

# Canadian Journal of Art Therapy

Research, Practice, and Issues



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ucat21>


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To cite this article: Alexandra Hanania (2020) Embroidery (*Tatriz*) and Syrian Refugees: Exploring Loss and Hope Through Storytelling (Broderie [*tatriz*] et réfugiées syriennes : exploration de la perte et de l'espoir à travers le récit), Canadian Journal of Art Therapy, 33:2, 62-69, DOI: [10.1080/26907240.2020.1844416](https://doi.org/10.1080/26907240.2020.1844416)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/26907240.2020.1844416>

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## Embroidery (*Tatriz*) and Syrian Refugees: Exploring Loss and Hope Through Storytelling (Broderie [*tatriz*] et réfugiées syriennes : exploration de la perte et de l'espoir à travers le récit)

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### ABSTRACT

Canada is now home to at least 44,615 Syrian refugees. Of these refugees, four out of five are women and children. There is a clear need for an increase in mental health resources, resource accessibility, and social connection for Syrian refugees. This paper describes a Syrian refugee women's embroidery program that provided both an accessible art therapy group and a way for the participants to process feelings of hope and loss. Postgroup questionnaires indicated that the women experienced a sense of pride and mastery over their completed artwork, built new friendships and community, and felt connected to their homeland through the embroidery. One-on-one interviews were held to collect the participants' stories. The participants' artwork and stories are summarized in this paper, and the stories are available in full as [supplementary material](#).

### RÉSUMÉ

Le Canada compte maintenant au moins 44 615 réfugiés syriens. Parmi ces réfugiés, quatre sur cinq sont des femmes et des enfants. Il y a un besoin clair d'augmenter les ressources en santé mentale, l'accessibilité des ressources et les liens sociaux pour les réfugiés syriens. Cet article décrit un programme de broderie pour femmes réfugiées syriennes qui a constitué à la fois un groupe d'art-thérapie accessible et un moyen pour les participantes d'assimiler leurs sentiments d'espoir et de perte. Les questionnaires post-groupe ont indiqué que les femmes ont éprouvé un sentiment de fierté et de maîtrise envers leur oeuvre achevée, ont construit de nouvelles amitiés et une nouvelle communauté, et se sont senties connectées à leur patrie grâce à la broderie. Des entretiens individuels ont été organisés pour recueillir les récits des participantes. Les illustrations et les récits des participantes sont résumés dans cet article, et ces derniers sont disponibles dans leur intégralité comme matériel supplémentaire.


The ongoing civil war in Syria has caused a large influx of Syrian newcomers entering Canada. While some art therapy groups for Syrian children do exist in Canada, there is a lack of art therapy groups designed to address the mental health needs of Syrian adults (Hanania, 2018). In January 2019, Access Alliance, a Toronto-based organization that offers health and settlement services and community programs to immigrants and refugees ran its first art therapy group with Syrian refugee women. The group used embroidery (*tatriz* in Arabic) to encourage connection to the tradition of needlework in the Levant (the region of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan),

and to encourage a sense of community among participants.

### Literature review

Since the 2011 Syrian civil uprising began, there have been an estimated 6.6 million Syrian refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees worldwide (USA UNHCR, n.d.). In 2015, Canada opened its doors to Syrian Refugees (Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2020). According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, an estimated 44,615 Syrian

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 Supplemental material for this article can be accessed on the [publisher's website](#).

refugees arrived in Canada between November 4, 2015 and June 30, 2020 (IRCC, 2020).

### ***Mental/physical health and Syrian refugees***

Refugees around the world experience multiple stressors that contribute to their mental health and physical needs. These stressors include but are not limited to experiencing trauma, depression and anxiety, death and loss of loved ones, loss of homes and personal items, poor living conditions, and post-migration struggles (Guruge et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2017). Researchers have found that Syrian refugees, especially women, are reporting increased symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and stress (Acarturk et al., 2018; Alpak et al., 2015; Al-Qdah & Lacroix, 2017; Ghumman et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2016; Masterson et al., 2014; Naja et al., 2016). The data demonstrate a need for increased mental health resources and support programs to be provided to all refugees around the world and in Canada.

