

PRESERVATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC HERITAGE OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT

There exist hidden treasures in the Eastern Mediterranean, largely unrecognized and cared for by an enlightened few. These treasures are not the artifacts, monuments and architectural wonders that normally come to mind when pondering the incredibly rich and long cultural history of the region, but photographs dating from the early history of the medium to the present day that are the undervalued record of times past, documentation of social, political and cultural history and the expression of past and present societies. In 2006 the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) and two photograph conservators from the United States began a collaboration that ultimately led to a successful two-week Middle East Photograph Preservation Institute (MEPPI), supported by funding from the Getty and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundations. Fourteen individuals from five Middle Eastern countries participated in this unprecedented and highly successful workshop. This has served as a springboard to launch a range of initiatives aimed at the preservation of photographic heritage in the region. It is clear that the AIF role is critical, but it must also be supported and augmented by collaboration and participation from other individuals and institutions with similar aims. Initiatives must be produced at all levels to raise awareness, educate, train and prepare the next generation to care for, appreciate and utilize this invaluable resource.

ÖZET

Doğu Akdeniz'in gizli hazinelerinden biri de objelerden, anıtlardan ve mimari harikalardan farklı olarak çoğu kez gözden kaçan ve eskiden günümüze kadar sosyal, politik ve kültürel tarih ile geçmiş ve gelecek toplumların belgesi olmuş olan fotoğraflardır. 2006 yılında Arap Görüntü Kuruluşu ve Amerika'dan iki fotoğraf konservatörü, Getty ve Andrew W. Mellon Kuruluşları tarafından desteklenen ve sonunda Orta Doğu Fotoğraf Koruma Enstitüsü (MEPPI)'nin kurulmasına yol açan bir işbirliği gerçekleştirmişlerdir. 5 Orta Doğu ülkesinden 14 katılımcı ile yapılan bu workshop çok başarılı olmuş ve bölgedeki fotoğraf mirasının korunması konusunda çeşitli kararların alınmasına sahne olmuştur. AIF'nin bu çalışma üzerindeki desteği çok önemli olmakla birlikte, aynı zamanda benzer amaçla çalışan diğer kurumlara ve bireylere de ihtiyaç vardır. Alınacak kararlar, birinci artırmak ve eğitim amaçlı olarak, yeni neslin bu değer biçilemeyen kaynaklara önem vermesi ve koruması doğrultusunda olmalıdır.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

The invention of photography was formally announced to the world in Paris in 1839. Photography was introduced to the Middle East by European photographers who traveled to the region in the early 1850s taking photographs of archaeological and biblical sites for European markets. This began a period of cultural exchange in which photography was the primary vehicle. Towards the end of the 1860s the young residents who had worked as assistants to the European pioneers began producing their own images. Like their European predecessors they photographed the landscapes and the historic monuments, but they also documented the changing Middle Eastern and Arab societies from within. Skilled local photographers such as Sabounji, Abdullah, Sabbah and Zangaki opened studios in major cities, including Jerusalem, Cairo, Beirut and Damascus. Local photographic production intensified after Yessai Garabedian, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, founded the first workshop to provide regular training for young photographers of the region in the 1860s. Photographic production expanded in the years that followed, especially after the massive exodus of Armenians, many of whom had worked as photographers, from Turkey to Arab countries. This exodus provided the labor force needed to accommodate an expanding desire for photographs, especially after the invention of the Kodak box camera and its export to the Arab world in the late 1880s and 1890s. As elsewhere, the introduction of affordable box cameras put photography within the reach of many.

The arrival of photography in the Arab world occurred within the context of the modernization of the social, political and economic life of the emerging nation states. The geopolitical remapping of the region after World War I and the rise of nationalist liberation movements spawned a new consciousness of Arab geography and identity. Modern approaches and new technologies were introduced to urban planning, architecture, transportation systems and civil engineering. The Arab world witnessed the emergence of labor and women's movements, as well as modern educational and disciplinary institutions. The appearance of new literary and artistic forms attested the centrality of social, economic and political identities. The photographic collection of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) traces this social evolution [1, 2].

THE ARAB IMAGE FOUNDATION

The Arab Image Foundation was conceived in 1997 by a group of prominent Arab photographers, video artists and curators. The Foundation is a not-for-profit organization established in Beirut for the purpose of locating, collecting, preserving, interpreting and presenting the photographic heritage of the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The AIF plays a key role in the emerging consciousness of the importance of photography for the history, culture and creative life of this region, as well as recognizing the desire to protect and preserve the medium. For this reason the Foundation is central in establishing the efforts toward preservation described in this paper.

