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**Early Arab Photography**

The history of Arab modernism, in all of its variations, is intertwined with its history of photography. Likewise, the history of photography in the Arab world interlinked within the tectonic shifts in political economy, governance, and cultural formations that were underway during the 19th century. Just as new forms thought and literature arose to negotiate these shifts, photography in the Ottoman Arab world quickly was assimilated into all strata of society, from the personal cartomania to the active use of photographic landscape and portraiture by the Imperial, provincial, and local governments. (The term “cartomania” refers to the global craze for the carte de visite as coined by Gernsheim). While overshadowed and silenced by the hegemony of Orientalist photography and expatriate travelling and resident photographers, the Arab modernism owes its aesthetic and epistemological origins to native Ottoman photographers, such as Abdullah Frères, Pascal and Jean Sébah, Jurji Sabunji (G. Saboungi), Kova Frères, Garabed and Johannes Krikorian, Khalil Raad and many others, as to its putative experience with Western modalities of art, philosophy and the *belles lettres*.

Shortly after Francois Arago’s announcement to the Académie des Sciences, European photographers from Noël Paymal Lerebours and Henri Le Secq to Auguste Salzmann and Maxime Du Camp photographed and published albums of Egypt and the “Holy Land.” Over the next half a century, names such as Abdullah Frères, Sébah, Sébah et Joaillier, Bonfils, Beato, Frith, Arnoux, Lehnert and Landrock and countless others produced tens of thousands of images of the Arab “Orient.”

At the same time as Basili Kargopoulos, Abdullah Frères and Pascal Sébah were opening studios in Istanbul and producing portraits of the Sultan and his administration, a number of Europeans, such as Tancrède Dumas and Felix Bonfils in Beirut and Gustave Le Gray and Sébah in Cairo, were among the first to open studios in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, catering to the European market.

In 1867, Félix Bonfils opened his photographic studio in Beirut. The Bonfils embossment would become emblematic for photography of the Middle East during the Ottoman Empire. After Félix’s death in 1885, his wife Marie-Lydie and son Adrien took over the studio. The sheer ubiquity of the Bonfils’ production could not have been achieved without the untold anonymous local photographers they employed. Not coincidentally, the Bonfils studio was bought by Abraham Guiragossian, a Beiruti Armenian apprentice and partner.

The interaction between Europeans, Americans, Arabs and Armenians was a common feature to early indigenous photography in the region. The Jesuits established photography ateliers in Lebanon integrating them into their schools’ curriculum as early as the 1880s. In 1898 Jerusalem, Elijah Meyers, an Indian-born Jewish convert to Protestantism, started the American Colony photography department. He trained Lors “Lewis” Larsson, Eric Matson and the Palestinian Fareed Naseef. Larsson eventually took over the Photographic Department. He was assisted by local Palestinians like Naseef, Jamil and Najib Albina. Larsson, Matson and the Albina brothers are responsible for the American Colony’s most widely known images including photographs of current affairs during World War I, the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the British mandate and the colonization of Palestine by European Zionist settlers.

The role of anonymous native assistants employed in expatriate studios aside, indigenous photography in the Arab world can be traced to the activity of independent Armenian and Arab photographers during the Ottoman era. The first Arab photographer to open a studio was Jurji Sabunji (i.e., George Saboungi, 1840-1927) in 1863 Beirut. Sabunji was born in Mardin to an Arabised Assyrian family; the brother of the famous Louis Sabunji, who taught him photography upon returning from the latter’s religious studies in Rome. He produced not only landscapes and cityscapes, which are found in numerous Ottoman and European albums, but he is also portraits of the political, economic and intellectual elites, bourgeoisie and aspirant classes of Greater Syria and Egypt.

Sabunji’s peers in Beirut were Iskandar (d. 1911) and Joseph (circa d. 1904) Khorshid, otherwise known as the Kova Brothers. “Famed in the craft of photography and skill in painting (*taswir*),” as one journal exclaimed, the Kovas won ribbons at the Vienna World’s Exhibition in 1873 and the International Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 for their images of Syrian landmarks and costumes.

The prestige of Sabunji’s and Kovas portraiture and landscapes arises out of a particular Ottoman context, where photographers of Istanbul, most notably the ethnic Greek Vasili Kargopoulo (1826-1886) and the Abdullah Frères, raised photography to the highest levels of prestige. The Abdullah Frères were three Armenian brothers, Vichen (d. 1902), Hovsep (d. 1900), and Kevork (d. 1918). Kevork studied miniature painting at the Armenian Catholic seminary Murad Rafaelian in Venice while Vichen apprenticed under the German chemist photographer Rabach. After buying Rabach’s studio in Istanbul, the three brothers became court photographers to the Sultan`Abd al-`Aziz, replacing Kargopoulo after the death of Sultan Abd al-Majid. The Sultan commissioned them to take cityscapes and genre images for the Ottoman Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, under the theme “Life of Istanbul.”

