Article: The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative 2011-2013: Mapping Photograph Archives and Training Collection Keepers
Author(s): Rima Mokaiseh, Zeina Arida, Debra Hess Norris, Nora W. Kennedy, and Tram Vo
Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume 15.
Pages: 416-424
Compiler: Jessica Keister

Topics in Photographic Preservation is published biannually by the Photographic Materials Group (PMG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). A membership benefit of the Photographic Materials Group, Topics in Photographic Preservation is primarily comprised of papers presented at PMG meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

Papers presented in Topics in Photographic Preservation, Vol. 15, have not undergone a formal process of peer review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein rests solely with the authors, whose articles should not be considered official statements of the PMG or the AIC. The PMG is an approved division of the AIC but does not necessarily represent the AIC policy or opinions.
The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative 2011-2013: Mapping Photograph Archives and Training Collection Keepers

Rima Mokaiesh, Zeina Arida, Debra Hess Norris, Nora W. Kennedy, and Tram Vo

Presented as a poster at the 2013 AIC & ICOM-CC Photographs Conservation Joint Meeting in Wellington, New Zealand.

Abstract
The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) is a unique project that has, since 2009, identified nearly 300 photographs collections in the broad Middle East, and provided training for 38 collections in 14 countries, helping to preserve over 15 million photographs.

1. Introduction
The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) was launched in 2009 as a pilot project encompassing networking, educational and awareness raising functions. Starting in 2011, MEPPI has developed into a full program incorporating a mapping component and a training component, both contributing to a better understanding of the state of photograph collections in the region, and building a strong network of photograph preservation professionals in the broad Middle East – extending through North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean to Iran and Turkey. MEPPI was initially conceived in response to two observations: that the region was home to many undervalued photograph collections, and that the custodians of these collections unanimously expressed a need for access to preservation education and resources (see Kennedy et al., 2010). The project is led jointly by the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, Photograph Conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Getty Conservation Institute. It is funded by a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with additional funding from the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI).

2. The MEPPI Survey: Mapping Photograph Collections in the Arab World and Beyond
In 2011, the Arab Image Foundation initiated a one-year survey to locate and document photograph collections in North Africa, the Arab Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. Three scholars were hired with Mellon funding, and assigned a region each. Art historian and researcher Jean-Gabriel Leturcq assessed collections in Libya and the Arab Peninsula, identifying over 80 repositories. Dr. Mark Westmoreland, a visual anthropologist and professor at the American University of Cairo, researched Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, visiting and mapping over 90 collections. The third researcher, Marie Moignard, contributed 30 names to the list of collections in North Africa. As of September 2013, nearly 300 photograph collections have been surveyed, with a focus on institutional collections held in national libraries and archives, museums, universities, press agencies, as well as some significant private collections.

The researchers contacted collections via e-mail or telephone, visiting where possible to meet and interview staff and to see holdings. Basic information was collected for each institution, using a form available in Arabic, English and French that included questions about the photographic formats and time periods represented, the collection’s history and plans for the
future, its storage conditions, and its availability to the public. The completed survey form was submitted to the AIF.

The results of this important work are centralized at the Arab Image Foundation, where staff members added to the collections surveyed and updated information, through encounters with collection keepers at the AIF’s premises in Beirut, or during research trips to Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Collections have proved easy to approach and open to discussion, particularly when presented with the benefits of connecting with other collections from the region and with preservation experts. Some have had questions about the future use of collected information and voiced concerns over the risk they might incur in case that information was made public, particularly in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. This is an understandable response in countries undergoing recent and current socio-political upheaval.

Taking into account the needs and concerns expressed by the collections approached, the Arab Image Foundation is currently developing a directory that will be published online, on the project website, by the end of 2013. In the trilingual directory, collections will be listed by type (archive, library, etc.) and will be searchable by country, time period and topics covered. Each entry will be illustrated with representative sample images, accessible with the owner’s approval. With this platform, MEPPI project partners hope to create a regional hub for research about the region’s photographic heritage. Specific mapping projects led by third parties in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Qatar, and others yet to be identified, will be associated to the directory, with their permission.