The AIF was established with the primary aim of creating a space for the representation of Arabs by Arabs. In this manner, the Foundation provides an alternative to prevailing Orientalist representations of this region and its people, Fig. 1. Research conducted by the AIF has helped to better document and share the history of Arab photography — previously largely unknown — with the world. While its focus is the Arab world and its diaspora, the Foundation's conception of 'the region' is fluid, incorporating lands as diverse as Afghanistan, Cyprus, Iran and Turkey.

The AIF aims to make its collection accessible to the public through a wide spectrum of activities, including site-specific exhibitions, publications, videos and an online image database. It seeks to encourage critical approaches to reading and interpreting photographs. To date, the AIF's collection includes approximately 300000 images. Since its inception it has been involved in strengthening scholarship and acquiring photographic works produced by professional, amateur and anonymous residents of the region, Figs 2 and 3. The Foundation has undertaken research in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Senegal, Mexico and Argentina. The selection of photographs includes documentary, historical, social, industrial, experimental and advertising photography, Fig. 4. One aspect that differentiates the Foundation from other institutions collecting photography is that research is led by artists, whose interpretation and selection criteria often differ from those of historians or researchers. Through the work of the AIF, photographers such as Van Leo from Egypt, Latif el Ani from Iraq and Hashem el Madani from Lebanon have been introduced to an international public. Artistically and historically important prints and negatives are scanned at high resolution to enable searches within the



Fig. 1 Zangaki Frères: *Fellah woman and child*, Cairo, c.1870. Collection: AIF/Nawaf Salam. Photo: © Arab Image Foundation



Fig. 2 Alban: [*Studio portrait*], Cairo, c.1945. Collection: AIF/Georges Mikaelian family. Photo: © Arab Image Foundation

facility and approximately 9000 images in the AIF holdings are currently available online. The collections are publicized through gallery and museum exhibitions, publications and other projects



Fig. 3 Marie el Khazen: *Jounieh Littoral*, Lebanon, 1928. Collection: AIF/Mohsen Yammine. Photo: © Arab Image Foundation



Fig. 4 Unknown photographer: *Hindenburg zeppelin over Jerusalem*, Palestine, 1936. Collection: AIF/Abdel Hadi family. Photo: © Arab Image Foundation

initiated by members. At times the AIF functions as a photography agency, selling reproduction rights for publication purposes and paying copyright fees to photographers and collectors.

Since the establishment of a cool storage facility on the AIF premises in April 1998 the Foundation's preservation policy has focused on two major priorities: preserving original documents by limiting their manipulation and exposure, and storing photographs in a stable light- and climate-controlled environment to better ensure their longevity. Preservation education and training for collection keepers throughout the Arab world is a primary mission and is promoted through contact with individuals as well as through workshops such as the Middle East Photograph Preservation Institute of 2009.

PRESERVATION CHALLENGES IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTIONS

Photography has not been collected as a matter of course in the Middle East. National archives and libraries, for example, do not uniformly have the tradition of including photographs with accessioned documents, books, maps and other materials. Collecting has taken place at colleges, universities, private

organizations and ministries of culture and certainly exists on an individual level. As in many countries, even where these collections exist they are not always recognized or valued and may not be provided with the staff and funding necessary for their care. The photographs are frequently maintained by dedicated individuals, sometimes among the paid staff but at other times from outside the institution.

The collections have holdings representing the broad spectrum of photography. The works are by visiting or indigenous photographers, many of them professional but some of them amateur. They include nineteenth-century albumen prints and glass plate negatives, twentieth-century black-and-white and color prints, as well as plastic-based negatives and positive transparencies both in black-and-white and in color. Some collections also encompass important moving image works on film base and magnetic media. Image holdings range in size from modest groups of thousands to more impressive collections numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Institutions with whom we have been in contact to date — and doubtless many more exist — have cited common preservation needs for their collections. These include the installation and maintenance of adequate climate control systems, dust suppression, mitigation of water-related threats, full cataloging, digitization for access and maintenance of digital records. Housing materials such as papers and plastics that can be used in storage and are available at reasonable prices, and from local sources, are at a premium. Other needs are for staff who can consistently devote themselves to the preservation of the collections, provide training in proper handling to researchers and collections caretakers and who have the knowledge to impose best storage practices. There is a desire for further training in the technical history of photography and practical preservation measures. In addition there is pressing demand for skilled individuals working on site who can capably address the conservation treatment needs associated with photographs, including surface dirt and physical damage such as creases and tears.

The underlying limiting factor for the many preservation challenges outlined above is funding, coupled with a constant challenge to raise awareness about the invaluable and irreplaceable nature of these images that represent the cultural and historical heritage of many peoples and regions.

