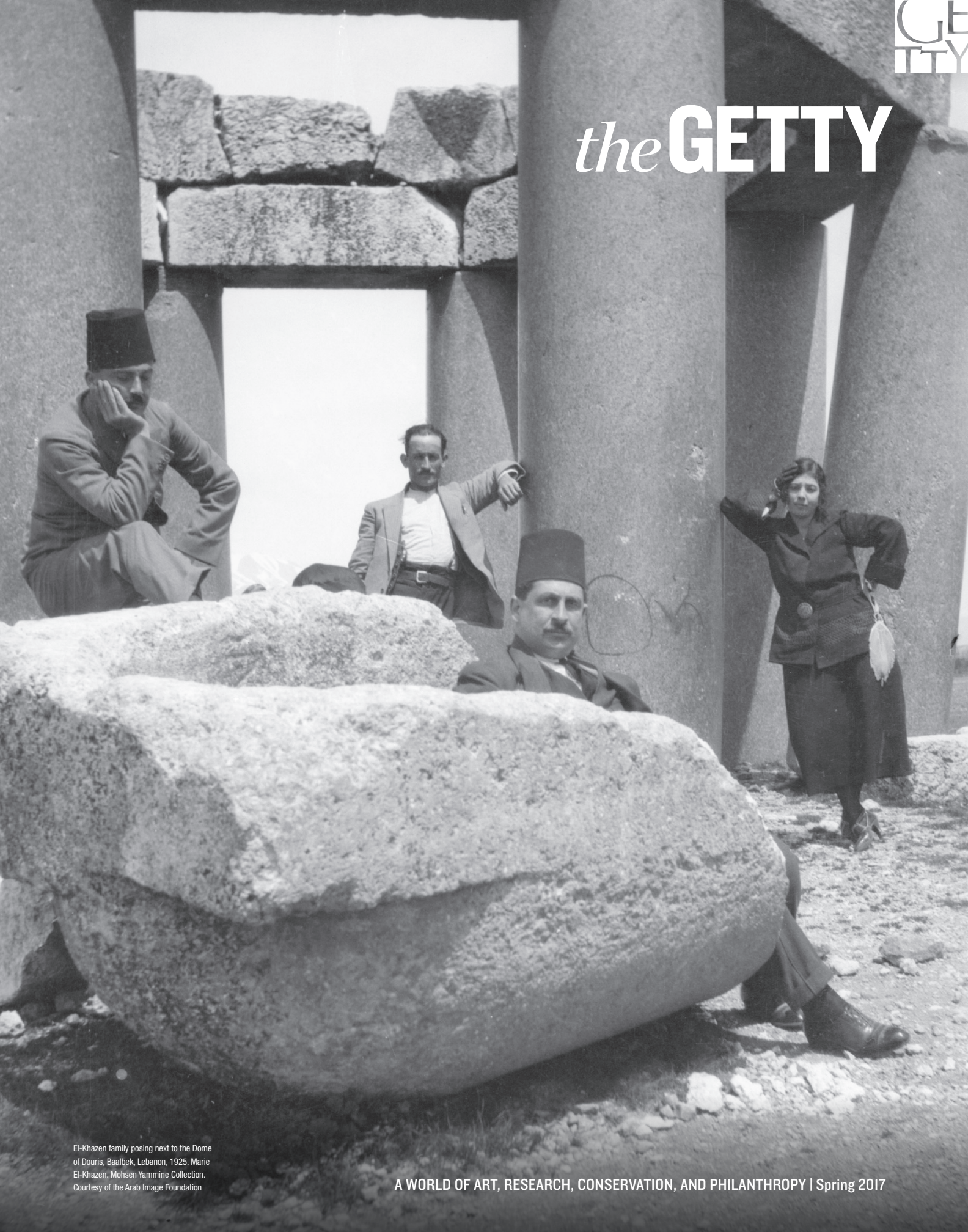


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El-Khazen family posing next to the Dome of Douris, Baalbek, Lebanon, 1925, Marie El-Khazen, Mohsen Yammine Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

# PRESERVING PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Above: Instructors Debra Hess Norris and Bertrand Lavédrine with participants at the MEPPPI Workshop, Amman, Jordan, 2014. Photo by Abdulrahman Al Ghaberi.

