



Van Leo, self-portrait - Cairo, Egypt, 1945
Collection: AIF / Van Leo

Van Leo
CAIRO - 1945

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Friends in front of beach cabins
Sidi Bichr, Egypt, 1940
Photographer: anonymous
Collection: AIF / Eglal Farhi

Sousou the dancer and the snake
Baghdad, Iraq, 1930
Photographer: Murad Daguestani
Collection: AIF / Murad Daguestani

Retro Revival

Words Victoria Macchi

Flipping through the online collection of the Arab Image Foundation is like discovering a box of pictures in your grandmother's attic – if she were the matriarch of the Middle East

Its pictures are a history from the Gulf to Morocco through the lenses of amateur and professional photographers documenting war and peace, fashion and fetish. Sousou the dancer, in a bikini with a boa tightly wrapped around her, in Baghdad. In 1930. A sensual black and white photograph of a young woman in loose handcuffs and an off-the-shoulder shirt. Cairo, 1945. Decades of conflict in Palestine and Lebanon chronicled in a massive collection that also includes family photos of picnics and trips to the sea, as well as the more intimate sides of regional political and religious leaders.

Since 1996, the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) based out of Beirut has been running the research, collection, and preservation of what currently amounts to between 150,000-200,000 images dating back to the late 1800s; a century of visual life in the Middle East is now available to the public. "What interests us a lot is to research and write the history of photography in this area, and to diffuse it all over the world," said AIF Director Zeina Arida. "The important thing is that we are gathering this material to show it, not to keep it in boxes." >

With the first comprehensive regional archive, more artists can delve into the images for inspiration. Lebanese-born freelance photographer Lara Baladi, who is a member of the AIF, has been inspired by the collection, as has digital painter Setareh Shahbazi who was an artist in residence at AIF.

In October 2003, Shahbazi traveled to Beirut to “seek out what had created the apparently oriental aura in my drawings,” explains the artist. “I was trying to find out about schemes and strategies to create specifically eastern or western images and mixing these visual worlds within my digital world of icons. The more I focused on these issues however, the more I recognized that I was pushing myself and my work deeper into the absorbing world of questions on identity and cultural affiliation.” According to Arida, the relationship between art and archives is developing. “Artists are becoming more and more interested in found material... [It’s] not a trend, but an orientation,” she explains. “It’s a very interesting debate because it opens up lots of different discussions about authorship...” Given that in many cases, primarily in studios, photography was viewed as a job, not as art, “Who is the artist?” asks Arida, “Is it the artist or the photographer? ...There is only one photographer with who we met [Van Leo] who tells you ‘I am an artist,’” she adds.

Another facet of the AIF is the restoration and conservation. “Sometimes we do take collections that are in a very bad state... we feel we have to.... If you leave it where it is, a year later you’re not going to have any image left.” Often, the culprits of damaged prints are bacteria and mildew. One example is the pieces salvaged from Egypt-based photographer Van Leo, who donated the bulk of his collection to the American University in Cairo. Within 5000 images selected by AIF for their value and/or critical condition, many are beyond repair but are not deteriorating further in the Beirut office’s conservation room, where temperature and humidity are regulated. Because there are no photo

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restorers in the region, AIF works with a paper restorer on images that need to be transferred to safer paper; a photo conservation consultant visits every two years to assess the collection, while another team member cleans the negatives and maintains the physical archive on site.

There are gaps in the collection, often geographical, because of the primary method used to acquire the images. Researchers spend six months in one place, exploring, working with collectors and studio photographers, in addition to sitting with families and learning through word of mouth about other private and professional collections. The bulk of images come from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt, with smaller collections from Iraq, Iran, Morocco, and the Lebanese Diaspora in Argentina, Mexico and Senegal. Retrieving further images from Iraq and Algeria is limited currently, because no researchers are willing to spend the amount of time the countries necessary to build up the collection. “We know of the Daguestani collection in Mosul,” (of which Sousou the dancer is a part) laments Arida, “but we have no way to even know if it still exists”.



Studio photography - Cairo, Egypt, 1945
Photographer: Armenak Arzrouni Collection: AIF / Armand

Retro Roadtrip

The AIF online collection captivates you, sometimes for hours, and every so often you come across an image that sticks with you

For the *Skin* staff, a photo of three young women, playfully perched 1963 on top of a BMW in 1963, caught our eye. We challenged ourselves to find the ladies. With a call to AIF headquarters in Beirut, the daunting task became sublimely easy. The photographer owned a hotel in Amman, and by that evening I was sitting with Hisham Abdel Hadi. He knows the women in the picture, and calls one of them from his mobile. The one in the centre of the image is his wife, Samar (she is 16 years his junior). I hear an incredulous “*Ayn jad?*” from her end when he tells her which photo we’re interested in.

Quick to dismiss himself as a hobby photographer, the octogenarian is uncertain why *Skin* is so interested in this photo. Perhaps because it doesn’t look like an amateur shot, but rather like a profession advert for BMW. High heeled chicks with bob haircuts, above the knee pencil skirts, snug sweaters, and pearls – flirty and demure, all sprawled across his glistening new car in Jericho. Jericho?

“It was a winter resort then,” he recalls. It’s difficult for younger generations to comprehend a time when travel between the East and West Banks was so simple. Hisham, a father of four daughters, is cheeky as he tells me with a deep chuckle how he got rid of the vehicle, but kept the wife. “It’s not easy to change wives, some men do... [mine] is good...”

He is full of stories, wit, memories, and modesty as he lovingly shuffles through a dozen other pictures of his father and himself, meeting with international leaders, and at high-powered dinners... still unsure why we want to know about the BMW shot. “I meant it just as a joke. Apparently when you’re young, you interest younger ladies... each age has its tricks, and that trick was to have the ladies sit on top of the car”.

But the joke captured a time and a place, when the atmosphere was freer, the skirts shorter, and life more relaxed – when checkpoints and borders didn’t keep an entire nation confined to or banned from its homeland. When Jericho was a holiday destination, not being raided by Israeli helicopters.

The breadth of the AIF collection is intense. It chronicles war and peace, love, lust, and playfulness. Ad campaign photo shoots, family portraits, studio images of movie stars, political heavyweights and royals. There is intense beauty and sadness in studio portraits of un-famous women. The AIF collection portrays a much more rounded history of the last century in the Middle East than text books – and certainly than most media outlets. In wrapping up the interview, Hisham best summarizes the foundation’s importance in the realm of collective identity and memory: “To some [people], the sense of belonging to the tribe is important, to others the sense of belonging to God is more important. To me, what is more important is the present, and the future, and the globe we’re on.”

“Not always on a camel but also on a BMW” Jericho, Palestine, 1963

Photographer: Hisham Abdel Hadi Collection: AIF / Hisham Abdel Hadi family