The Abdullah Frères were the most celebrated photographers of their age. In addition to numerous catalogues and albums for international, domestic and royal consumption, their *cartes de visite* and portraits were in high demand. Prince Edward, the German Empress Augusta, French Empress Eugenie and Mark Twain were their most famous foreign sitters. They opened a successful studio in Cairo after taking the portrait of the Khedive Tawfiq and his family. For much of their career, their work was protected by the Sultan’s decree, which undoubtedly only enhanced a portraiture studio that photographed Istanbul’s elite, bureaucracy and new bourgeoisie.

The only photographer to rival the Abdullah Frères was Pascal Sébah, whose earliest studio El Chark was established in Istanbul’s fashionable Pera in 1857, predating the Abdullah’s own studio. Sébah is particularly known for landscapes and genre types. He partnered with several expatriate photographers including Béchard. After his death, his son Jean or Johannes (i.e., J. Pascal Sébah) used the caché of his father’s name to partner with Policarpe Joaillier, establishing the famous and successful Sébah et Joaillier trademark, who in turn purchased the Abdullah Frères collection upon their retirement. Sébah, like the Abdullah Frères, opened a branch in Cairo and won an award at the Vienna Exhibition in 1873. Perhaps most demonstrative of Sébah’s oeuvre are his character types illustrated by Osman Hamdi’s *Les Costumes Populaires de al Turquie*, a book commissioned by the Sultan.

The number of 19th and early 20th century, indigenous-owned studios and native photographers in the Ottoman Arab provinces—from Suleiman Hakim’s studio established in 1870s Damascus to Karimah ‘Abbud’s, possibly the first studio owned by an Arab woman, in Palestine—is largely unknown. Indeed, even before the introduction of the Kodak into the Ottoman Empire in the late 1880s, a myriad of amateur photographers existed in the Arab world, many of whom used their hobby for official purposes, like Muhammad Sadiq Bey’s (1822-1902) photographs of Mecca in 1861, Ibrahim Rif’at Pasha and Muhammad ‘Ali Effendi Sa’udi’s (1865-1955) documenting of the Khedive’s *mahmal* to Mecca in 1904 and 1908.

The contribution of Armenians to the development of “Arab photography” cannot be understated. Apart from the influx of Armenians after the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896 and the massive influx of refugees after the Armenian Genocide (1915-1916), small Armenian communities existed in Greater Syria and Egypt for centuries.

Yassayi Garebedian (1825-1885), the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, is thought to be one of the first non-European importers and teachers of photography into Palestine. Learning the craft in Istanbul, he opened an atelier within the Armenian monastery. Apart from his own oeuvre, his atelier is responsible for training a number of photographers, most prominently Garabed Krikorian (1847-1920). Krikorian opened the most successful studio in Palestine and trained son Hovaness and Khalil Raad (1854-1957), a Lebanese immigrant, as his apprentice. Raad would eventually open a studio across Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. These two ateliers, like those in Cairo, accommodated two discrete markets. On the one hand, Krikorian and Raad were the preeminent photographers of the newly emerging Palestinian middle class. On the other, like the American Colony and Maison Bonfils, they too catered to Holy Land tourists.

The Sarrafian Brothers, however, owned perhaps the most prolific studio in the Greater Syria. Protestant converts from Diyarbakir, the three brothers opened a studio in Beirut’s Bab Idriss in 1895 only to close in 1975. At their peak, the studio produced one fourth of all postcards in Lebanon.

The development of portrait, genre and landscape photography in the Arab world was formalistic with its roots in the commercial market and the objectivism of the age. However, pictorial and modernist traditions are likely to be rooted in the development of this very commercial, portrait and genre photography. For example, enigmatic G. Légékian, relocating to Cairo from Istanbul in 1880 and claiming to be “Photographer to the British Army,” names his photographs as *photographie artistique*. In other words, he may have been the first non-European photographer in the Middle Eastern to have consciously aestheticized his photographs.

With the change in printing technology and the explosion of the illustrated magazine in the 1930s, Armenian Egyptians such as Alban (Aram Alban, 1883-1961), Armand (Armanak Arzrouni, 1901-1963), and Van Leo (Leo Boyadjian, 1921-2002) produced highly-crafted artistic and stylized, even modernist in the case of Van Leo, portraits for the Egyptian elite and new film and entertainment industry.

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**Image:**

G. Krikorian, “Doctor and Author Tawfiq Kan’an,” Jersualem (1905-1920); John D. Whiting Collection, Library of Congress.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007675292/resource>

