

# 13. All you need is love?

## The preservation of photographic collections here, there, and everywhere

*Debra Hess Norris*

**Preservation of photographic materials, both physical and digital, presents numerous challenges, and photographic collections are at risk worldwide. In response to this danger, regional partners have worked with international organizations to forge global training initiatives and platforms centred on experiential learning and designed with curricula tailored to specific climates, geographies, needs and outcomes. This paper highlights three forward-thinking efforts. The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) has provided training to collections in 16 countries. Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain (3PA) has connected and empowered talented African archivists, artists and collections care professionals. Training efforts by APOYO have sought to build a regional network to preserve collections in Latin America. By using problem-based learning, advocacy and community engagement, these programmes offer new paths for collaboration in an effort to protect a critical piece of our world heritage.**

Photography connects the world. The preservation of these rich and endangered resources – from early dry plate negatives to albumen, silver gelatin and digital prints – inspire, connect and inform communities large and small, local and global. Photographs catalyse cultural exchange and strengthen identity. They are treasured across religious, ethnic and socio-economic divides. So, too, are the rich audiovisual materials that engage our minds. These materials unite humanity in powerful ways. Their preservation is essential, and with audiovisual materials especially, ICCROM's SOIMA programme is a leading advocate for collections care investment, education and training, and global partnerships (Oomen, 2015). While this paper focuses more precisely on issues associated with the global preservation of photographic holdings in archives, libraries and museums, the challenges cited and lessons learned resonate across other media.<sup>1</sup>

Whether housed in the Americas, Africa or Asia, many photographic collections are at risk. Few systematic inventories exist; the number of collections is incalculable and growing exponentially, and many remain unknown and unexplored.<sup>2</sup> Located in climatic conditions ranging from desert to rainforest, photographic materials are threatened by exposure to unsuitable environmental conditions, poor management practices, improper housing and handling,

<sup>1</sup> Many of these topics have been raised in past talks and publications, often co-authored. I thank my colleagues worldwide for their partnership in photographic preservation initiatives of all kinds and their deep commitment to this field. They have contributed to and/or inspired many of the thoughts incorporated in this essay. More detailed information may be found in other publications, including Jürgens *et al.* (2012) and Kennedy and Lavédrine (2014).

<sup>2</sup> In the United States of America, the Heritage Health Index (HHI) has proven to be a fundamental tool for assessing the condition of cultural heritage. Conceived and implemented by Heritage Preservation in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, it was the first comprehensive survey of the condition and preservation needs of all collections held in the public trust. In 2005, the HHI concluded that immediate attention was crucial to prevent the catastrophic loss of 190 million artefacts held by archives, historical societies, libraries, museums and scientific organizations across the country. The nation's collections required swift protective action due to a stunning absence of institutional emergency planning, a pressing need for improved collections storage and a serious shortfall in annual budgetary allocations for preservation. Since then, collecting institutions across the United States have worked diligently with their governing boards, local and state decision-makers, community funders and the public to address these urgent preservation challenges. In January 2014, Heritage Preservation launched Heritage Health Index II to assess progress made by cultural institutions over the past decade, ascertain their current needs and measure success. The results of this work are forthcoming.

natural and man-made emergencies and inherent instability. Traditional contemporary photographic materials – for example, silver gelatin printing-out papers, silver dye bleach, dye diffusion transfer and dye imbibition processes – also face obsolescence as digital processes replace analogue materials at an alarming rate. Studies indicate that by 2025, analogue carriers will need to be digitized. Acetate and nitrate films housed in poor environments face similar challenges. These inherently unstable media should be digitized and preserved in cool or cold storage environments to the extent possible.<sup>3</sup>

Research and work by legions of dedicated conservators, collections care professionals, scientists, curators, scholars, archivists and librarians worldwide – many deeply committed to SOIMA – have advanced our field significantly, resulting in a greater understanding of photographic materials' degradation, characterization, technical art history and preventive conservation; new and important scholarly publications; and expanded global engagement.<sup>4</sup>

