

Business

This Mission-Driven Textile Company Is Determined to Continue to Provide Work for Refugee Women

Kissweh, which supports Palestinian refugee artisans in Lebanon, has been navigating simultaneous public health, political, and economic crises

By Jessica Ritz

July 7, 2020



New Kissweh pillows, photographed in Puglia, Italy. Photo: Marta Suárez Ponce de León / Courtesy of Kissweh

Since the first signs of [COVID-19](#), the design industry has been struggling with disrupted supply chains across the globe. [Kissweh](#), a small operation founded in Los Angeles by Claudia Martinez Mansell, is no exception—especially considering that its underlying purpose is to support a team of master embroidery artisans in Lebanon.

Martinez Mansell, a humanitarian crisis program and policy specialist who is temporarily living in Rome, launched Kissweh in 2017. It was approximately 20 years after she first spent time in Rashidieh, one of the dozen U.N.-designated refugee camps located in Lebanon. Early on, Martinez Mansell learned about Palestinian refugee women's traditional embroidery work

from Ensaf Ajjawi, an individual who has since trained many of the brand's craftswomen. To connect this artistic heritage with a wider international market, Martinez Mansell collaborated with the [artisans](#) to make linen-backed throw pillows that honor this unique needlework craft. The work provides nearly 30 highly skilled and talented women with a means of personal financial empowerment and community support.

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Given that Martinez Mansell is currently in Italy and working on a project for the U.N., she saw the effect of the pandemic early on. “I was warning everybody, from family in Spain to friends in Los Angeles,” she says. She also understood how the coronavirus poses a more serious threat to overcrowded refugee camps, given the already hyper-vulnerable conditions. The sudden prohibition against physical gatherings was just one of many upheavals Kissweh makers have experienced. Essential to Kissweh’s ongoing production is a closely coordinated network of on-the-ground community contacts in Lebanon. And usually, much of the embroidery itself is made in small groups that meet and share conversation while engaging in the labor-intensive and painstaking cross-stitching process that [results](#) in largely one-of-a-kind pieces.

“COVID is just the final thing in a perfect storm,” Martinez Mansell explains, given that Lebanon’s other compounding emergencies include the collapse of its currency and economic instability. Circumstances in the country’s decades-old refugee camps are even more tenuous: Approximately one in five residents in Lebanon is a refugee. Martinez Mansell notes that the country has “an incredible burden,” and yet these communities often receive fewer public health and financial resources.

“We have tried our best to make it work through a group in WhatsApp,” explains Hanan Dabdoub, Kissweh’s embroidery coordinator, who is based in the Burj Barajneh camp in southern Beirut. Travel among the camps has been restricted and difficult. But with frequent messaging and virtual communications, the artists have been able to keep up the work and experiment with fresh colorways and patterns.

Kissweh’s latest collection reflects creative departures and incorporates other traditional Palestinian embroidery elements that hadn’t been used previously. Some embroiderers have added images of birds and flowers. There are also new, larger pillows that feature patterned bands and other stitched embellishments on linen. “It wasn’t easy. We made many mistakes,” Dabdoub says. “But many of these mistakes created beautiful things.”