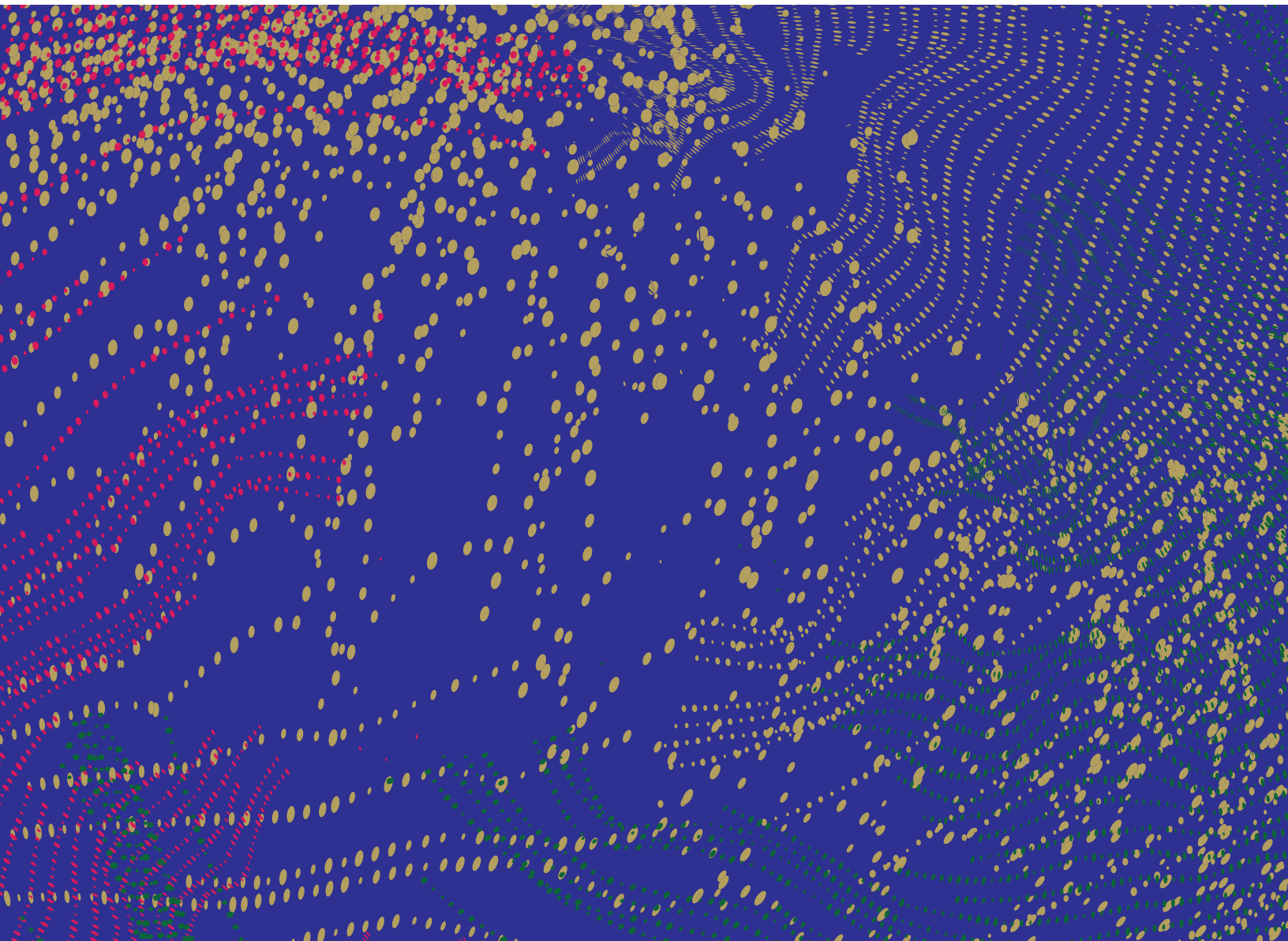
Arab Region

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Arab Image Foundation

Reem Joudi



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Case Study: Arab Image Foundation

Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

The Arab Image Foundation (AIF)[1] was founded in 1997 after the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). The foundation was created from the need to recognize and preserve the past of a country that did not acknowledge the bloody events in its official history and of a region unsettled by crises and colonial struggles. Since its founding, the AIF has collected over 500,000 photographic objects and documents related to the Middle East and North Africa region made available through research, artistic work, and donations. The majority of their images are digitized and available online, and users can filter the images through the collection name, location, time period, or keyword (for example, "Lebanese upper class," "outdoor snapshots," "ethnographic gaze"). The last category is key, as it is used to offer context on the various media texts, allowing users to place them in particular time periods, locations, and socioeconomic, political, or cultural conditions.

