

Building Digital Collections for Egyptian Artists' Archives and Oral Histories: A Project Case Study

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Abstract

With so much attention focused on its ancient pharaonic art and medieval Islamic art, Egypt's modern-era visual artists do not always receive the attention they deserve. This presentation will showcase how The American University in Cairo's Rare Books and Special Collections Library has attempted to document and bring more visibility to the contributions of Egyptian artists, using digital methods of preserving and disseminating cultural heritage collections. Through a university-funded project titled "Building an Archive and Digital Repository of 20th Century Egyptian Art," library and project staff launched a program of digital oral histories with elder artists (painters, sculptors, etc.) in Egypt, in conjunction with collecting artists' and art gallery archives in digital format (such as born digital promotional material, videos of exhibition openings and interviews, etc.). The way that the Library used this project to adopt new collecting techniques will be covered, including a post-custodial collecting model by which donor artists loaned and later received back originals of photographs (of life events and their artwork), exhibition catalogs, and other archival materials for digitizing and deposit into AUC's digital library as a freely open accessible resource. Collaboration within the library, between project subject experts (trained artists hired on the project to conduct oral histories and collect and process donated material) and the library's digital archives staff, in areas like developing metadata and presenting material in an open-access digital library, will also be addressed. Observations will be offered on the importance of personal relationships in the context of building digital documentation, whether this be forging trusted relationships with potential interviewees and donors or leveraging existing connections with individuals with expertise and professional contacts like university arts faculty. The value of the digital collections built through the project for international researchers or for experiential learning by student interns will be highlighted as well.