MIDDLE EAST PHOTOGRAPH PRESERVATION INSTITUTE

A first major step toward addressing the preservation of photographic collections came with the Middle East Photograph Preservation Institute (MEPPI), a two-week intensive workshop that took place in Beirut in January 2009. The primary goals of the workshop were to educate and train custodians of photograph collections in the Middle East and to open dialog and create connections between concerned collectors and collections in the region. MEPPI was conceived and organized by the authors and was four years in the planning. It could not have taken place without very generous support from the Getty Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, collaboration with the AIF in Beirut, the welcome and co-operation of the American University of Beirut (where the Institute was conducted), the commitment of all guest lecturers and the dedication of 14 wonderful participants from museum and library collections in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iran and Syria, Fig. 5. While the participants' experience of photography and preservation varied widely they all held a passion for their institutions' holdings. Their desire to better safeguard these collections was inspiring.

The two-week curriculum design reflected findings from pre-conference collection questionnaires gathered during the planning phase as well as advice from the AIF. During the Institute,



Fig. 5 Participants and organizers, Middle East Photograph Preservation Institute, Beirut, January 2009. Photo: © Nora W. Kennedy



Fig. 6 Tamara Sawaya of the Arab Image Foundation shows participants photographs from the collection, Beirut, January 2009. Photo: © Nora W. Kennedy

participants were exposed to fundamental concepts, followed by concrete applications of theories and techniques. The emphasis was always on the practical, as we knew that budgets and staffing for the preservation of photographic collections tended to be minimal or non-existent. The curriculum included introductions to the technical history of photography, image formation and deterioration, degradation mechanisms and causes. Emphasis was placed on hands-on workshops for the identification of photographic processes, examination of examples of different forms of deterioration and diagnosis of their likely causes. Collection visits further familiarized participants with the rich photographic holdings in Beirut, Fig. 6. These on-site experiences offered a practical opportunity to address real and immediate preservation challenges and often showed participants how much they shared with their colleagues in terms of issues affecting preservation. Practical preventive strategies were emphasized in ameliorating conditions for damaged photographs using low-cost solutions, in preparing for and responding to disaster situations and in brainstorming about fundraising strategies and sources, large and small. Advocacy for the collections was emphasized as a first step in raising awareness of the richness and importance of visual cultural heritage.

At the conclusion of MEPPI participants were asked to develop concrete preservation goals. These included efforts to review and amend existing preservation policies and procedures, establish

informed priorities for preservation, monitor storage environments, prepare and institute basic disaster plans and promote the importance and value of collections within and outside the institution. A MEPPi blog was established that includes institutional information as well as useful links about photograph and digital image preservation, sources for preservation supplies and materials, references for emergency planning and response, tips and tricks and general development resources [3]. In addition participants suggested offering regular informal meetings to share preservation challenges and activities and to further strengthen professional networks and build capacity and expertise. MEPPi participants are eager to work together on exhibitions that share complementary collections and individual holdings. Opportunities for joint fundraising are a possibility for such exhibitions and other important preservation initiatives, including the testing of storage materials, ordering bulk supplies and sharing environmental monitoring.

Lessons learned from the planning and implementation of this two-week Institute include the necessity of flexibility in planning and scheduling due to inevitable political uncertainties in this part of the world. Yet the continuation of cultural events in a time of conflict is a form of resistance to war and should be encouraged. Collaboration and partnership with local institutions or organizations is absolutely essential to the success of any workshop or meeting. The collections survey distributed early on in the process enabled MEPPi to succeed in meeting the needs of the individuals and collections involved. Pre-workshop visits helped to form a clearer picture of the collection preservation needs. The practical focus of the two weeks held the participants' interest and clearly directed the contact towards tangible, everyday applications. We anticipated that language would be a challenge but in the end we did not require a professional translator. Participation from some key collections was impossible due to travel difficulties and inability to leave work for a prolonged period.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS TOWARD STRENGTHENING PHOTOGRAPH PRESERVATION PRACTICE

While MEPPi was a strong first step and had many positive outcomes, the conservation of photography of the Eastern Mediterranean is still in its infancy. We cannot fully grasp the true need until all collections of photographs, large and small, are identified and their holdings surveyed. Collection assessments and surveys are an essential first step. Future preservation initiatives will necessitate a variety of approaches and an implicit promotion of the value and importance of photography in the Middle East. Some initiatives that are in their planning stages or already underway are briefly outlined below.

Education and training

Workshops are a powerful educational tool that can be modified and enhanced using post-workshop, distance learning practices to reinforce content, maintain momentum and ensure that theories are put into practice, benefiting collections in concrete ways. In addition to traditional and hybrid photograph preservation workshops and educational institutes, other educational initiatives under consideration for the Middle East include specialized training of individuals currently employed by collections. These individuals would be given internships in conservation laboratories outside the region to gain experience in state-of-the-art methods and techniques and/or would be provided with training *in situ* from visiting photograph conservators. Despite a wealth of photographic heritage dating from the early nineteenth century to the present there are no formally trained photograph conservators in the Middle East and therefore one-on-one, structured training may be most beneficial.

