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# **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**

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## **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.

Country	Institution	Type	Alumni
Bahrain	Bahrain House of Photography	Archive	Hussain Mahroos
Egypt	American University in Cairo	University	Ola Seif
Egypt	CULTNAT	Public Research Center	Doaa Mohamed and Heba Farid
Egypt	Grand Egyptian Museum	Museum	Ibrahim Abdel-fattah
Egypt	The Qasr el Doubara Institute for Historical Research	Private Collection	Clare Davies
Egypt	Visual Cultural Heritage	Research Center	Mohamed Wishahi
Iran	Cultural Research Bureau	Research Center	Rana Javadi
Iran	Independent researcher	Private Collection	Mohammadreza Tahmasebpour
Iran	Kamran Collection	Independent Researcher	Kamran Najafzadeh
Iraq	Iraq National Library and Archive	National Library	Nahid Fadhil Mahdai
Iraq	Photographic Memory	Private Collection	Kifah Amin
Jordan	Department of Antiquities	Government Agency	Hala Qasem Abdallah Alsyouf
Jordan	National Library of Jordan	National Library	Muntaha Ibrahim Ayesh Aldiri
Jordan	Royal Court: Royal Protocol	National Archive	Salma K. Al Shuhail
Jordan	Yarmouk University	University	Atef Shiyab
Kuwait	Tareq Rajab Museum	Museum	Ziad Rajab
Lebanon	American University of Beirut	University	Kaoukab Chebaro
Lebanon	American University of Beirut	University	Samar Mikati Kaissi
Lebanon	An-nahar	Press	Nabila Bitar
Lebanon	Arab Image Foundation	Research Center	Ralph Nashawaty
Lebanon	Arab Image Foundation	Research Center	Sana Chkeibane
Lebanon	Arab Image Foundation	Research Center	Tamara Sawaya
Lebanon	Arab Image Foundation	Research Center	Walid Sader
Lebanon	Arab Image Foundation	Research Center	Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Fadi Soleiman
Lebanon	Daralhayat Information Center	Press	Nada Itani
Lebanon	Fouad Debbas Collection	Research Center	Yasmine Chemali
Lebanon	Institute for Palestine Studies	Research Center	Jeannette Sarouphim
Lebanon	Institute for Palestine Studies	Ministry	Mirna Kalash Itani
Lebanon	Ministry of Tourism	Museum	Ibtissam Fawaz
Lebanon	Musée National, Direction Générale des Antiquités	Museum	Carole Atallah
Lebanon	Musée National, Direction Générale des Antiquités	Private Collection	Rana Andari

Lebanon	Université St Joseph, Bibliothèque Orientale	University	Levon Nordiguian
Libya	Department of Antiquities	Government Agency	Farag Mohammed el Ferrjani
Morocco	Bibliothèque Générale et Archives de Tetouan	City archive	Ahmed Teimi
Morocco	Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc	National Library	Fatima Zohra Bouallaga
Morocco	Ecole Nationale d'Architecture	University	Touriya Elazri Ennassiri
Palestine	WAFA	Press	Nawaf Hamed
Palestine	Riwaq	Research Center	Iyad Issa
Syria	City of Aleppo archive	City Archive	Hala Hamcho
Tunisia	Centre de Documentation Nationale	National Archive	Kaouther Dridi
Turkey	Koç University Library	University	Huseyin Eski
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority	Government Agency	Abdalla Mohamed Bastaki
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority	Government Agency	Daniel Suarez
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority	Government Agency	Fatima Al Dhaif
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority	Government Agency	Jo-Fan Huang
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	El Etihad	Press	Tareq Al-Ghoul
UAE (Abu Dhabi)	Noor Ali Rashid archive	Private Collection	Safdar Rashid
UAE (Sharjah)	Sharjah Museums	Museum	Amna Al Humairi

Source: MEPPi project, table by author.

#### 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.
2. A survey conducted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Office in Amman, Jordan.
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.

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### Further Readings

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