Guruge et al. (2018) studied the health needs, accessibility of healthcare services, and the factors that influence how services were utilized by Syrian women newcomers resettled in the Greater Toronto Area. The reported post-migration health concerns included “medical, dental, and psychological problems,” the latter of which was attributed to “the distress, violence, and trauma experienced during the war” (Guruge et al., 2018, Results section, para. 6). Factors that were prohibitive in obtaining appropriate health care included language barriers, lack of culturally responsive information, lack of access to public transportation, and lack of information about treatments and available services (Guruge et al., 2018). Many reported they felt social disconnection from other Syrian newcomers who are scattered across the provinces, thereby making it difficult to share information and support one another. Drolet and Moorthi’s (2018) research on Syrian refugee settlement in Alberta supports this finding, concluding that the refugees had a greater chance at thriving when they were able to develop social relationships.

### ***Art therapy and refugees***

At present, there is a lack of research available to indicate the value of art therapy practice with Syrian refugee women specifically. However, there is evidence supporting the use of art therapy (and other expressive therapies) with refugees in general (Carey, 2006; Dokter, 1998; Isfahani, 2008; Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016; Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009; Munt, 2012), and with refugee children (Quinlan et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2005; Rowe et al., 2017; Ugurlu et al., 2016). Mitschke et al. (2013) explain that negative long-term consequences of trauma can be mitigated when providing refugees mental health support in group settings, as groups help to create community. For example, by combining art therapy and mindfulness techniques, Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) created a group for refugees with physiological and anxiety symptoms. Together, art and mindfulness activities aided in the development of coping skills by addressing the somatic and visual experiences of trauma (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). Munt (2012) achieved similar results by utilizing art-based cognitive behavior therapy techniques using written and visual exercises with refugee women. In 2008, Isfahani published a case study on conducting therapy sessions with a female refugee client, providing an example of working in a culturally informed manner. Isfahani helped her client regain part of what was lost by designing the art therapy sessions to explore the client’s feelings of guilt, separation, helplessness, and anger, and to reclaim good childhood memories, traditions, and religious beliefs. For a more detailed review of the use of art therapy with refugee adults and children, refer to Hanania (2018).

### ***Cultural humility and awareness***

In art therapy, taking a culturally informed approach can be achieved in steps. Fitzpatrick (2002) explains that the first step is understanding “the client’s sociocultural frame of reference and the influences of that frame upon thought, behavior, and artistic expression. Second, is the need for culturally relevant therapeutic practice when working with clients who come from other ethnic backgrounds” (p. 152). Another important part of the process is taking into consideration what the arts mean in other cultures

(Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). “We need to question whether [the arts] hold a cultural, religious, or political message ...” (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005, p. 8). It is important to understand the difference between cultural competency and practicing with cultural humility as described by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) (as cited in Bal & Kaur, 2018). As Bal and Kaur (2018) warn against, being culturally competent “although well-intentioned, operates with the assumption that culture is a concrete monolith that a practitioner can have mastery over” (p. 7). Bal and Kaur (2018) explain that cultural humility, on the part of the therapist, is understanding that the client is the expert on the lived experience of their own culture.

### **The embroidery group**

The aims of the Syrian women’s embroidery group were to help participants build a sense of community, to foster a sense of connection to “home” through their embroidered artwork, and to encourage self-expression through textile making by telling visual stories about their lives. The group did not aim to teach traditional Levantine embroidery techniques, rather it used Levantine embroidery as inspiration. Textile art is an old craft that has belonged to all people and cultures around the world for thousands of years (Collier, 2011). It has been used, especially in women’s roles, to tell stories of identity (Garlock, 2016). While there are many art forms that are practiced in Syria, embroidery was selected as the art medium for the group because historically, embroidery played a significant role in women’s culture in the Levant (Kawar et al., 2016; Saca & Saca, 2006). Traditionally, embroidery was taught at a young age and practiced as a way for women to express their identity through motifs on their clothing and household items (Saca & Saca, 2006). Given the current state of Syria and the declining textile industry in the region (Kawar et al., 2016), it was uncertain *a priori* what the degree of embroidery experience the Syrian women would have, and therefore all levels of experience were accommodated.

Embroidery materials were provided each week. After four weeks of learning and practicing

embroidery stitches, participants were invited to create wall hangings. The following two directives were presented to the participants verbally and in written form, in Arabic. For the first directive, participants were asked to create an image that reflected their greatest loss: “when you moved to Canada, what did you leave behind?” For the second directive, participants were asked to create an image depicting their hopes and dreams for the future: “what are your hopes and dreams for your life in Canada? What do they look like, what/who do they include?”