3. MEPPI Courses: Training Those Responsible for Photograph Collections in the Broad Middle East

Following the pilot workshop held in Beirut in 2009, the MEPPI partners developed a cycle of three photograph preservation courses. Each course welcomes 14 to 18 participants representing a variety of photograph collections from the broad Middle East. Participants are selected after answering a call for applications, which was answered in 2011 by 41 applicants; in 2012 by 61 applicants; and in 2013 by 85 applicants. MEPPI Courses start with an eight-day bilingual workshop offering theoretical and practical sessions on process identification, best practices in housing, storage, exhibition and climate control, as well as sessions presenting common forms of deterioration and damage and suggested responses. Core instructors of the course are Debra Hess Norris (University of Delaware), Nora Kennedy (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Bertrand Lavédrine (Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections) and Tram Vo (Getty Conservation Institute). Guest instructors offer additional sessions on the history of photography in the Arab world, digitization practices and standards, artistic practices using photographic archives, as well as fundraising and advocacy for collections. Workshops typically include site visits to local institutions, either identified through the MEPPI Survey, or with MEPPI participants or alumni among their staff. One public lecture in each host location provides local audiences with perspectives on museum practice, contemporary art, and practical options for preserving family collections.

Following the workshop, participants engage in the distance-learning phase of the course, which is coordinated by the Getty Conservation Institute and lasts nine months. During this period, assignments range from assessing a collection to preparing an emergency plan. Participants disseminate information collected from the MEPPI workshop and online resources within their
institutions and beyond. Some give public talks on photograph preservation. Clare Davies and Ibrahim Abdel-fattah engaged the public during an evening lecture and discussion of photograph preservation at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo in February 2012. In September 2013, Ziad Rajab shared his views about MEPPI goals and their impact on the Rajab Museum at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah in Kuwait. Others participants from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and the UAE were inspired to create working groups and collaborate on preservation and digitization projects, some informal and others on a formal level. The distance-mentoring phase is important for participants to implement the acquired skills and knowledge in their own institutions while still benefiting from a GCI advisor’s input. It also is key to the MEPPI network’s sustainability, as participants and alumni deepen their working and personal relationships and are able to view and learn from each other’s assignments.

Finally, the course participants and instructors reconvene in a new location for a follow-up meeting – usually hosted by one of the course’s participating institutions. At follow-up meetings, participants discuss their accomplishments and share their challenges. Tailored theoretical and practical sessions are offered – often with groups working collaboratively on solutions – such as the creation of specialized housings, the design of a storage area, or the evaluation of the process, condition, and storage and exhibition parameters of specific groups of sample photographs.

Since 2009, MEPPI has provided training for 38 collections in 14 countries, helping to preserve over 15 million photographs. Workshops and follow-up meetings have been held in Lebanon at the American University of Beirut and Arab Image Foundation; in Morocco at the Bibliothèque nationale du Royaume du Maroc; in the UAE at New York University Abu Dhabi; and in Turkey at SALT Galata. Upcoming venues include the National Library of Jordan in Amman. Figure 1 below highlights the countries where institutions benefitted from training, and cities where workshops were held. A detailed list of MEPPI alumni is provided in Figure 2.

