographic or political.” This is her vision of what the museum can be doing. “I want the museum to be a leader in disseminating stories and narratives about Palestine and bringing Palestinians closer together. I think the institution is where the leadership needs to be, not so much in the individual. The overall vision for the museum is to disseminate emancipative experiences about Palestine, its people, its culture and its history, and we are striving to do this through innovative programming.”

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