

White Paper Prepared for the “Digital Library in the Middle East” Workshop
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The AUC Rare Books and Special Collections Library has many missions but two are directly relevant to this conference: 1) the preservation of historic documents as a part of the world's common intellectual heritage and most particularly that of the Middle East and Arab cultures and 2) undertaking preservation projects that protect and benefit the AUC collections and scholarly community. Finding a way to accomplish both of these missions while at the same time benefiting other institutions of learning is one result we would welcome from these discussions.. An additional hope is to find ways to avoid or eliminate the barriers and problems we have encountered in our own digital initiatives, namely the need for 1) expert technical and conceptual advice in the planning of digital projects, 2) additional manpower, equipment and space for actually doing the digitizing and, of course, 3) funding to finance these projects.

Since 2000 the RBSC Library has digitized significant portions of several of its important rare materials collections. These include approximately 3,500 nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs, almost 1,000 portraits by 20th century Cairo photographer Van-Leo, and several hundred drawings and plans from several contemporary Egyptian architects and architectural historians, notably photographs of Islamic monuments by scholar K.A.C. Creswell. These materials, drawn mostly from archival and manuscript collections, were selected for scanning from among numerous other items in the library that have the potential for digital conversion. They were chosen due to the potential digitizing offered for three needs tailored to each collection: preservation, expansion of access, and collaboration with other institutions. The latter has included a cooperative agreement with OCLC and King's College, London to exchange expertise in order to build databases and websites featuring our collections as well as an ongoing commitment to the Research Libraries Group to share our collections with other institutions of learning.

We have many reasons for pursuing digital projects either alone or cooperatively. For example, it is evident that digitizing can be one of the best ways of preserving materials in very serious stages of decay such as fading photographs, dissolving negatives and highly acidic papers. Without this convenient and flexible form of conversion the information contained in these materials might simply disappear from the world's storehouse of knowledge. Digitizing is also an opportunity to extend access to users who cannot view the physical items in person. While this has also been a goal for the RBSC, to this point scanning has been performed largely to address the specific access needs of individual collections. One of the library's most sought-after resources has been its nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of Egypt and the Middle East, many by pioneering artistic and commercial photographers. The large quantity of

images was an obstacle for locating views of specific locations or subjects. In addition, because many of the photographs were affixed in albums or printed in books, the handling required for an image search was not only difficult but also potentially damaging to the volumes that contained them. Digitizing the images using an outside vendor with equipment that could safely capture oversized or bound prints and assemble them in an accessible database gave the library a cost-effective means for overcoming these problems. Digitizing has occasionally been a requirement of a donor who wanted to retain a personal copy of his gift. The intrinsic value of the donation justified the expensive investment in digital conversion. Digitizing can also be an opportunity to conveniently apply needed conservation techniques and at the same time process and index a collection. In one case we collaborated with an outside vendor to do the scanning and assemble a database but the RBSC conservation laboratory staff first cleaned and repaired the materials. This made logistical sense and maximized the productivity of a limited staff to rather rapidly make the materials available to researchers.

Our concerns about collaborative initiatives include 1) the need for a clear assurance that we continue to maintain some kind of control as to how our digital images contributed to the consortium are used by others (copyright, resolution quality, the ability to download, etc.) 2) that other institutions will contribute comparable files from which the AUC community can also benefit, 3) a set of best practices and standards to which all consortium members will conform and 4) that any collaborative digital conversion projects offer expertise and safeguards to protect our materials during the actual conversion process. For example, for many security reasons we would hesitate to send our rare materials outside of the AUC to be digitized and would much prefer that conversion be performed *in situ*. The option of a “roving” scanning operation is one way to address this issue, i.e. the consortium might hire a team of scanners who would take equipment and personnel to the participating institutions and perform the digitalization on site. We found that bringing outside vendors into the RBSC Library to do large parts of our digital conversion projects under the watchful eye of our staff was a secure, convenient and cost-effective way to safely digitize our collections.

A final overriding concern is that one not lose sight of the absolute necessity of assuring the conservation of the original artifacts that are digitized. The digital surrogate is a wonderful tool but it will never be a complete replacement for the original. Visions of libraries without books or manuscript boxes are mere delusions since it would be irresponsible not to assure the conservation of a 15th century Islamic manuscript or a first edition *Description de l’Egypte* just because one could access their contents online. Unfortunately the procedures for assuring the physical conservation of these artifacts – including the issue of space – are among the most expensive issues intrinsic to any digital conversion project. Thus the idea of a common effort to preserve the physical artifact as well as cooperative agreements for digital conversions might well be something for this group to consider.