Fig.1. Participating and host countries of MEPPI Courses, 2009-2013.
Source: MEPPI project, map by author.
### Figure 2: Alumni of MEPPI Courses, 2009-2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Alumni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Bahrain House of Photography</td>
<td>Archive</td>
<td>Hussain Mahroos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>American University in Cairo</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Ola Seif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>CULTNAT</td>
<td>Public Research Center</td>
<td>Doaa Mohamed and Heba Farid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Grand Egyptian Museum</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>Ibrahim Abdel-fattah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>The Qasr el Doubara Institute for Historical Research</td>
<td>Private Collection</td>
<td>Clare Davies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Visual Cultural Heritage</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Mohamed Wishahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Cultural Research Bureau</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Rana Javadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Independent researcher</td>
<td>Private Collection</td>
<td>Mohammadreza Tahmasebpour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Kamran Collection</td>
<td>Independent Researcher</td>
<td>Kamran Najafzadeh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Iraq National Library and Archive</td>
<td>National Library</td>
<td>Nahid Fadhil Mahdai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Photographic Memory</td>
<td>Private Collection</td>
<td>Kifah Amin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Department of Antiquities</td>
<td>Government Agency</td>
<td>Hala Qasem Abdallah Alsyouf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>National Library of Jordan</td>
<td>National Library</td>
<td>Munthea Ibrahim Ayesh Aldiri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Royal Court: Royal Protocol</td>
<td>National Archive</td>
<td>Salma K. Al Shuhail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Yarmouk University</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Atef Shiyab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>Tareq Rajab Museum</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>Ziad Rajab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>American University of Beirut</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Kaoukab Chebaro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>American University of Beirut</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Samar Mikati Kaissi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>An-nahar</td>
<td>Press</td>
<td>Nabila Bitar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Arab Image Foundation</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Ralph Nashawaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Arab Image Foundation</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Sana Chkeibane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Arab Image Foundation</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Tamara Sawaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Arab Image Foundation</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Walid Sader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Arab Image Foundation</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Fadi Soleiman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Daralhayat Information Center</td>
<td>Press</td>
<td>Nada Itani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Fouad Debbas Collection</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Yasmine Chemali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Institute for Palestine Studies</td>
<td>Research Center</td>
<td>Jeannette Sarouphim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Institute for Palestine Studies</td>
<td>Ministry</td>
<td>Mirna Kalash Itani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Ministry of Tourism</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>Ibtissam Fawaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Musée National, Direction Générale des Antiquités</td>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>Carole Atallah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Musée National, Direction Générale des Antiquités</td>
<td>Private Collection</td>
<td>Rana Andari</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. New Resources
Since 2009, the MEPPI partners have sought to make educational resources available throughout the region through the translation to Arabic of a number of key publications on photograph preservation. These include an English-Arabic-French glossary of photograph preservation terms, and a number of key scholarly articles on photograph preservation and preventive care. In 2010, the AIF – with the permission of the United States-based organization Heritage Preservation – produced an Arabic version of “The Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel”™, a tool outlining procedures for safeguarding heritage, including photograph materials, in times of natural or man-made disasters.

5. Impact and Main Successes
In order to assess participants’ satisfaction with each course, to improve the MEPPI curriculum, and to ensure, year after year, that collections’ needs and expectations are met by the MEPPI courses, the MEPPI partners have designed a course evaluation process, whereby participants fill out short questionnaires at the end of the initial workshop, and a more extensive course
evaluation after the follow-up meeting. The latter contains a section assessing the impact of the course on participants’ day-to-day work. Evaluations are completed anonymously and participants are encouraged to be honest and constructive. Participants will be contacted three years after “graduating” to once again assess the impact of the course they attended.

In the feedback from the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 courses, 100% of participants said they would recommend the course to others in their profession. As one participant reported ‘it's been an extraordinary experience of strategic importance for my institution’. 85% reported being familiar with the basic functions of photograph preservation and being able to apply the information confidently to their collections. When asked about what they were most proud of, many of the participants mentioned the network they are now part of, and the possibilities of regional collaboration. One participant wrote ‘the outcomes of this workshop are quite amazing: with only a small group from different backgrounds we were able to understand and develop so much in the field’.

Among MEPPI alumni’s most impressive achievements are the following:

Participants have reported the establishment of clearer objectives and policies for preservation. For example, alumni from CULTNAT in Egypt have developed image policy guidelines for their member institutions. An alumnus from the Tareq Rajab Museum in Kuwait has worked to clarify the objectives of the institution, in the course of which he has conducted a full inspection of the Museum, organized a thorough cleaning and reorganization of storage sites, and has developed an emergency plan.

Participants have reported major improvements in the housing and storage conditions of their collections. The collections of the Royal Court in Jordan were catalogued and rehoused. A micro-storage was created for the protection of early glass-plate negatives at the Grand Egyptian Museum. A rare degraded acetate film collection from Lebanon was assessed and the environment monitored using environment data loggers supplied by MEPPi. The Kamran Collection in Iran was organized and rehoused in custom-made individual enclosures, boxes and in cabinets. Three major archives in poor condition were reorganized and rehoused at the Bahrain Museum of Photography.

Projects were initiated for the protection of endangered collections of great significance in regions with political unrest. Plans were developed to move to safety a collection housed in rooftop storage units adjacent to the US Embassy in Cairo. Collections were salvaged and acquisition strategies developed for the National Library and Archives of Iraq and the WAFA News Agency in Palestine, following massive losses sustained during armed conflict.