Opposite: Self-Portrait, 1944, Van Leo. Egypt/Cairo. Van Leo Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

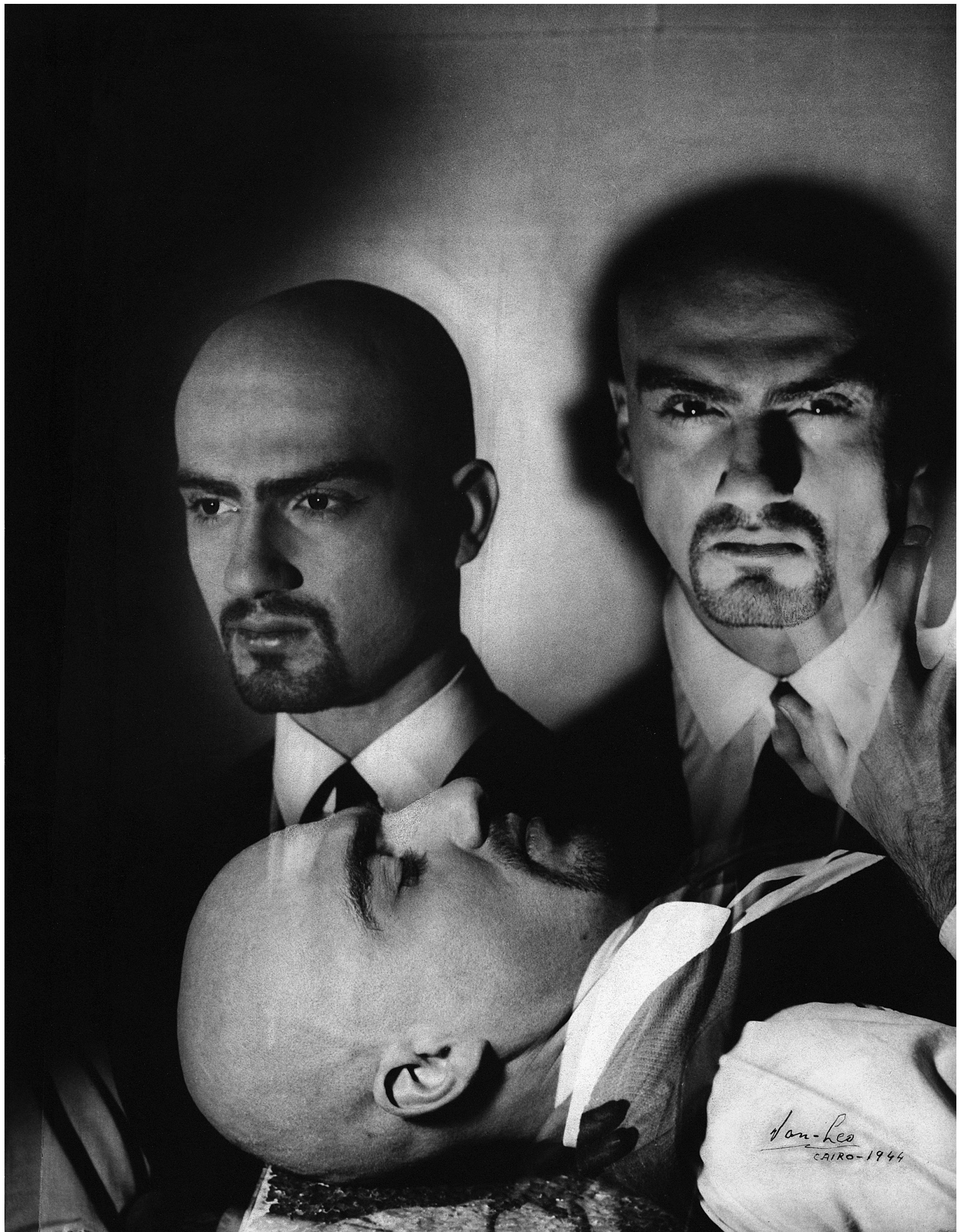
The history of photography in the Middle East is rich and unique, offering fascinating glimpses of life, culture, and artistic expression in the region since the medium was adopted there in the 1860s. However, until recently, these photograph collections were sometimes not fully appreciated or cataloged, and the region lacked access to instruction about their safekeeping. In 2011, the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPPI)—a multi-year collaborative

