

# Palestine: An Interview with Vera Tamari

السياسات الثقافية في المنطقة العربية

**Feb 2018**

*Vera Tamari was born in Jerusalem and studied arts in Beirut, Italy, and Oxford. She specialized in visual arts, the history of art, and Islamic architecture. She's worked as an arts and Islamic architecture lecturer in Birzeit University, where she founded the Birzeit Museum and the Virtual Gallery. She has contributed to the promotion of arts and culture in Palestine, making academic and artistic contributions locally and internationally. She is a consultant and an active member of several boards of artistic and cultural institutions. Starting in 1974, she's participated in tens of group exhibitions, and several personal ones. Tamari's work focuses on nature, memory, and identity*

## **Vera Tamari: Virtual Galleries Cannot Die...and the Birzeit Museum was a Turning Point**

*In conversation with Badia'a Zidan*

Artist Vera Tamari grew-up in a Jaffa family that deeply cared for culture and the arts; her parents greatly encouraged their children's creativity. Her mother studied the arts in Jerusalem in the 1920s, exchanging letters with Ecole ABC in France and creating something of a workshop in her house with her sister, Tamari's aunt. Tamari's father was a businessman in love with the arts. Together, the two helped cultivated Vera's growth into a .figurehead of Palestinian art

.A transcript of our conversation follows

**What role did your mother play in facilitating your life as an  
?artist**

My mother's background in art and her talent for it played a part, no doubt, especially since she was a huge bibliophile. She kept up with news about the arts worldwide. But most importantly, she taught us to love nature. I have very clear memories of the nature trips she took us on. My two siblings and I inherited this from her

### **?Do you mean Vladimir and Tania**

Yes. My recently-deceased brother, Vladimir, was an artist at four. He drew and wrote stories. I would watch him wide-eyed; I was a little younger than he was. Tania was a singer early on. The family encouraged her to pursue her talent. Vladimir studied physics, then abandoned it for a while, heading towards art, then doing both. He would wind-up inventing a number of things related to optics and space. My siblings and I encouraged each other. Whenever I created something I'd present to Vladimir, who'd discuss it with me and give me feedback, and I'd do the same with him. We used Skype a lot, since Vladimir lived in Japan. We were a very satisfied family

### **?You've worked in theatre, haven't you**

That was through the Balaleen ("Balloons") theatre troupe, in the 1970s. My parents didn't oppose it; they didn't even care that was always in the company of men in Jerusalem, or that we'd sometimes go home at dawn after rehearsal and previews or hanging-up posters, for promotion. On the contrary: they were excited I was excited, despite the fact that the social classes I was in contact with were removed from my parents'. Balaleen was made-up of women and men across all social classes. It was a perfect experience

### **You studied art at a time when it was uncommon for Palestinian women to do it**

I studied in Beirut, and found myself attracted to the arts. After a period of exploration, I specialized in drama and the arts. When I was done, I went to study the arts at the UNRWA Ramallah Women's Training Centre in Al-

**.This was a rich experience, I imagine**

This teaching period was among the most important of my life. The women I was instructing were supposed to become qualified arts teachers, but they had no interest in the material. They'd mostly come there against their own .will, to the point where a lot of them would cry, refusing to learn art

We were close in age...I might have been older by a little bit. The curriculum I taught encouraged experimentation and exploration, foregoing the classical, emulation style that art had traditionally been taught in. I was inspired to do this by Samia Zaro, who taught arts at the .(institute (leaving temporarily after her husband's exile

I spent years with the Ramallah Women's Training Centre, training and .learning simultaneously

One of the most important parts of that time was getting permission to do some extracurricular work with some of the students. We visited traditional craftsmen across Palestine, interviewing them, learning their trade and their tools. Many of these experiences, which we saw closely, .were inspiring

Many of these traditional occupations, which are often inherited, have been associated with us for quite some time. When we went back to the institute, we used methods to simulate these traditional crafts with some modernization. In other words, the objective wasn't to keep these crafts as is, but to diversify their application and emerge with a modern art, if I may .say so myself, inspired by our heritage and folklore. It was a lively time

**Do you think things have changed? Do you think our educational system here in Palestine has taken the importance of teaching ?art to young children for social development**

Art as taught in schools was weak and has remained so. There's too much focus on traditional methods and not enough on personal expression and

creativity. Children are robbed of exercises that build creativity, which  
.reflects negatively on the society these children will build

**If you consider art to be so important, then, why did you stop  
?teaching it**

I started feeling that I myself was not developing artistically. After graduating from Beirut, I never plunged deeply into any form of art. I found myself drawn towards studying ceramics in Italy, though I knew nothing about ceramics. The course was highly technical. When I returned, I created a workshop so I could improve my ceramics work. What made things difficult was that there was nobody around then who had mastered artistic ceramics, which differ somewhat from traditional Palestinian ceramics work, enough for me to talk to. Any ceramics work I'd do would be received with admiration. I'd continue because I knew this admiration was surprise at this work being produced in Palestine. I taught myself a lot through experimentation and improved myself, leaving teaching to pursue  
.it more fully in time

**And you weren't satisfied with limiting your education to Italy,  
?so you pursued it further in Oxford**

Yes. I headed to Oxford because I cared about the history of Islamic and regional ceramics. For two years, I only found theoretical courses there. It was an intensive program not only for ceramics but also for Islamic architecture, applied arts, painting, photography, etc., which opened-up a window of opportunity to learn things I hadn't before. I went to Oxford  
.thinking I knew so much, only to discover I knew nothing