Alumni also contributed to raising awareness in their respective countries about the importance of photography and photograph preservation. They gave public talks in venues such as the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo (2012), the Turkish Librarian’s Association’s Istanbul branch (2013), and Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah in Kuwait (2013), among others. They published articles in newspapers in Lebanon, Palestine and Iran. An alumnus from the National Library of Jordan contributed to launching a weekly column in the country’s most read newspaper where photographs from the National Library’s archive are presented and documented. Archives in
Bahrain and Jordan invited members of the general public to contribute to their photograph collections. In addition, MEPPI colleagues have advocated forcefully with their supervisors and other high-level decision-makers to raise awareness and secure support, which helped ensure the safeguarding of important collections in Bahrain, Jordan, Tunisia, and in the UAE.

Participants engaged in research, and while working groups were created in Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and the UAE, two institutions from Abu Dhabi even formalized common digitization standards. Meanwhile, one alumnus published his research on the history of the daguerreotype in Iran.

Finally, to date, two MEPPI alumni are pursuing graduate degrees in preservation and conservation following their participation in our courses. Ibrahim Abdel-fattah, from Egypt, is now a student at George Washington University in the Museum Studies Masters’ program, while Fatima Al Dhaif from Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority is about to enroll at Camberwell University to pursue an MA in Conservation of Books and Archival Materials.

6. Challenges Ahead
While the successes of the MEPPI program are abundant, the organizing partners are also faced with a number of challenges.

Many participants reported that they had difficulty convincing their higher management that the institution’s photograph archive should be a priority. Thanks to the first distance-mentoring assignment, requiring participants to present their accomplishments through MEPPI to their colleagues and supervisors, participants achieved some progress improving awareness at the management level. Others still feel they are fighting a lone battle within their institution, though gain courage from solidarity with MEPPI colleagues even from afar.

Additional difficulties are directly related to the region’s sometimes unstable socio-political situation. Due to political complexities, participants from Egypt, Libya and Syria were unable to participate in all aspects of the course, though they have remained in touch with the cohort of alumni and with the instructors. All will be more than welcome to join a further edition of the course as the individual situation allows.

The final MEPPI course will take place in 2014, and MEPPI partners are preparing for the next steps for photograph preservation in the Middle East. Those include to more broadly raise awareness, at the decision-making level, of the importance of preserving the region’s valuable photographic heritage. On the institutional level, this will allow for a better safeguarding of collections, and on the regional level, for improved policies for the protection of intangible heritage in general, and photographic heritage in particular. Related to this, the Arab Image Foundation will present a policy brief for intangible heritage in Lebanon later in 2013. In the meantime, MEPPI partners will continue their efforts to build capacity and sustain the network of committed and engaged preservation professionals recently established across the region. Alumni updates and updates from the field will be posted regularly on the MEPPI website. Participants will continue to connect through social media, and alumni and instructors will actively engage in the mentoring of new participants as well as others learning of the initiative.
Looking to the future, MEPPI partners are currently developing a series of shorter advanced workshops to be offered in 2015 and 2016 to MEPPI alumni. These workshops will focus on specific areas of photograph preservation as well as access, to include the preservation environment, safe exhibition practices, emergency preparedness and response, and digitization standards and practices. Though not a preservation theme per se, digitization is widely practiced and has an impact on how collections are used and appreciated.

A symposium to bring together all participants, instructors and photography enthusiasts is being planned as a culmination to MEPPI. This will feature speakers from a wide range of countries and collections, and will be a celebration of the new community devoted to the appreciation and long-term preservation of photography in the region. More information about the event will be announced soon.

Notes

1. Ongoing Photographic Memory of Egypt project at Center for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT), Cairo.


3. Research led by the Institute for Palestine Studies, Ramallah, Palestine.

4. Ongoing Qatar Unified Imaging Project (QUIP), Doha, Qatar.

5. See references below for a list of translated publications.

References


Further Readings

MEPPI project website: www.meppi.me, accessed 09/30/13.

Publications translated to Arabic by the MEPPI project:


**Rima Mokaiesh**  
Assistant Director  
The Arab Image Foundation  
Beirut, Lebanon

**Zeina Arida**  
Director  
The Arab Image Foundation  
Beirut, Lebanon

**Debra Hess Norris**  
Unidel-Henry Francis Chair of Fine Arts  
Chair and Professor, Department of Art Conservation, University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware, USA.

**Nora W. Kennedy**  
Sherman Fairchild Conservator of Photographs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Adjunct Professor, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, Conservation Center  
New York, New York, USA

**Tram Vo**  
Project Specialist  
Getty Conservation Institute  
Los Angeles, California, USA

Papers presented in *Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume Fifteen* have not undergone a formal process of peer review.