

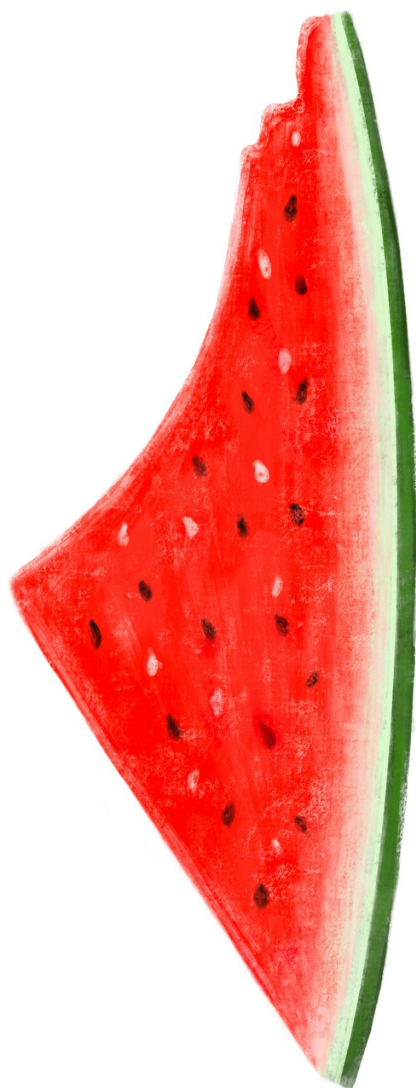
Art

How Watermelon Became a Symbol of Palestinian Resistance

A new tradition is emerging online, uniting Palestinians worldwide and drawing influence from the 20th-century motif.



Billie Anania July 29, 2021



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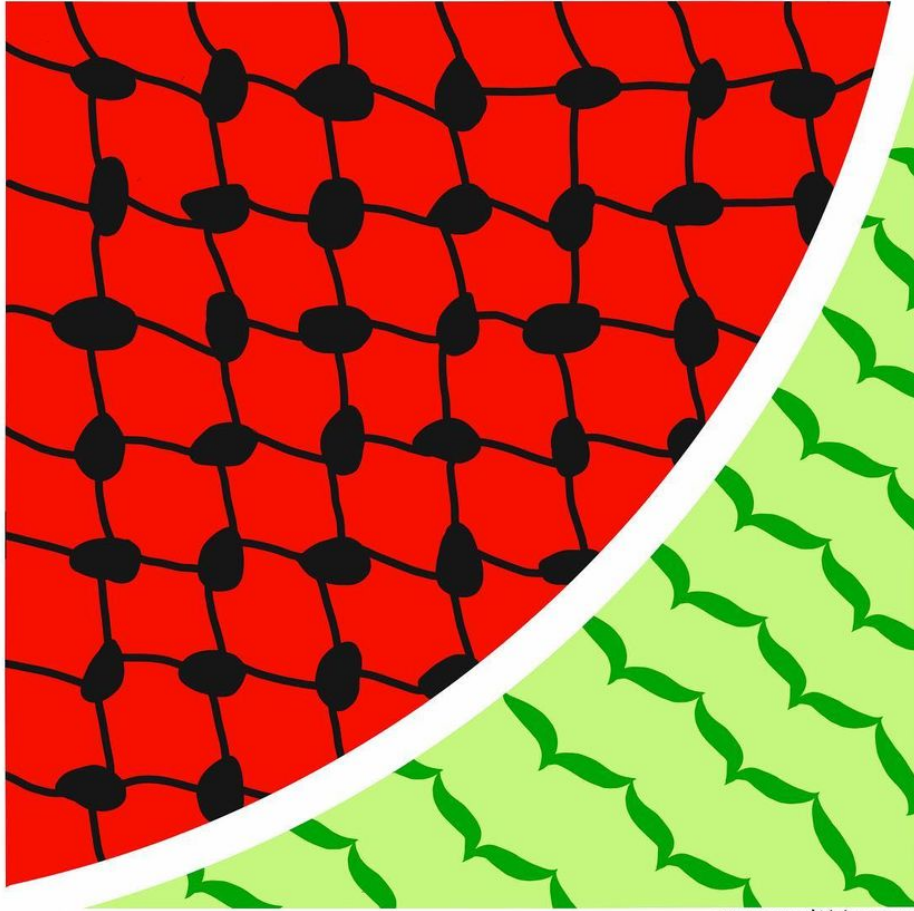
Digital illustration by [Sami Boukhari](#) (courtesy of the artist)

In occupied Palestine, watermelon is a symbol of resistance. With its colors mirroring the Palestinian flag, the fruit can be seen from the stone walls of Gaza to the galleries of Ramallah, hinting at the **political history** of a cherished summer fruit.