### **Participants**

The group ran for 12 weeks with 11 consistent participants. All participants were Arabic-speaking women between the ages of 22-53 and the majority were Syrian refugees (two Iraqi and one Saudi Arabian refugee joined as well). Participants were recruited through Access Alliance’s Arabic-speaking peer outreach worker.

### **Ethics, consent, and feedback**

Pre- and postgroup questionnaires were collected as feedback to inform future groups and to determine whether the group was beneficial for the participants. Both questionnaires and the consent form were approved by the internal research department at Access Alliance prior to the group’s start date. Additionally, consent forms, questionnaires, and directive handouts were translated into Arabic so that all participants could provide informed consent to participate. The consent form explained their participation in the group, and the intent to publish their feedback and stories (optional participation). A final (optional) interview was conducted at the end of the group between the art therapist (the author), interpreter, and individual participants to record the descriptions of their artwork and migration stories. The final interview was unstructured, and each participant was asked open-ended questions about the embroidery on their wall hanging.

## Overcoming barriers

To overcome language barriers, an interpreter and a peer facilitator (a Syrian woman experienced in embroidery who could aid in teaching embroidery in both Arabic and English) were hired onto the team to ensure smooth communication between the art therapist and the participants. Additionally, public transportation fare, food, and childcare were provided for the participants. The group space was women-only, to encourage a safe space for religious and cultural expression.

## Results

### Pregroup questionnaire

The opening questionnaire asked about the participants' experience with embroidery and the stressors that were currently impacting their lives. When asked if participants had previous experience doing embroidery or other textile arts, six out of the 11 respondents (55%) reported they did. The participants' responses regarding stressors are presented in Table 1.

### Postgroup questionnaire

The closing questionnaire inquired about the impact the group had on the participants (Table 2). The feedback indicated that the group created feelings of community (100%), friendship (91%), support (100%), beneficial social interaction (100%), and a decrease in loneliness (70%). The embroidery itself produced feelings of accomplishment (91%) and a connection to culture/homeland (82%).

### Qualitative findings from artwork and interviews

Several common themes arose in the participants' stories about their artwork during the final interviews. The most prevalent themes described in the women's stories are listed in Table 3. The most prominent theme was "home," specifically, the loss of home and country or the hope to create a new home in Canada. The symbolic depictions of home were usually connected to some aspect of the participants' homeland such as

**Table 1.** Stressors affecting group participants (from pregroup questionnaire).

Stressor	Fraction	Percent
Lack of community	3/11	27.27
Loneliness	6/11	54.55
Mental health	7/11	63.64

cultural monuments (Figure 1), buildings, or flags. Specific types of trees and flowers native to their country were also depicted (i.e., palm tree, date tree, jasmine flower, etc.). Other themes include resilience, dreams, the pursuit of a better future, and gratitude for being in Canada; these were commonly depicted through embroidered Arabic script (*tiraz* in Arabic) (Figure 2). The women's stories and artwork are available in full as [supplementary material](#) to this paper.

Table 4 presents a list of symbols that are present in the women's artwork. The list of symbols only includes the images that were mentioned in the women's interviews. For instance, there are flowers depicted up to six times in the women's artwork, however, only three of the flower depictions were discussed in their interviews, and the remaining flowers may have served as *décor* rather than holding symbolic meaning. Table 4 also shows the connection between the symbols used and the themes that arose from the women's stories.

## Discussion

The postgroup questionnaire shows that many of the participants felt that the group provided them with new community, supports and friendships, which Guruge et al. (2018) point out is lacking among Syrian newcomers in Canada. By developing new programs such as the art therapy group under discussion, we may find an improvement in feelings of loneliness and belonging in newcomer communities. In the pregroup questionnaire, 27% of participants reported feeling a lack of community and 55% reported feeling loneliness (several of the participants included their immigration sponsors as part of their community, which accounts for the discrepancy in answers between loneliness and lack of community). The postgroup questionnaire shows that the group had a positive impact in these regards: 100% of the participants reported feeling like