This knowledge must be shared with photograph preservation stakeholders broadly. Effective education and advocacy are essential. From webinars to short-term or hybrid workshops with distance-mentoring components, graduate-level and certificate study, targeted internship training and student exchange, we must work together to develop new global training initiatives and platforms centred on experiential learning and designed with curricula tailored to specific regions, needs and outcomes. Continuing education for practicing conservators is equally vital. ICCROM, the International Committee on Museums (ICOM), the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC), the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) and others must develop and deliver preservation workshops and train teachers of photograph conservation to share their knowledge and skills effectively. Both theoretical and skills-based training is

needed; developing effective partnerships and leadership abilities is imperative.<sup>5</sup>

Collaboration is key to our success – and lessons learned from recent educational initiatives must be shared broadly, including the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI) and *Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain* (3PA). These programmes offer interesting training models, centred on problem-based learning, advocacy and community engagement.

While these projects concentrate on the preservation of photographic materials – analogue and digital – lessons learned are relevant for dealing with other media collections. Impact assessment, project evaluation and sustainability remain challenging, yet we have seen substantive results.

### Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI)

The broader Middle East and North Africa region is home to many significant historical photograph collections, yet their preservation is threatened by the dearth of formally trained local photograph conservators and photograph preservation professionals. Following a successful 2009 pilot, MEPPI was launched in 2011 to address this need. It is led by the Arab Image Foundation in Lebanon and, in the United States, the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), University of Delaware and Metropolitan Museum of Art. This strategic initiative seeks to improve the awareness and preservation of the region's rich photographic heritage by identifying significant photograph collections, providing basic preservation training and building a strong network of conservation. Today, this work is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and GCI.<sup>6</sup> Since its inception, MEPPI has provided training for more than 60 institutions and collections in 16 countries, helping to preserve more than 15 million photographs. Participants have included individuals representing national archives and libraries, ministries, universities, museums and private collections.

The three year-long courses, taught in 2011–2014 in Beirut/Rabat, Abu Dhabi/Istanbul and Amman/Beirut, began with a workshop covering topics ranging from identification of photographic processes, principles of image formation and structure, and storage and housing, to digitization best

<sup>3</sup> The Image Permanence Institute in Rochester, New York, USA, has introduced an exceptional web-based collection management tool developed for archivists, curators, collections managers and other professionals involved in the care and preservation of photographic film collections. See [www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/resources/newsletter-archive/v29/filmcare-launched](http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/resources/newsletter-archive/v29/filmcare-launched). Like IPI, AVPreserve in New York City has created a multitude of innovative preservation assessment tools for audiovisual collections. The Cost of Inaction Calculator, presented at the 2015 SOIMA conference is most impressive in its scope and usability (see Chris Lacinak's contribution to this volume).

<sup>4</sup> An important new research laboratory opened in 2015 at the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale University. Led by Paul Messier, the Image Media Lab focuses on the preservation and characterization of photographic materials. This research laboratory joins many others worldwide, notably the GCI, Image Permanence Institute, Canadian Conservation Institute and Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections in Paris.

<sup>5</sup> Many books on leadership strategy are helpful. An extensive bibliography was developed for an April 2016 workshop hosted by Winterthur Museum and the University of Delaware, *Learning to Lead: Training for Heritage Preservation Professionals*, led by Sarah Staniforth and Robert Norris. This should be posted at [www.artcons.udel.edu](http://www.artcons.udel.edu) in the not-too-distant future. Likewise, there are many excellent books and websites addressing philanthropy. In photograph conservation, Gonzalez (2012) is superb.

<sup>6</sup> There are multiple publications on MEPPI. See [www.meppi.me/](http://www.meppi.me/) for a more comprehensive overview. Mokaiesh *et al.* (2014) provides another summary.

practices, advocacy and emergency preparedness and response. The workshop was followed by a distance-mentoring period with practical assignments through which participants were encouraged to apply the skills learned at their institutions before reconvening for a follow-up meeting to strengthen teachings and share accomplishments and challenges. Although originally intended to be a discussion-driven meeting, similar to a seminar, a portion of the follow-up meeting has served as a second workshop to provide additional information and teach skills required for competent practice. The mentoring and follow-up segments have been essential in consolidating learning and maintaining motivation and engagement in participants.

