



Article: Digitization as a Tool for Preventative Conservation and a Key Role for Sustainability (Abstract)

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Digitization as a Tool for Preventative Conservation and a Key Role for Sustainability

Yasmine Chemali

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Cultural institutions are committed to a long-term preservation of their collections and to providing information to help communities better understand their heritage. The Fouad Debbas Collection, a private collection of photographs based in Beirut, Lebanon, has developed policies that guide both the management and access of artifacts and their information. While the most recent activities of at the Fouad Debbas Collection focused on the importance of preventive conservation, especially through an optimum environment control (climate, light, housing and storage), today the target is the public and the mission is to meet its needs. A collection such as the Fouad Debbas Collection, encompassing more than 40,000 images from the 19th and the mid 20th centuries (albumen prints in albums or gathered in portfolios, glass plates and magic lantern slides, stereoscopic views, cabinet cards, engravings, and maps), is a major national asset and a legacy for future generations.

The question of sustainability is then the challenge: how can awareness and appreciation for these materials be incorporated into the cultural awareness of Lebanese society which, with every generation, has suffered political instability, war, and other conflicts?

Lebanon, like the region at large, lacks any serious governmental structures and institutions capable of protecting and preserving the region's cultural heritage. Moreover, the Damocles sword of a new armed conflict haunting Lebanon and the instability of the region are constant risks that threaten the Lebanese and Middle Eastern heritage. In this context, the Fouad Debbas Collection has recently received a grant from the British Library and the Endangered Archives Program for digitizing, cataloguing, and indexing a representative sample of the collection: the photographs of the Bonfils studio, a photographic establishment in Beirut from 1867 to the 1910s. The Bonfils collection is clearly an invaluable document recording the history of a region at a crucial crossroads, before the beginning of the great historical upheaval that was about to sweep the region and bring about the Modern Middle East as we know it today.

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