A second Middle East workshop, now in the preliminary planning stages, will take place in Cairo — another Eastern Mediterranean urban center with a large number of significant photograph collections. Possible changes to the MEPPi format will include a shorter duration and an expanded group of participants. Essential topics to be covered will include the technical history of photography (with an emphasis on those processes most prominent in the regional collections), environmental parameters that affect photographic materials and practical pointers on mitigating the effects of an uncontrolled environment, the proper scanning of collections and the preservation and storage of digital files for scholarly and public access and use. Fundraising will also be introduced as it is an area traditionally undertaken by administrators but increasingly accomplished more effectively in partnership with preservation staff and collection keepers. The larger group of participants will necessarily mean less room for hands-on exercises and more emphasis on the lecture format. Simultaneous translation may be required, which poses disadvantages in terms of personal interaction between speakers and participants but may be inevitable until more experts are available on site.

It is likely that many workshops, meetings and lectures, from large to intimate and from basic to advanced, will be required throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Such varied approaches will promote the dissemination of preservation fundamentals and best practices to professional and public audiences, young and old. A bi-monthly gathering of like-minded professionals in an urban center, for example, can be a rich and inexpensive forum for creative exchange and morale boosting. Photography clubs, community organizations and other affiliated or interested groups should be engaged in preservation meetings to socialize, network and learn more about historic collections. Public lectures on lively topics such as 'how to care for one's family photographs' will engage new audiences. Younger generations must be brought into contact with their history and culture. To the generations born into the digital age, the world of photography opens new arenas of exploration and self-discovery. Drawing these young people in will inevitably lead to a small percentage of them returning as adults to help to preserve and promulgate images of the past.

Shared environmental monitoring and high-quality housing materials

Although some preservation issues faced by cultural institutions will vary, others — such as the need for environmental monitoring and control and the identification, testing and procurement of high-quality housing materials — are shared. Working collaboratively and in partnership with the AIF will strengthen and advance photograph preservation practice in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Without knowledge of the environment a collection is housed in, it becomes difficult to make recommendations for improvements. While data loggers provide long-term and continuous environmental records, they are expensive and require expertise in downloading and interpreting data. Local readings can be made cost effectively with basic equipment such as a thermometer and a sling psychrometer, but this requires a dedicated individual and a significant time commitment. Ideally, a central institution such as the AIF would provide data loggers for extended or short-term loan, oversee their installation and visit regularly to download information and report trends and results to the collection keepers. This information would aid in making facility modifications where necessary, as well as providing a platform for development and fundraising.

Papers and some plastics are manufactured in the Eastern Mediterranean. Currently a number of locally manufactured

papers are being tested at the Image Permanence Institute in the United States with the Photographic Activity Test (PAT) to determine their suitability for use in envelopes, folders and other housings for photographs. This limited testing has been funded by the Getty Foundation in conjunction with MEPPi. More materials should be tested as it is prohibitively expensive to import proper housing materials from the United States and even from Europe. Collecting institutions may wish to purchase large quantities of supplies jointly and minimize costs. This requires (often difficult) coordination between multiple institutions. The AIF is encouraged by the authors of this paper to provide central leadership in the testing and procurement of high-quality storage enclosures. Ideally an enterprising businessperson will seize the opportunity for a business venture and provide both imported and locally produced materials to the region.

Translating key resources for dissemination

It is essential that fundamental photograph preservation texts be translated for broad dissemination in the Eastern Mediterranean region. MEPPi and the AIF made a significant first step in translating the *Care of Photographs* by Susie Clark and Franziska Frey, a monograph originally published by SEPIA (Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access) in a project supported by the European Union in 2000. This publication, translated into Arabic for MEPPi and funded by the Getty Foundation, is available as a downloadable PDF [4].

One of the authors (Tamara Sawaya of the AIF) and Rana Andari of the National Museum in Beirut are working on a translation of Heritage Preservation's *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel* into Arabic. In doing so, some recommendations will be modified to address regional challenges that vary from those in the United States, such as the constant threat of war. No authoritative source yet exists for terminology in Arabic specific to the history and preservation of photography although a glossary for conservation in general has been produced by ICCROM [5]. As with other languages spoken across large parts of the world, there are challenges posed by local variations in the Arabic language.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East has a rich and long culture and history as exemplified by archeological records going back more than 1000000 years. Photography is a very recent phenomenon in this incredible record of humankind and as such is little thought of when preservation comes to mind. There is an ongoing need for introductory photograph preservation education, translated publications, increased public awareness and dedicated fundraising but additional in-depth practical training in collection processing, exhibition preparation, scanning and the use of digital technologies for access is also required. MEPPi is the first substantial step toward awakening awareness and building infrastructure to preserve the important photographic heritage in this region. We are confident that from this small group of individuals who participated in the 2009 Middle East Photograph Preservation Institute more will be inspired to join the collaboration.

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