MEPPI alumni have reported significant improvements in storage and housing conditions, as well as in documentation and digitization of collections, often despite facing financial and administrative challenges within their institutions. By bringing together collection custodians from diverse countries and institutional backgrounds, MEPPI has also helped to strengthen professional networks both within and across organizations. Recent preservation accomplishments include:

- Assessment and relocation of many of the historically prominent archives across Tunisia for improved protection and digitization for access. Similar work is ongoing in Bahrain and in Iraq at the National Library in Baghdad.
- Development of a University of Cairo advanced course in photograph conservation for undergraduate and graduate students. One Egyptian participant has since earned a master's degree in museum studies and collections management from George Washington University.
- Relocation of collections within the American University of Beirut to a room with superior environmental conditions, thus providing for the long-term preservation of the images. New initiatives in paper and photograph preservation training are now under way.
- Stabilization treatment and scanning of nearly 100 nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographic albums that document the history of irrigation in Egypt. The value of this work was shared using Facebook. Facebook and other social media have become important platforms for advocacy, which is a primary focus of the training.
- Establishment of an archive – A Cultural Memory and Exchange – for the city of Ramallah in Palestine that promotes the digitization of historic documents and photographs and the preservation of contemporary municipal and other vital records.
- Preservation of the Jordanian and Lebanese News Agency photographic archives. The National Library and Archives of Iraq and the Wafa News Agency in Palestine have salvaged collections and are developing acquisition

strategies as well as new collection repositories, following massive losses sustained during armed conflicts.

- Creation of a vibrant independent art and darkroom space in Istanbul dedicated to the history and technology of photography. Preservation of Turkish archival print and negative collections, including images documenting Istanbul households that profile the last period of Ottoman Muslim families living in Istanbul.
- Technical workshops held in Yemen to promote fundamentals of photograph preservation for regional collections faced with significant security and environmental challenges, including storage where external temperatures reach 50° C.
- Improvement of conditions for several important collections. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, early, oversized and rare print collections have been removed from poor-quality plastic bags and rehoused using conservation folders and polyester film interleaving. In the Golestan Palace, a World Heritage Site in Tehran, a significant collection of glass plate negatives was rehoused. And in Amman, Jordan, the Royal Photographic Collection has been rehoused and moved to a dedicated and improved storage room within the palace, and photographs at the Jordan Archaeological Museum have been catalogued and sleeved in good-quality paper enclosures.
- Photograph exhibitions and significant improvement in the storage environment for the National Press, Image and Media Institute in Algeria.

Among the most significant successes of MEPPI is the empowerment of those trained, giving them the skills and confidence to further their professional growth and become local experts in the field. Since 2011, MEPPI's research activities, led by the Arab Image Foundation, have resulted in mapping and documenting some 300 significant institutional and private regional photographic collections. These collections represent the broad spectrum of photographic formats, dating from the nineteenth century until today. An online directory has been launched to make this information available to researchers.<sup>7</sup>

Significant progress has been made since MEPPI was initiated, yet it remains crucial to continue building upon its foundational efforts in order to achieve a lasting impact that can create a body of expertise and spread awareness of the significance and value of photography as a historic and contemporary record. A critical factor in the sustainability of MEPPI's training efforts is the development of a vibrant network of leading institutions and professionals. The creation and nurturing of this network – consisting of MEPPI

<sup>7</sup> See <http://meppi.me/>.

alumni and other interested colleagues – have been largely the responsibility of the Arab Image Foundation.

Through course evaluations, observations during the mentoring and follow-up phase and participant feedback, MEPPi instructors identified several areas where alumni could benefit from additional training and experience: digitization, the environment of photograph collections, condition assessments, storage and exhibition practices, selecting and creating enclosures and other related collections care topics. The third and final phase of MEPPi (funded by the Mellon Foundation and GCI) has therefore involved the delivery of in-depth workshops on digitization and preventive conservation for participants who successfully completed the earlier training and distance mentoring and whose collections are significant regionally. This work will be completed in 2017. Security concerns have complicated the training schedule and required that at least one course be moved from Beirut to another location.