I enjoyed these studies. I returned to Birzeit University afterwards to teach  
.from 1986 to 2010

**.Tell us about your time at Birzeit**

I'd gone abroad with a scholarship from Birzeit. When I returned, I found that there was no foundation for a teacher of Islamic art history. I was therefore moving between university departments, studying ancient

Palestinian pottery among ruins, stretching back to prehistoric times and even the Byzantine and Islamic periods. My teaching philosophy was based on interaction, one where I taught as well as learned, which inspired me to .always provide more

Afterwards, I founded the fine arts program in Birzeit, an elective course for students, starting with the history of Islamic art and Islamic architecture. My time with Birzeit University students was essential and formative. The students were clever and curious, unafraid of discovery, .especially the visual arts students I taught in the architecture department

I often directed students towards cultural knowledge, the role of arts in developing humanity, and conducting research in practical projects which inherently required research, anyway. These courses were given renewed energy yearly. Also, there were other courses which required practical projects and art pieces that required research. I remember one that was about prisoners' hunger strikes. It was a fantastic project in the form of installation art, which was new for Palestine. It helped me realize its importance as conceptual art that tied between art, imagination, and .critical thinking. The students loved it dearly

I tried founding a college of fine arts, but this was less successful, since I was its only practitioner. We also didn't receive the needed support after a bunch of political upheavals, including the First and Second Intifadas. The university may have also had other priorities, thinking that fine arts wouldn't have created income or may have had less support than other .majors more applicable to market demands

During that time, the international community began thinking about elevating Birzeit University into a stellar national educational institute. I remember Swiss artist René Feurer donating six of his paintings to the university as appreciation for its national educational role. Being the only relevant specialist at the university, I was tasked with a lot regarding such important collections, which included the amulets of Tawfik Canaan. I .wound-up diving a little bit into ethnography to preserve these collections

## **?Is this where the Birzeit Museum idea came from**

These collections needed a place to be housed. My colleague Bahaa AlJubeh and I spent some time studying our holdings and documenting them. We were teaching ourselves and consulting specialists in Britain, Germany, and the United States, and largely found ourselves on the right .path

The university began hosting galleries, including the *Ya Kafi ya Shafi* (“You Satisfy, You Heal”) exhibition that belonged to the Tawfik Canaan Amulets collection, which we worked hard to create a professional exhibit for in the university library. We finally secured a room in the Media Department with a glass front that we converted into a fine arts gallery. I thought it was the first of its kind in a Palestinian university. Numerous artists had their works exhibited there, including Sliman Mansour and Tayseer Barakat. We cooperated with the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center .and the British Council in hosting galleries there

Plans to create a new library building finally started going forward. We were given a 400-meter ground floor to replace our scattered gallery space.

This challenge was the genesis of Birzeit Museum. It was called the Museum of Heritage and Art at Birzeit University. It was a cultural and artistic meeting point that hosted exhibitions of university holdings, meetings, seminars...There was a cooperative and exchange relationship with cultural institutions, including the A.M. Qattan Foundation, al Hoash, and Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, among others. The museum created .its own exhibitions as well

Administration found that the museum was a cultural draw of the university’s, one to be proud of, especially since we tried to ensure it lived-up to the professional level of museums internationally, which made such a .difference

**What do you think of the evolution of visual arts currently in Palestine? Have you noticed any attention from official ?institutes**

Palestine is undoubtedly going through a visible change in terms of the visual arts, one that is visibly affecting the Arab and international cultural scenes. But despite these efforts, there has been no support from official bodies towards this movement, which has been dependent on the efforts of art institutes and the work of individual artists

### **?And what about the virtual gallery**

Back when I taught at Birzeit University and we were organizing galleries before founding the museum, we noticed that most audiences that weren't students flocked from Ramallah and surrounding areas, due to all the barriers restricting free movement in Palestine. I thought we could reach more people digitally. The Virtual Gallery was born. Its purpose is to gather the materials of a museum in all its varied contents—the Palestinian material and exhibitions, national and regional and international galleries, artists profiles and related studies...and make all that available to people who can't arrive geographically. The gallery is also a digital library of Palestinian art, one of the world's most prominent. It is also home to several projects like "Art for Schools," an interactive experimental program that introduces children to Palestinian art

We had the idea of creating a virtual 3D tour of the gallery, and have created something in that vein

### **How do you assess the state of museums in Palestine? Do we have enough museums? What are we lacking**

I'm proud of our role in creating the Birzeit Museum, seeing how it's one of the first successful efforts and which has rekindled interest in museums in Palestine. There's some competition nowadays in creating specialized museums. This is a useful tool for spreading knowledge and preserving Palestinian cultural heritage

**And now we also have the Palestinian Museum. What kind of cooperation is possible between Birzeit Museum and the Palestinian Museum? How can the two complement each other**



Institutional cooperation is of course necessary for exchange of knowledge and expertise; you also don't want to overlap your programs. The two parties have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation. The availability of significant ethnographic materials, assessed and document, at Birzeit University may be an important resource in efforts to preserve, care, and .benefit from such collections

*Tamari thinks that cultural institutes in Palestine are in a state of collapse, especially since the external support they depend on is in visible decline; this is exacerbated because they have not formulated strategies that depend on local support secure their futures. She also thinks that the evolution of art and culture in Palestine begins on the school level; the .curriculum is in dire need of modernization*



Vera Tamari  
HOME (2017)  
Installation  
2.75 x 2.75 x 2.75 meters  
plexiglas and wire mesh  
photo credit: Ahmad Sawalha