effort of the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the University of Delaware, with key funding provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—introduced a strategic approach to build the capacity of individuals and institutions in the preservation and awareness of photograph collections in the broad Middle East—encompassing North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Since its inception, MEPPPI has provided an ambitious program of complementary activities, including a survey of photograph collections throughout the Middle East, and workshops and online exchanges designed to provide training in the care of photographs and the management of collections. In addition, MEPPPI has served as a platform for those charged with the care of photograph collections to engage with like-minded professionals.

As the culmination of this initiative approaches, we have an opportunity to reflect upon the accomplishments of the institutions and individuals that have taken part in MEPPPI and the future of photograph preservation in the Middle East. Collectively, these photographs document the people, culture, and history of the region, ranging from the monuments of ancient civilizations to contemporary events. As political and social change occurs in the region, and areas of conflict see cultural heritage sites and cities destroyed or in danger of destruction, safeguarding this shared photographic legacy becomes even more critical.

“Of the many wonderful things that have come out of MEPPPI since that first workshop in 2011, the most gratifying for me is to see a network of professionals develop in this region where before there was none,” said photograph conservator Tram Vo, a project specialist at the GCI who has worked with fellow instructors Debra Hess Norris, Nora Kennedy, Bertrand Lavédrine, and Klaus Pollmeier to develop curriculum for the MEPPPI workshops, to organize and manage the sessions, and to teach some of the classes.

“Exceptional work has been imagined and accomplished by our colleagues in the Middle East since that first workshop,” said Hess Norris, chair of the conservation department, University of Delaware. “MEPPPI has offered an unprecedented opportunity to bring people together, not just for



Hans-Les  
CAIRO-1944



MEPPI workshop participants identify different types of photographic processes at a follow-up meeting in Istanbul.

the sake of a particular preservation project, but for the Middle East. Clearly a conservation network is forming and it has brought together people from different countries, backgrounds, religions, and beliefs around a common goal to preserve this shared cultural heritage.”

As part of MEPPI’s efforts to map photograph heritage in the region, the AIF has undertaken a survey of photograph collections in the Middle East. Initial field research was carried out in 2011 by three scholars to locate and document significant institutional and private photograph collections in North Africa, the Arab Peninsula, and the Eastern Mediterranean. This work was followed by additional and ongoing research by the AIF.

As of today, close to three hundred photograph collections have been identified. The research undertaken has yielded new information about collections in the region, including their size,

significance, mission, and condition, as well as the resources available for their preservation, management, and access by scholars and the general public.

MEPPI has dedicated resources to developing an online directory of those collections. It is hoped that this expanding, English-Arabic bilingual platform can serve as a research tool to advance awareness of and engagement with regional photograph collections and their preservation.

Users can discover rich and diverse photographic holdings, ranging from those in large institutions, such as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Egypt), Golestan Palace (Iran), and SALT (Turkey), to the more subject-specific ones, such as École Nationale d’Architecture (Morocco), and École Biblique et Archéologique Française (Palestine). While many of these institutions represent public national archives, others are linked to the work of one or a few individuals—such as The Fouad Debbas Collection (Lebanon), and the Noor Ali Rashid Archive (UAE). Some collections are directly affiliated with an academic institution, but all offer a wealth of research and investigative opportunities for historians, scholars, photographers, journalists, artists, students, and the wider public. The collections directory can be accessed through the MEPPI website [[www.meppi.me](http://www.meppi.me)], made possible through the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Training workshops for collection personnel who have the day-to-day responsibility of caring for photograph collections has been a major emphasis of MEPPI. “This region has some very important photographic collections that are still not well known,” said Vo. “In many instances the collection’s caretakers don’t have the available resources, including academic and technical training in the care of photographs. This is by no means limited to the Middle East, but the need here is urgent.”