A final symposium, on the photographic legacy of the Middle East, is planned for Abu Dhabi in 2017, in partnership with New York University Abu Dhabi. Whereas the workshops target collections caretakers, the symposium is an opportunity to bring together a larger group of professionals, including cultural heritage directors and decision-makers. Broader institutional involvement is critical to the ultimate success of MEPPi's participants. The MEPPi symposium therefore intends to highlight both the need for and potential of engaging a broad group of professional colleagues in the promotion and safeguarding of the photographic heritage of the Middle East. MEPPi's eventual longer-term impact is directly aligned with our capacity to influence those individuals who allocate resources and create the conditions for the better preservation and management of photograph collections.

### **Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain (3PA)**

Historically significant African photographic collections face serious environmental and economic risks. The absence of formally trained photograph conservators in this region makes the need for informed preservation professionals essential to care for the wealth of photographic heritage dating from the early nineteenth century to the present. In Africa, many important photograph collections are held privately or housed in regional museums and libraries where controlled environments are rare, electricity never guaranteed and damage caused by flash floods, silverfish, termites and mould can be extensive. The threat to these collections is substantial and often unacknowledged outside of the continent.

In response to these challenges, the École du Patrimoine Africain (EPA) in Benin partnered with the Department of Art Conservation at the University of Delaware, the Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections in Paris, the Department of Photograph Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Resolution Photo to identify important photographic repositories at risk and to develop, organize and administer a four-day Photograph Preservation Workshop, which was held in 2014.<sup>8</sup>

The workshop included 22 established curators, photographers, collections care professionals and directors of contemporary art centres, museums and regional archives deeply committed to the preservation of African heritage *in Africa*. Well over 50 percent of the participants were artists or photographers who care for influential archives, including those representing the collections of Roger DaSilva of Senegal, Paul Kodjo of Côte d'Ivoire, Bâ and Bamba of Mali, and J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere of Nigeria, all photographers of historical and cultural significance.

Touching on everything from identification of negative and print processes and creative storage solutions to advocacy and grant-writing, the workshop sparked probing questions and compelling contributions from all quarters. Our teaching was hands-on where possible and translated simultaneously to ease communication. Expert speakers also addressed issues related to public programming, community outreach, advocacy, intellectual property and digitization. Brainstorming sessions focused on the use of traditional clay and earthen architecture to provide passive cooling and ventilation and opportunities to collectively promote the value of privately held collections across the continent.

Our African colleagues spoke eloquently and with passion about the preservation of these rich photographic resources. While great strides have been made in the preservation of photography in Africa thanks to many organizations, from UNESCO to ICCROM, ICOM and the Getty Foundation, the broadening of networks and further dissemination of information as a result of this workshop are further steps in connecting and empowering talented African archivists, artists, collections care professionals, directors and educators capable of advancing preservation practice, public programming and advocacy. We aim to ensure this work

<sup>8</sup> See [www.resolutionphoto.org/](http://www.resolutionphoto.org/) for a detailed accounting of this workshop and the amazing work of Resolution Photo. Also see Kennedy, Lavédrine and Ogou (2015). Information on the School of African Heritage in Benin can be found at <http://epa-prema.net/index.php/en/>. The author would like to thank all funders for this project – contributions large and small from foundations, corporations, partner institutions and individuals made this work possible. Very special thanks is due to the late Henrike Grohs, director of the Goethe Institute d'Abidjan, for her steadfast and inspiring support of this initiative and so many others centred on the preservation of cultural memory in Africa and beyond.

continues through additional programming, online mentoring and an investment of new preservation funding for collections at risk. Since our 2014 workshop, Paul Kodjo's photographic negative archive has been rehoused in good-quality enclosures, and a crowdsource fundraising platform has been launched to secure support for the protection of photographic archives in Benin.<sup>9</sup> Our fundraising continues as we look to partner more fully with ICCROM and UNESCO and other potential collaborators, ideally offering additional workshops with distance-mentoring components across Africa. The 3PA remains firmly committed to photograph preservation regionally and intends to lead additional educational programmes.