Over several decades, the Palestinian watermelon has become a public expression of cultural pride in artworks representing the struggle against Israeli apartheid. Now, a new tradition is emerging online, uniting Palestinians worldwide and drawing influence from those who fought for free expression throughout the late 20th century. Since the protests sparked by Israeli violence in Sheikh Jarrah, their story — cleverly encapsulated in a **minimalist silkscreen** of a watermelon — is experiencing a resurgence thanks to younger generations of artists.



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After the Six-Day War in 1967, the Israeli government banned all public displays of the Palestinian flag and its colors. Any outward show of the flag, from publications to advertisements and even old photographs, could result in imprisonment or worse. Watermelon — with its red, green, black, and white coloring — **became** a

subtle method for Palestinians to display national pride. Even holding a slice of fresh watermelon outside became an act of protest.

In the 1980s, Zionist forces shut down a major Ramallah art gallery and **arrested** three artists — **Nabil Anani**, **Sliman Mansour**, and **Isam Bader** — for incorporating the colors of the Palestinian flag into their artworks. Mansour, in a recent *AJ+* **interview**, detailed how an Israeli police chief tried to bribe them into depoliticizing their art. “He was trying to convince us not to do any political art, saying to us, ‘Why do you do political art? Why don’t you paint nice flowers or a nude figure? It’s nice. I will even buy from you.’” He then instructed the artists to present their paintings to the IDF for permission before exhibiting, stamping each painting as either good or bad. Anything that fell into the latter category would be seized.

“The officer raised his voice and said, ‘Even if you do a watermelon, it will be confiscated,’” Mansour said.

“So the idea of the watermelon came actually from the officer, not from us.”



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Before the Nakba in 1948, Palestine was world-famous for growing succulent watermelons in Jenin, the Jordan Valley, and Arabet Al-Batouf. As Israel Defense Forces (IDF) started occupying Palestinian

neighborhoods, settler authorities brought in their own seed companies and flooded the market, driving the Palestinians **out of competition**. Farmers and agriculturalists still remark on the impressive size of Palestinian watermelons and their **popularity** as exports to Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. Palestinians would **distinguish** between locally grown watermelons and those grown in Israeli greenhouses, saving the former to eat and using the latter to **throw at IDF tanks**.

In the decades since, Palestinians have reclaimed the watermelon as protest art against acts of Israeli terror. In the aftermath of the Second Intifada, Khaled Hourani crafted a cute but powerful **silkscreen series**, titled *The Story of the Watermelon* (2007), which appeared in the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine*. This satirical work is receiving newfound attention for its subversive simplicity. Standing upright, the watermelon slice appears highly pixelated, conveying an innocent nature, yet it emanates a rosy pride against a stark white background. Hourani incorporated a thin line of black seeds and shadows along the rind to make it look three-dimensional. He later isolated one silkscreen and titled it “The Colours of the Palestinian Flag” (2013).