The AIF's approach to preserving, documenting, and disseminating the photographic archive raises questions on how these images end up being used, for what purposes, where they are circulated, and by whom, as well as the narratives they produce as a result. In the World Humanities Report survey, they write, "with a critical and innovative approach, we collect, rethink, preserve, animate, and understand these photographs through their multiple strata, and enrich the collection in the process."[2] Their approach recognizes that photographs are not inanimate objects, but rather dynamic media texts that are produced by particular sociopolitical and cultural factors and transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. That said, the effects of photographs and the ways they are interpreted by audiences can be ambivalent.

The AIF's archival methodology and its experimental platforms differentiate its work from institutional and noninstitutional online archives in the region.[3] Their approach differs in several ways: First, they are concerned with preserv-

[1] See https://stories.arabimagefoundation.org/.

[2] Heba Hage-Felder, Arab Image Foundation, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

[3] The term "noninstitutional" refers to the digital initiatives led by individual users that burgeoned in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, which circulated vintage family photographs and/or vintage images of Arab cities.

ing the materiality of images—stains, fades, scratches, tears—as a way to better understand their narrative layers and the memories they carry. Second, the group analyzes the historical and geopolitical features of the photographs while looking for ways to understand and (re)read them in contemporary contexts. AIF understands the past as a historical period deeply imbricated in the present moment; moreover, they offer a nuanced understanding of memory. Rather than frame it exclusively through the lenses of nostalgic belongings or personal histories, they demonstrate how memory is socially, culturally, and politically produced and renegotiated over time and through space. For an organization that looks to produce a photographic archive of the Arab world, such an approach considers the intersecting histories, identities, and politics that shape the region. Ultimately, this prompts the question of who has the right to remember and what narratives they claim to access and/or reshape.

The AIF notes in the World Humanities Report survey that they "encourage critical and provocative reflections that engage a wider public to think about what is essential and human about diverse histories, and . . . seek to contribute to . . . the link between past, present, and future."[4] They consider memory an unstable category that is not necessarily tied to the past but also has forward-looking elements. Memory relates to how communities and individuals understand their histories and to how they use these understandings to shape alternative narratives for the future. More important, AIF encourages discussions around the intersection of memory, photographs, and the archive online. The "Explore" and "Lab" sections on their website offer an experimental space for researchers and writers to discuss the AIF's images, unpack their multiple meanings, and talk about their importance across various spatial and temporal histories.

The online archive, much like other digital platforms, is subject to constraints: namely, connectivity issues that affect how content is downloaded and viewed, who has the right and capacities/privileges to access the online data, and linguistic barriers that leave out some audiences. The AIF faces similar obstacles when digitizing its photographic collection and counts language as the key challenge. They noted in the survey that the main goal "is to produce knowledge in Arabic, and yet most of the technological advancements are driven by English."[5] This raises the question of what an "Arab" archive means and looks like, especially when the technological infrastructures that support the language do not exist and the lexicon for archival work is either nonexistent or not as commonly used as English and French.

[4] Hage-Felder, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.
[5] Hage-Felder, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

On one hand, it suggests the need for interdisciplinarity that involves trained researchers, linguists, programmers, and developers who are able to collaborate on an Arab archive. On the other hand, it points to the importance of considering the intentionality behind creating and curating an archive. Though the AIF faces significant challenges in producing content in Arabic, the organization is committed to countering the Western, Eurocentric, and colonial archive that often homogenizes and fetishizes the Arab world. As Edward Said once said, "The archive of much of modern Arab history resides unmetaphorically, has been deposited in, has been physically imprisoned by, Europe."[6] In that light, does the AIF offer the resources to free this history, create new histories and/or reinterpret the past?

The AIF currently participates in several regional and international collaborations.[7] Although these collaborations are essential for knowledge sharing and dissemination in the Arab region, one can argue that this archival work needs to move beyond Mediterranean and Western institutions to unpack forgotten histories and illuminate different futures. In his study on Indo-Arab relations and archives, Esmat Elhalaby notes that

> If prudent, Arab intellectuals would set their sights across the Indian Ocean and beyond, to those regions and peoples with whom we share a complimentary recent past, in order to build new Asian and African centers of thought. The deadly crossing of the Mediterranean cannot be the Arab world's only portal to the future. For centuries Arab archives readily moved south and east; there is no reason that such movement cannot again nurture Arab thought.[8]

[6] Quoted in Esmat Elhalaby, *Arab Archives and Asian Histories* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 6.

[7] These include the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative network; the CLUSTER PILOT (Public Inter-Libraries Online Technology), which is a bilingual (Arabic/English) online library cataloguing system; Modern Heritage Observatory; the virtual practitioner in residence, a collaboration with Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University; and a long-term collaboration (2019–21) with Les Rencontres de la photographie, Arles, at the Musée Départemental Arles Antique (Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles, France). These were all listed in the WHR Survey.

[8] Elhalaby, *Arab Archives and Asian Histories*, 10.

Reem Joudi is a media researcher and writer based in Lebanon, currently working as a researcher and project coordinator at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. She earned her MA in media studies from the American University of Beirut and her BSFS in international economics from Georgetown University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of visual culture, digital technologies, and affect theory, with a particular focus on Lebanon and the Southwest Asia and North Africa region.