### Latin America and the Caribbean and APOYO

Like the Middle East and Africa, the conservation and preservation of photography in Latin America and the Caribbean is under-resourced and underserved. Collections and risk assessments, carefully developed educational workshops from basic to advanced, community partnerships and translations of key preservation texts into Spanish and Portuguese are needed to preserve the photographic treasures from this region of the world. In response to these challenges, the Department of Art Conservation at the University of Delaware worked in collaboration with leaders in the Association for Heritage Preservation of the Americas Inc. (APOYO) to develop, organize and administer a four-day photograph preservation, fundraising, and advocacy workshop in August–September 2016.<sup>10</sup>

### Advocacy and fundraising

MEPPI, 3PA and APOYO are only a few of many regional and global preservation efforts led by passionate individuals committed to photography and its preservation. As we work to strengthen photograph collections preservation via educational initiatives worldwide, effective and energetic advocacy is essential. We must use traditional and social media combined with engaging lectures, exhibitions and behind-the-scenes tours to promote an understanding of the meaning and value of photographic materials to current and future generations. We must connect with the public and individual donors by sharing our challenges and posing smart and strategic solutions.

In doing so, we should work with global foundations and local corporations to build financial support – connecting closely to their mission, vision and marketing strategies. While foundations often support pressing societal causes, often centring on health, education, poverty, climate change

and sustainable economies, corporations are more typically focused on promoting *their* identity via effective marketing. Corporate philanthropy can and must be creatively connected to the preservation of our at-risk photographic heritage. Investments by regional airlines or mobile phone industries, for example, can preserve our history, while Fortune 100 companies may wish to promote cultural understanding via improved preservation. Such messages resonate with the public and build welcome attention to corporate partners. We all benefit.

Indeed, our work in the preservation of photograph *and* audiovisual collections has the capacity to connect communities, build visual literacy and economic growth, promote tourism, enhance cultural identity and promote peace and reconciliation. Connecting to these societal needs may broaden avenues of support and create new opportunities for engaged partnership and leadership. While fundraising opportunities and goals may vary considerably among projects and locales, the guiding principles are universal. These include a focus on education and outreach, thoughtful planning with accurate timelines and transparent budgets, risk assessment, regional and community partnership and measurable outcomes.

Photograph preservation initiatives that assess and address documented risks, build knowledge via learning and scholarship, and are collaborative and sustainable are best. Cultural institutions may wish to pursue support for pilot demonstration projects that educate and highlight their high-profile collections – prints, negatives or sound recordings – in greatest need or of the greatest significance. Examples may include the rehousing and digitization of early gelatin glass plate negatives (never digitize without considering the longer-term preservation of the originals), the storage of oversized albumen and silver gelatin photographs in protective sleeves and appropriate cabinetry, or the boxing of difficult-to-handle albums for added protection from handling. This work may be conducted by well-trained and supervised senior volunteers or young scholars in the arts and humanities, creating a rich learning experience and a pipeline for professional growth. Interesting projects that connect collecting institutions – via coordinated exhibitions or popular themes – may help to raise awareness and promote new research and scholarship, ultimately strengthening the reach and practice of photograph conservation.

Working across borders will facilitate new and rewarding professional connections that may capture the attention and support of those committed to global partnership. Engaging decision-makers and cultural leaders with clear preservation

<sup>9</sup> See [www.contemporaryand.com/fr/exhibition/photographie-paul-kodjo-in-conversation/](http://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/exhibition/photographie-paul-kodjo-in-conversation/).

<sup>10</sup> See <http://apoyo-conservation.appspot.com/>.

and outreach strategies is vital. While drafted in 2009, the Salzburg Declaration on the Conservation and Preservation of Cultural Heritage, with its deep commitment to community engagement and increased research, global networking and education, still rings true.<sup>11</sup>

*Love* – combined with passion, hard work, strategic thinking, collaboration, education and advocacy – *is all we need*. Working together we can continue to advance, innovate and strengthen photograph preservation efforts and to ensure that these rich resources are protected and preserved for humankind. In doing so, the prominence and value of photographic conservation will escalate and new financial and other preservation resources will be identified. Engaging others in our work is essential; connecting with SOIMA's ten-year strategy will ensure our success.

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.heritagepreservation.org/PDFS/SalzburgDeclaration.pdf](http://www.heritagepreservation.org/PDFS/SalzburgDeclaration.pdf). This doctrine has been translated into multiple languages and inspires the author daily.