**Table 2.** Selected data from postgroup questionnaire.

Question	Answer	Fraction	Percent
Did the group help you feel like you were part of a community?	Yes	11/11	100.00
	Somewhat	0/11	0.00
	No	0/11	0.00
Did you build new or stronger friendships?	Yes	10/11	90.91
	Somewhat	1/11	9.09
	No	0/11	0.00
Do you feel like you have a new support system from the other women?	Yes	11/11	100.00
	Somewhat	0/11	0.00
	No	0/11	0.00
Did you feel like the social interaction was beneficial to you?	Yes	10/10	100.00
	Somewhat	0/10	0.00
	No	0/10	0.00
Did you feel less lonely when participating in the group?	Yes	7/10	70.00
	Somewhat	1/10	10.00
	No	2/10	20.00
Does your embroidery make you feel like you have accomplished something?	Yes	10/11	90.91
	Somewhat	1/11	9.09
	No	0/11	0.00
Did the embroidery make you feel connected to your culture or homeland?	Yes	9/11	81.82
	Somewhat	2/11	18.18
	No	0/11	0.00

**Table 3.** Most common themes from interviews.

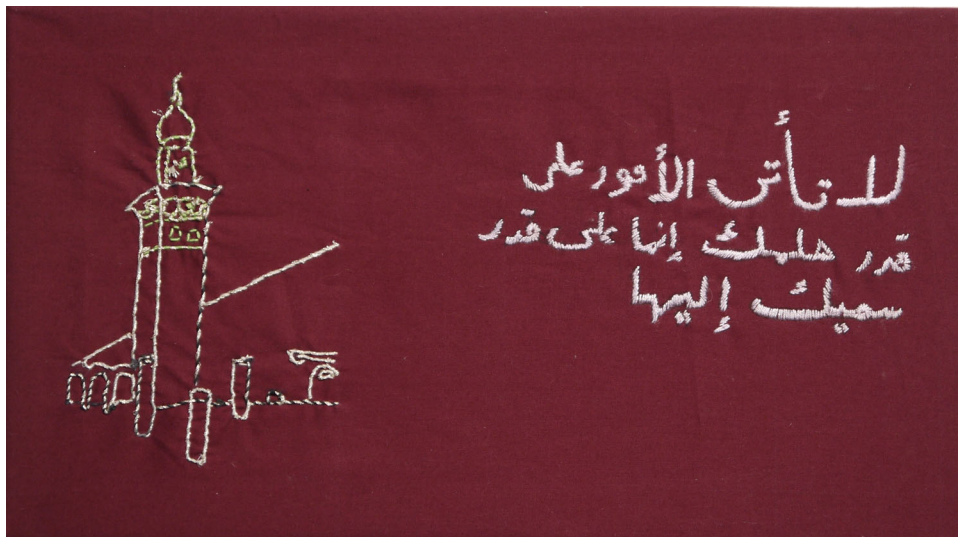
Theme	No. participants using theme	Story excerpt example
i. Home: Mention of home, loss of home/homeland (including monuments), or hope for a new home.	7	MA: "Victory songs remind me of back home." LB: "This is my future. A nice house, pool, garden."
ii. Dreams: Loss of dreams and the desire to create new dreams for the future.	6	MM: "You must make an effort in order to make your dreams come true."
iii. Some expression of resiliency.	6	LB: "I overcame this situation by self-education. I ran away to reach Canada to be safe. I escaped." MA: "Even with all of the suffering, we live."
iv. Some mention of migration story.	6	MH: "When chaos happened, we had to cross the border into Turkey. We stayed in the camps for nine months."
v. Mention of war or destruction/violence.	6	EA: "I see my country like this, but because of war, everything is destroyed."
vi. Missing childhood memories and family.	5	AD: "Lots of my relatives used to live there so it brings me nice memories of my childhood and grandparents, and beautiful memories."
vii. Mention of embroidery experience (or similar craft).	5	JAR: Embroidery was "... a hobby I learned from my aunt."
viii. Connection between Canada and children's futures.	5	GA: "Canada gave a new life to my children."
ix. Canada: Welcoming, feelings of safety, and freedom of expression.	4	HO: "Canada represents equality. Canada gave us freedom of religion and a life for my four kids."
x. Relationship between Canada and growth/opportunities.	4	EA: "I am the flower. From the heart of the lock, I grow. I am the flower blooming in Canada, out of the lock."
xi. Freedom (struggle for freedom).	4	MH: "It is our daily dream that Syria will raise a flag that really expresses the freedom of the country."
xii. Loss of a loved one.	3	YS: "My husband passed away. He drowned in the sea."
xiii. Thankfulness to Canada and a desire to repay Canadians (present in story or artwork).	3	GA: "We volunteer at the church because we want to pay them back and say thank you."
xiv. Desire to return.	3	MO: "I hope to return to Syria and go to this place."