“We try to offer very practical preservation approaches, working with the participants to come up with creative solutions using local materials, and the skills of local craftpeople where possible,” said Nora Kennedy, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge of Photograph Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum. “We



recognize that preservation budgets may be small or non-existent, and seek to empower our colleagues with knowledge they can apply to what can be very different challenges. We have seen so many rise to these challenges and approach what were problems with innovative solutions. Involvement with MEPPi is rewarding in so many ways!”

What started as a modest conservation training project has grown into a network of committed professionals, eager to learn and share their experience. “From day one, MEPPi instructors made it clear that their main objective was to provide us with the tools and strategies that we could take back home and educate others in the region and help them in preserving the photographic heritage of the Middle East,” said Maha Ahmed Ali Ahmed, lecturer in the conservation department, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo University. “I have discussed with the manager of the Conservation Center at Cairo University about offering a series of courses in photograph conservation through the center for all those who are interested. This way

what has been learned will reach more people and we will get more people involved with photograph preservation.”

The eventual effectiveness of the trainees in implementing what they have learned depends on the support they receive from their institution. A second round of workshops in 2015 focused on selecting participants from those institutions that made a commitment to MEPPi’s goals. To further this objective, MEPPi is partnering with the Sursock Museum in Beirut, to present the symposium “The Photographic Legacy of the Middle East and North Africa: Priorities for Sustainability,” May 3–4, 2017. The symposium will provide an opportunity to engage with directors from many of MEPPi’s institutions to both reflect upon the progress made by the initiative and to consider how to continue the many benefits of the MEPPi network into the future.

“The sustainability of MEPPi’s efforts depends upon a wider recognition of the value of photography as a historic and contemporary record, as

Men in Oriental Clothing, date unknown, Arachtingi. Fouad El-Khoury Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation.



well as support for preservation in this region,” said Kathleen Dardes, head of collections at the GCI and MEPPi project leader. “Therefore, a critical complement to the training offered through MEPPi is engagement with a broader group of professional colleagues, including directors, policy and decision-makers, scholars, and others with an interest in, or responsibility for, the photographic heritage of the region.”

Thanks in part to MEPPi, an understanding and appreciation of this artistic and historic legacy is growing. “Now more people are becoming interested in historical photographs, materials that were once not even recognized as heritage in Egypt,” said Ahmed. “I think this is a very important outcome of my participation, since now the knowledge I have gained is spread from one person

to another and that was one of the main aims of MEPPi from the beginning, to establish a network between professionals in the region.”

Fellow MEPPi participant Hala Al Syoof, head of the registration and publication department and the library of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, added, “The sum total of the two MEPPi workshops I have participated in goes far beyond the technical skills and collection management strategies I have acquired, as it also encompasses the spirit of team building and the network of professional colleagues I have gained.”

## THE ARAB IMAGE FOUNDATION

The Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation (AIF), established in 1997, collects, preserves and researches photographs from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab diaspora from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It is a dynamic and to a degree idiosyncratic collection in that it does not merely illustrate the history of photography in the region but rather situates a wealth of different photographic practices in a complex field of social, economic, political and cultural factors. The collection has also proved an invaluable resource for artists’ projects, curatorial initiatives, and academic research. Past projects have looked at subjects as diverse as the infiltration of modernity into the Arab world as represented by motorized transportation, from cars to planes to trains, an important element in family albums during the first half of the century; to an intimate look at the private life of photographer Youssef Safieddine and his wife in Dakar, Senegal, in the 1960s; to the photographs of the Van Leo Collection that document the cosmopolitan and vibrant society of Cairo in the second half of the twentieth century.



In order to ensure public access to the collection, the AIF has been digitizing its holdings of more than six hundred thousand images since its inception, integrating them into an online database. Currently, twenty thousand images are viewable online through their website ([www.fai.org.lb](http://www.fai.org.lb)), and the AIF is involved in a large-scale initiative funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sharjah Art Foundation, Robert A. Matta Foundation, The Violet Jabara Charitable Fund, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, and the Ford Foundation to digitize the remainder of the collection.

Above: Khalil Raad's children, Ruth and Georges with Aida Krikorian, 1931, Khalil Raad, Aida Krikorian Kawar Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

Opposite: Hindenburg zeppelin over Jerusalem, 1936. Abdel Hadi (Family) Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

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