

Bonds without Borders

Connecting All of Palestine through Design



By Shirabe Yamada

Bonds without Borders is a Palestinian design brand founded by two young Jerusalemite designers: Aya Kirresh and Shireen Salman. Their stylish products – scarves, tote bags, jewelry, and stationery – feature graphic-designed icons that represent Palestinian cities. The brand concept aims to promote Palestine through the design that communicates its cultural identity, one that is bonded through history and across the geographical areas.

The project was born out of the Creative Industries Workshop that Al-Hosh Art Court, a Jerusalem-based nonprofit, held in 2016. Kirresh and Salman, who were schoolmates at Schmidt's Girls College in Jerusalem and later became colleagues

at an architectural firm, became partners in this incubation program for design start-ups. They came up with a brand concept based on pattern recognition and symbols since both happened to be focusing on the study of patterns at the time: traditional Armenian tiles for Salman and contemporary concrete surfaces for Kirresh. The workshop gave birth to their first collection that was based on eight icons that represent seven cities and places: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, Hebron, Acre, Haifa, and the Galilee and Golan Heights.

At first glance, it is not obvious which places are represented by their symbols. For example, the shape of an irregular star taken from a detail of Islamic ornamentation found in the Dome of the Rock represents Jerusalem, and Bethlehem is represented by the recently discovered mosaic star of the Church of the Nativity. The two designers deliberately stay away from

Foldable shopping bag.

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The designs utilize icons that are reminiscent of traditional geometric, organic, or calligraphic forms of the cities they represent – the *ka'ek* or Jerusalem sesame bread, the mustache of men from the Galilee or Golan Heights, or the diamond marble works of Al-Jazzar Mosque in Acre.



Earrings

typical touristy, religious, or political motifs. They create icons by deriving everyday images that are in the back of one's mind and tap into subconscious imagery that represents social and cultural heritage. As a result, or rather by their clever intention, the icons prompt conversations with intrigued customers. And these interactions are an important part of the process for Kirresh and Salman, allowing them to tell the story of each city, to communicate their brand concept, and to evoke the vision of a Palestine that is bonded without borders. "Our brand is not just about the design, it is also about the service of its products," sums up Salman.

To create the designs, Kirresh and Salman use the collective process of brainstorming, sketching, studying details of cities, and making icons through eye-catching graphic design. They commission the production process to small workshops in Bethlehem, Al-Ram, and Ramallah that are chosen for the quality of their craftsmanship. Bonds without Borders also designs and produces its own packaging, an important element in its trademark. The brand is a 100% Palestinian production.





Set of two coasters, wood and mother of pearl.

In the relatively short time since its founding, Bonds without Borders has already produced three collections: Christmas (ornaments and angels), Winter (scarves), and Summer (scarves, coasters, key chains, earrings, and bracelets), in addition to three limited-edition products (cuff links and Jerusalem *ka'ek* necklaces and earrings). It is a remarkable production for a sideline project by the two young professionals who often juggle multiple job assignments; Salman is a product and interior designer, and Kirresh is an architect, visual artist, and university lecturer. The project has also been financially self-sustainable. The seed money from the Creative Industries Workshop financed their first collection, and the subsequent sales revenues have covered the production costs of each new collection. Their carefully planned and controlled production is based on the season and the target audience. When asked about their knack for business, Kirresh smiles: "We are both from business families."

Kirresh and Salman enjoy designing and creating, and are driven by positive reactions to their products. They constantly look for inspiration and research new ideas as they position their brand in the global context. When asked what the future holds for them, Kirresh replies: "We want to become a cross between Gucci and Kareem Rasheed (an Egyptian-Canadian designer), a brand that represents luxury with form and function. And someday, we want to open a shop of our own in Jerusalem."

Bonds without Borders is about to unveil its new collection that will feature three new city icons. Look out for them at craft markets and bazaars across Palestine or on Facebook and Instagram @bondswithoutborders.

Shirabe Yamada is the executive director of Sunbula, a fair trade organization that supports 23 craft-producer groups across Palestine in the marketing of their products and the development of their capacity. She is the general editor and producer of the upcoming Embroidery Stitches from Palestine: An Instruction Manual.

Photos: Kayané Antreassian.

Pattern earring, olive wood.



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