MEPPI
Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative
مبادرة الحفاظ على الصور الفوتوغرافية للشرق الأوسط

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Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) – Forging Professional Connections, Visibility, and Awareness

The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) is a three-year, strategic initiative funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to identify and assess significant photographic collections and to promote their preservation and visibility in the broad Middle East, from North Africa and the Arab Peninsula through Western Asia.

The Arab Image Foundation (AIF), the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Getty Conservation Institute recently presented MEPPI Beirut 2011, the first of a series of three, 8-day photograph preservation workshops in the Middle East. "This workshop gathered a group of very enthusiastic collections' holders, from 8 countries in the region," says AIF director Zeina Arida. "Their commitment is highly promising as a vital step towards the constitution of a network of individuals and institutions dedicated to the preservation of photographic heritage in the Arab world. We hope that the involvement of the Arab Image Foundation will contribute to a better knowledge of practices related to photograph preservation, and to the study and valorization of these collections."

MEPPI Beirut 2011 welcomed 18 participants from leading photograph collections of the greater Middle East, including national archives and libraries, museums, press agencies, and universities from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Syria.[1] The workshop was directed by Debra Hess Norris (University of Delaware) and Nora Kennedy (The Metropolitan Musspeakers included Franziska Frey (Harvard Library), Bertrand Lavédrine (Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections), Tram Vo (Getty Conservation Institute), Zeina Arida (Director of the Arab Image Foundation), Akram Zaatari (artist and founding member of the Arab Image Foundation) and Issam Nassar (scholar and historian of photography; Arab Image Foundation board member). Simultaneous translation of all talks and sessions was offered from English to Arabic and reciprocally.

Instructor Bertand Lavedrine demonstrating printing out silver images to participants.
Photo: Tram Vo

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[1] Participating institutions were, from Egypt, the Grand Egyptian Museum and the Qasr el Doubara Institute for Historical Research; from Iran, an independent researcher; from Iraq, the Iraq National Library and Archive and Photographic Memory; from Jordan, the Department of Antiquities, the National Library of Jordan, and the Royal Protocol; from Lebanon, the American University of Beirut, An-nahar, the Arab Image Foundation, the Daralhayat Information Center, and the Fouad Debbas Collection; from Morocco, Bibliothèque Générale et Archives de Tetouan, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc; from Palestine News and Information Agency, WAFA; from Syria, the City of Aleppo Archive

Participants and instructors engaged in theoretical and practical sessions addressing the identification, preservation, and display of photographic materials, whether analog or digital. Participants were provided with preservation toolkits and sample housing materials. Selected participants were provided with state-of-the-art environment monitoring data loggers, to gather data on storage conditions.

Instructors and participants visiting the American University of Beirut Library and Archive. Photo: Tram Vo

The workshop included collection visits at the American University of Beirut, the Arab Image Foundation and the Hashem el Madani studio in Saida, South Lebanon. The Madani studio has operated continuously for 60 years and is the largest collection archived at AIF. A public talk at the Beirut Art Centre addressed the critical challenges and best practices associated with digital print preservation.

An English-Arabic-French glossary of photograph conservation terms is being developed by the Arab Image Foundation and will facilitate the Arabic translation of academic publications on photograph preservation. The Arab Image Foundation is also compiling a detailed collection directory that will be made public in 2012.

Participants have enthusiastically acknowledged the importance of the MEPPI courses, both for the skills they have gained and their acquired sensitivity to matters of preservation and shared cultural heritage. Participants were inspired to work together and to strengthen the preservation of photographic materials in the Arab world.

"The workshop provided me with the information to know better how to prioritize, and the confidence to know that much of what I was doing was right. I was glad to meet individuals who shared concerns and challenges" reported one participant from Egypt. The workshop empowered participants: *"above all, [MEPPI] has given me the confidence to seek to be a real advocate for my collection,"* said another participant from Lebanon.

Participants have now engaged in the distance-learning portion of the course, which is coordinated by the Getty Conservation Institute. During this period, assignments will range from assessing a collection to preparing an emergency plan. Participants will disseminate information collected from MEPPI within their institutions and beyond and meet again as a group in late 2012 to share accomplishments and challenges. Meanwhile, the selection process for MEPPI 2012 and MEPPI 2013 will begin.

At the conclusion of the three courses, approximately 50 collections keepers from Middle East institutions will have received supervised preservation training and a network of like-minded individuals and institutions will have been established. The three-course cycle will culminate with a symposium to be hosted by a regional partner. Cultural policy makers from throughout the Arab world will gather to strategize for the future preservation and promotion of the region's rich photographic heritage.

For more information, please visit the MEPPI website and the Getty Conservation Institute's Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative website.

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