

Furthering Photograph Preservation Expertise in the Middle East

by: Reem Akl

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Earlier this year, the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) launched its third photograph preservation course in the history-laden surroundings of Darat al Funun, a platform for the arts based in Amman, Jordan. Seventeen participants joined from the broader Middle East and North Africa to take part in the eight-day intensive workshop that marked the start of the year-long training from which they will benefit.

Launched in 2011, MEPPI is led by the **Arab Image Foundation (AIF)** in Beirut, the **Getty Conservation Institute**, **The University of Delaware** and **The Metropolitan Museum of Art**, and is supported by a grant from **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** with additional funding from the **Getty Conservation Institute**.

This strategic initiative seeks to work toward the preservation of the region's rich photographic heritage, by identifying significant photograph collections, and building a strong network of conservation professionals.



Instructors Debra Hess Norris and Bertrand Lavédrine with participants at the MEPPI Amman workshop, January 2014. Photo by Abdulrahman Alghabri

Since its inception, MEPPI has provided training for 57 institutions and collections in 16 countries, helping to preserve more than 15 million photographs. Trained institutions have included national archives and libraries, ministries, universities, as well as museums and private collections.

"It's been an extraordinary experience of strategic importance for my institution," noted Ziad Rajab, MEPPI alumnus and director of the **Tareq Rajab Museum** in Kuwait. Following his training, Rajab conducted a full inspection of the museum, leading to the reorganization of storage sites, the establishment of clear policies and the development of an emergency plan. Volunteers were recruited among students to assist with these efforts, thereby engaging with the younger generations.

Other MEPPI alumni, despite the many financial and administrative challenges they face within their institutions, have reported impressive improvements in storage and housing conditions, as well as in documentation and digitization of collections. Often, what appear as minor steps can represent significant accomplishments when put into perspective. Kaouther Dridi, from the **Centre de Documentation Nationale** in Tunisia, succeeded in acquiring a scanner and computer to digitize and make accessible at-risk photograph collections, despite the institution's enormous financial and political challenges. "I am proud to be able to give more importance to my collection and to be able to report this to my supervisors," she said.

"From collections care to expert advocacy, community engagement, partnerships big and small, and new exhibitions and scholarship, MEPPI has and will continue to strengthen the preservation of significant photographic collections across the Middle East, North Africa, Iran and Turkey," emphasized Debra Hess Norris, chair of **The University of Delaware's Department of Art Conservation** and a lead instructor for the MEPPI training workshops. She also added, "MEPPI is much more than a photograph preservation workshop—it is about building professional networks and treasured personal friendships."

By bringing together collection custodians from diverse countries and institutional backgrounds, MEPPI has helped to strengthen professional networks both within and across institutions. Following their participation in the same MEPPI course in 2012-2013, **Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority** participants' Fatima Al Dhaif, Abdalla Mohamed Bastaki, Jo-Fan Huang and Daniel Suarez now form a formidable group of advocates for professional exchange in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Meanwhile, in Morocco, a cooperation agreement is being signed between the **Ecole Nationale d'Architecture** and the **National Library and Archives of Morocco**, both trained by MEPPI.

MEPPI alumni continue to show their clear commitment and dedication to the goal of photograph preservation in their countries. Heba Farid, part of **Contemporary Image Collective** – a working group of photographers, curators,

anthropologists and historians based in Cairo and promoting preservation and advocacy in Egypt – has surveyed some 25 local collections, contributing to mapping further the region's rich photographic heritage. These are precious efforts and events, such as the January 2014 bombing of the 111-year-old **Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo**, are there to remind one of the urgency of such missions.

Among the most significant successes of MEPI is the empowerment of those trained, giving them the skills and confidence to further their professional growth and become local experts in the field... and the results are highly encouraging. Fatima Al Dhaif from the UAE and Ibrahim Abdel-Fattah from Egypt have chosen to pursue graduate programs in conservation and museum studies at **Camberwell College of Arts** and **George Washington University**. "As there are now graduates of MEPI in most Middle East countries, we could play a role in the mentoring process. I would be happy for any future participant to approach me for assistance", indicated a MEPI alumnus and passionate private collector.

"This workshop has taught me different options for display and storage that I can use in the practical part of my thesis, and it will prove extremely helpful when teaching my course on photograph conservation in the future," said Maha Ahmed, one of the first to specialise in photograph conservation at **Cairo University**.

"Launching MEPI has been extremely important for the **Arab Image Foundation**", said acting director Rima Mokaiesh. "It has helped to position us as pionniers in the field of photograph preservation in the region, and we have since been increasingly active and approached by other collections for training and collaborations."

Following a successful three-year run, MEPI is now planning for the next phase to include further advanced workshops and a symposium that will bring together MEPI alumni, experts and decision-makers – a strategic step to ensure the long-term sustainability of the broader Middle East's photographic heritage.



Arab Image Foundation team, Beirut, December 2013 © Kassim Dabaji – Mind The Gap

The Arab Image Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the collection, preservation and study of photography and other related visual material from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora. Established in Beirut in 1997, the foundation holds a collection of more than 600,000 photographs from the mid-19th Century through today. Since its inception, the AIF has produced 15 exhibitions and seven publications in partnership with international museums, galleries and cultural institutions. The collection also has provided an invaluable resource for artists' projects, curatorial initiatives and academic research.

To learn more, visit www.fai.org.lb



MEPI Participants receive their certificates upon completing the course in Istanbul, September 2013. Photo by Reem Akl

MEPI www.meppi.me/
Arab Image Foundation www.fai.org.lb/home.aspx
Getty Conservation Institute www.getty.edu/conservation/
University of Delaware www.udel.edu/
The Metropolitan Museum of Art www.metmuseum.org/en
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation www.mellon.org/
Tareq Rajab Museum www.trmk.com/
Centre de Documentation Nationale www.cdn.nat.tn/
The University of Delaware's Department of Art Conservation www.artcons.udel.edu/
Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority www.tcaabudhabi.ae/en
Ecole Nationale d'Architecture www.archi.ac.ma/
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Contemporary Image Collective www.ciccairo.com/
Museum of Islamic Art www.islamictmuseum.gov.eg/
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