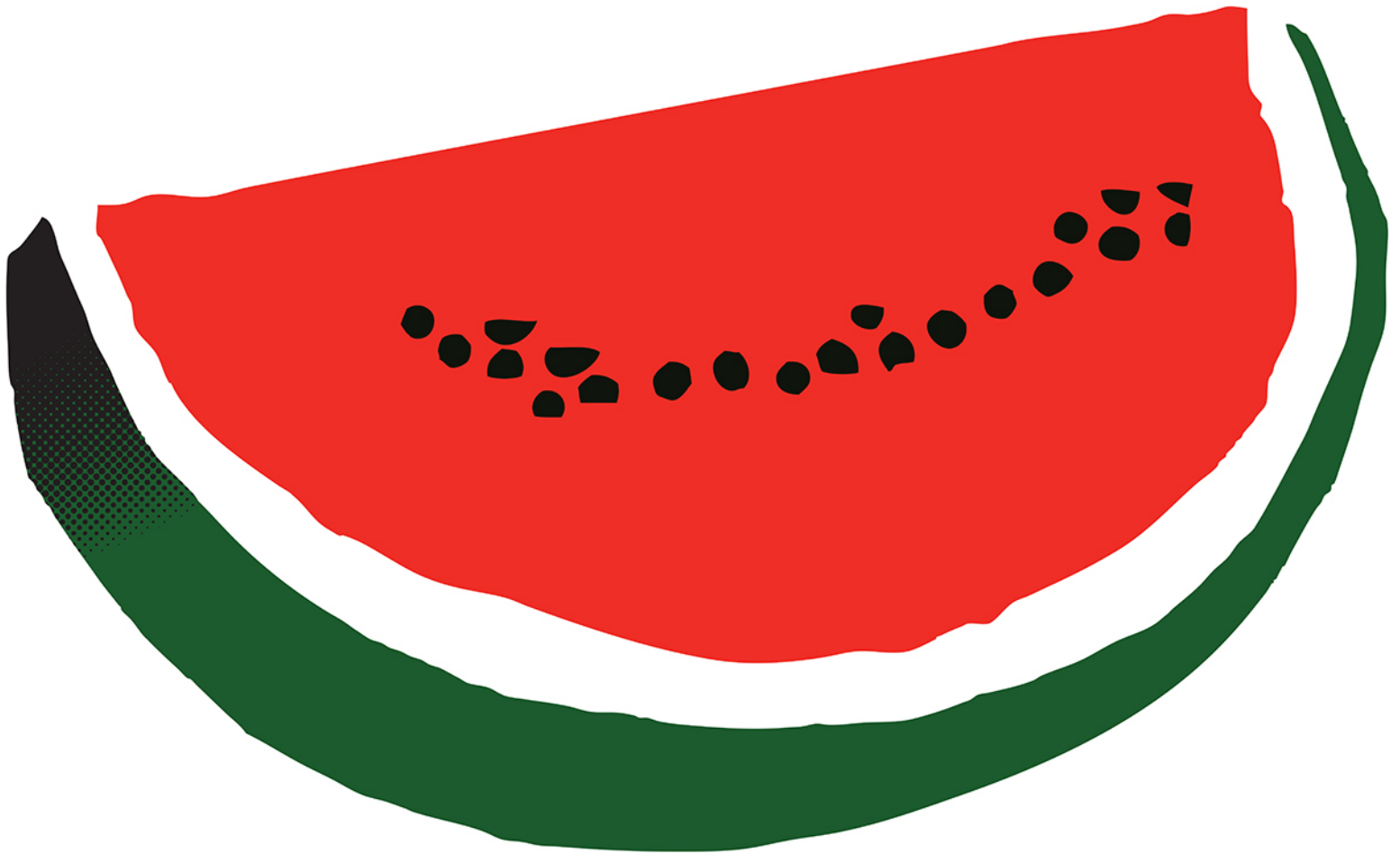


Khaled Hourani, “The Story of the Watermelon” (2007), silkscreen (courtesy the artist)

Hourani is the former Director of Fine Arts for the Palestinian Ministry of Culture and a central figure in the **revitalization** of Palestine’s arts discourse. Along with Mansour and Anani, he co-founded the International Art Academy of Palestine. Hourani painted a large-scale version of the watermelon for an exhibition in

Toulouse, France, and variations appeared at Darat Al Funun in Amman, Jordan, and the Center of Contemporary Art, Glasgow. In recent months, he claims, attacks on Gaza have conjured spirits of past generations through revivals of their artworks.

“Art was remarkably present in this confrontation in songs, logos, and graphics,” Hourani told Hyperallergic. “Art was recalled from history, media of years gone by. However, it was not only enlisted by people in Palestine, but by people everywhere. This was clearly reflected in the massive and unprecedented solidarity campaigns with Palestine and its just struggle.”



Khaled Hourani, "The Colours of the Palestinian Flag" (2013), silkscreen (courtesy the artist)

Renewed appreciation of Hourani’s work, along with extreme **AI censors** on Facebook and Instagram, have inspired artists to post their own interpretations on social media. Palestinian watermelons now appear in graphic designs, paintings, **murals**, drawings, tshirts, and banners. A minimalist design by Jaffa-based artist **Sami Bukhari** shows a slice shaped like the map of Palestine. Hanan Alsagoff, a yoga teacher in Singapore, **designed** a keffiyeh in red and green, with fishnet and olive leaf patterns representing livelihood and resilience, respectively. In Rotterdam, art school students **hung a banner** that combined Hourani’s watermelon with René Magritte’s “**The Treachery of Images**” (1929) after police took down a more blatant banner protesting Israel’s ethnic cleansing.



khaledhourani6

3,364 followers



Digital artist Gaytor Al [dug up](#) a May 1984 newspaper article reporting on the persecution of Gaza artist Fathi Ghabin, whose seven-year-old nephew, Suhain, was shot and killed by IDF soldiers. Ghabin painted Suhain's bloodied body on the ground, surrounded by Palestinian protestors with arms raised to the sky. The mere appearance of the flag's color scheme resulted in Ghabin's conviction for "inciting material." Another clip from 1993 in the *New York Times* details how Palestinians were arrested for merely carrying slices of watermelon, yet an Israeli government spokesperson neither confirmed nor denied the claims at the time.



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The IDF **continues** to **attack** Palestinian artists, forbid displays of the flag, and **destroy crops** in Gaza. Palestine's art history remains largely undocumented outside the West Bank. A 2014 *Haaretz* **article** describes a separate tradition of watermelons in Israeli paintings that starts with a 1923 triptych by Romanian settler and former Israeli ambassador Reuven Rubin. But in discussing the watermelon, even Rubin's daughter-in-law Carmela admits, "It's more Arab than Israeli." Zionism forged its history at the expense of Palestinians, making this struggle for legitimacy as political as it is aesthetic.

"There are many stories in our life; in Palestine, the narrative is in constant confrontation with settler-colonialism and apartheid," Hourani said. "And art is in that battle."