

Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

Dressed with Distinction: Garments from Ottoman Syria

March 17–August 18, 2019

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Los Angeles—A rare selection of Syrian garments is coming to the Fowler Museum at UCLA. *Dressed with Distinction: Garments from Ottoman Syria* features a collection assembled by David and Elizabeth Reisbord and will be on view March 17 through August 18.

The exhibition features examples of Arab and Ottoman attire dating from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries and celebrates the talents of weavers and tailors in urban centers like Aleppo, Damascus, and Homs where a sophisticated range of dyeing, weaving, and decorative techniques earned the region international renown for its textile production. Men and women living in these cities were famous for wearing brightly colored clothing worked in silk glittering with gold and silver thread.

After World War I (and the end of 400 years of Ottoman rule), Syrians privileged Western attire, leading to an eventual decline in handwoven garment production. More recently, unrest and conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean have virtually eradicated any remnants of these textile traditions and skills. Thus, this exhibition documents the heritage of iconic Arab and Ottoman garments and the importance of fashion as a marker of cultural knowledge.

“The Fowler Museum is honored to become the repository and custodian of this rare collection of Ottoman Syrian attire—both donated and promised to the museum by the Reisbords,” said Marla C. Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director at the Fowler. “This record of Middle Eastern textile heritage offers extraordinary opportunities for study and appreciation.”



Textiles and their production were central to the livelihoods and lifestyles of the majority of citizens in Ottoman Syria. The garments on view represent a dynamic era when the Eastern Mediterranean, together with parts of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, was part of the Ottoman Empire. Proximity to both Europe and Asia bolstered by the Silk Road trade fostered an exchange of materials, techniques, and skills that created Ottoman Syria's rich textile culture.

Installed according to type around the gallery, garments worn by urban women, men, and children include full-length cloaks (*abaya*), jackets (*qumbas*), smaller head coverings (*hatta*), and a two-piece woman's body and head covering (*çarşaf*). Silk and woolen garments have retained their rich red, blue and purple hues, while diaphanous patterns adorn summer housecoats woven in lighter colors. Colorful and complex ikat techniques (involving resist-dyed threads prior to weaving) incorporated an extensive range of natural dyes. The garments display a diverse range of weaving techniques including tapestry weaves, brocade and painstaking hand-stitched embroidery.

Garments with certain cuts and decoration could define the wearer as "Arab" or "Ottoman" as well as indicate religious preferences and class status. Urban attire was often embellished with a colorful repertoire of miniature trees, flowers, birds and geometric designs as well as Arabic inscriptions. Both the front and the back of each garment are decorated; however, the main design area is on the back. This may reflect a customary belief that looking directly at a person's front or face could be seen as improper. Concentrating decorative patterns on the back helped maintain social boundaries.

Nomadic Bedouin preferred woolen clothes to protect against the cold of the desert, and wore jackets known as *damir*. Made from a single piece of cloth, with sleeves added afterwards, this style of garment was made and sold in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. *Damir* were frequently worn by important and wealthy men and were rare, since they were bespoke rather than being sold on the open market.

Credit

Dressed with Distinction: Garments from Ottoman Syria is curated by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, Director of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, and was made possible in part with funds from David and Elizabeth Reisbord. The accompanying publication is supported by the Cotsen Foundation for Academic Research.

All garments on display are from the David and Elizabeth Reisbord Collection, donated and promised gifts to the Fowler Museum.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Fowler Museum at UCLA

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu

Admission to the Fowler is free

Hours: Wed 12–8pm and Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4: 398 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd. (\$12/day)

Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive

CAPTIONS

Page 1 (left to right)

Artist unknown (Ottoman Syria)

Man's cloak (*abaya*) back, early 20th century

Silk, cotton, and metallic thread

Weft-faced weave; slit tapestry technique; hand sewn

Promised gift of David and Elizabeth Reisbord (L2017.74.12)

Artist unknown (Ottoman Syria)

Man's cloak (*abaya*) back, 19th century

Silk, cotton, and metallic thread

Weft-faced weave; slit tapestry technique; tablet weaving; hand sewn

Fowler Museum at UCLA X2018.20.13; Gift of David and Elizabeth Reisbord

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Artists unknown (Bedouin peoples, Damascus, Ottoman Syria)

Man's coat (*damir*), late-19th to early 20th century

Wool, cotton, metallic thread

Weft-faced weave, slit tapestry technique, hand sewn

Promised gift of David and Elizabeth Reisbord (L2017.74.2)