they were part of a community, and 80% reported feeling less lonely or somewhat less lonely. All participants also reported feeling a sense of accomplishment after completing their embroidered wall hangings in the postgroup questionnaire. This supports Collier's (2011) claim that textile arts, including when used in art therapy, can produce a sense of mastery within the client, translating into feelings of confidence, empowerment, and resilience.

While 55% of participants reported in the pre-group questionnaire that they had experience with embroidery or textile arts, all the participants indicated in the postgroup questionnaire that the embroidery made them feel a connection (or somewhat of a connection) to their culture or homeland. Despite the decline in Syria's textile industry (Kawar et al., 2016), embroidery has enough historical and cultural traction that it is a recognizable piece of Levantine culture, even to



**Figure 1.** Participant 'EA'— A monument in Damascus, Syria represents loss of home (left), and a flower growing out of a lock represents growth and resiliency while the two doves represent hope for her daughters' futures in Canada (right).



**Figure 2.** Participant 'MM'— The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria represents loss of home (left). Arabic script (right) says: "you must make an effort in order to make your dreams come true."

**Table 4.** Symbols found in embroidery.

Symbol	No. participants using symbol	Typical theme-symbol connection (theme no. from Table 3)
Monuments (to represent home/city)	6	i, vi, xi, xiv.
Arabic script	4	ii, iii, xi.
People (individual or family)	4	vi, x.
Flags/Maps	4	i, v, xi.
Flowers	3	i, x.
Trees	3	i, iii, vi.
Water	3	i, ii.
Hearts	2	i, ii.
Home	2	i, ii, ix.
Religious imagery	2	i, ii, ix, xiv.
Dragonflies	1	ii, viii, ix.
Birds	1	viii.
Rainbow	1	x.
Isolation bubble	1	none

the women in the group who had not previously embroidered. The fact that all of the participants felt that the embroidery at least somewhat connected them to their culture/homeland shows two things: that the act of creating embroidery has the potential to connect Syrian women to their culture, and that the stories depicted through the artwork itself had the ability to connect the women to their homeland. However, the question in the postgroup questionnaire was phrased as follows: “did the embroidery make you feel connected to your culture or homeland?” Since the *subject* of the artwork was about their past and their journey, the wording allows for some ambiguity: did the embroidery make them feel connected to their culture or homeland because embroidery is culturally relevant, or because they were using embroidery to discuss subjects touching on their culture and homeland? Unfortunately, the wording of this question does limit the conclusions that can be drawn in this regard. That having been said, under either interpretation, the responses show that the women felt connected to their culture when they participated in the group. Additionally, as shown in the common themes (Table 3), five of the women reported that the embroidery reminded them of a time when they were young and a relative taught them how to embroider. The positive childhood and family memories that the embroidery evoked for some of the women suggests that there was value in using art materials that were common and recognizable.

## Conclusion

The Syrian women’s embroidery group was designed to ensure accessibility (through language aids [i.e., translation of documents, interpreters, and peer facilitation] and providing transportation fare, child care, and food) and to encourage culture-specific expression by creating a space that allowed them to take ownership of their artwork and the room. The embroidery was used to connect the women to their homeland, and served as a medium for telling their stories of loss and their hopes for the future. Throughout the group, the women talked about personal matters such as relationships and families, they sang

together while embroidering, and helped each other complete their projects. This group provided the women with a community in which they could all participate and gave them a voice to share their stories with each other, with the Access Alliance community, and beyond. The art therapy group created a space for each woman to visually represent her story and express her experiences in a validating environment. For these women, who are often isolated, that is an exciting and meaningful prospect.

## Acknowledgments

The Syrian refugee women’s embroidery group would not have been possible without the help of Serena Nudel for seeing its potential and creating the opportunity for it to flourish, as well as Mariam El Sheikh for generously helping with translations.

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