

**A Tradition of Stewardship: Documenting and Promoting
Egyptian and Regional Heritage at the Rare Books and
Special Collections Library, The American University in
Cairo, Egypt**

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Abstract

This article examines the development, holdings, and contributions of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library (RBSCL) of the American University in Cairo (AUC) in Cairo, Egypt. Tracing its origins to AUC's acquisition in the 1950s of the library of pioneering Islamic art and architecture scholar K.A.C. Creswell, this piece outlines how the present day RBSCL was created in the early 1990s through the merging of several special collections units at the university. The emergence of various collecting areas and description of major acquisitions and holdings across multiple formats is covered, including rare books and manuscripts, archives, architectural sources, Egyptology collections, photographs, historical magazines, and maps. Activities like conservation and digitization are also addressed, as well as RBSCL's service to researchers and outreach efforts.

Keywords: Architecture, Archives, Collections, Egypt, Heritage, Libraries, Rare Books

Introduction

In 1947 the American University in Cairo's founding President Charles R. Watson (1871-1948) left a memorandum for his successor proposing the hiring of a "full-time historically minded Librarian who would add to his duties the conservation of such material and other that he would collect" to provide "worthy, educative, and important physical exhibitions of the past."¹ Today the role Watson had in mind is played not by the single individual he had in mind, but by the university's Rare Books and Special Collections Library.

The American University in Cairo (AUC) celebrated its centennial in 2019, marking a century of serving Egypt along the lines of the model envisioned by Watson: offering an English-language, American-style liberal arts model of higher education. AUC started out small, with yearly enrollment less than 400 through the 1920s, but today enrolls almost 6,000 undergraduates, about 1,000 graduate students, with almost 30,000 continuing education students. While much smaller than most of its higher educational counterparts in the country, AUC has typically "punched above its weight," for example through innovations like the introduction of student athletics and hands-on science laboratory work, as well as being among the earliest to admit female students. For most of its history AUC had been located in downtown Cairo, at what's now known as Tahrir Square, until it moved to a new suburban campus in 2009, where most of its activities take place today.

AUC's Library stands at the center of that campus in New Cairo, and among other units houses the Rare Books and Special Collections Library (RBSCL). Today RBSCL holds about 65,000 rare books as well as contemporary monographs and journals about specialized areas such as Egyptology and Islamic art and

¹ Charles Watson, letter to John Badeau, September 1, 1947, Records of Executive Secretary Ward Madison, AUC University Archives.

architecture. Four curators on staff manage collection areas for photographs, architectural drawings, historical magazines and maps, and Egyptology holdings; research services staff assist users on-site and remotely. The archives unit manages the university's archives and other archival collections, working alongside a records management team. RBSCL's Conservation Laboratory and the library's Digitization Center provide essential support.

This article presents a case study on the American University in Cairo's Rare Books and Special Collections Library, demonstrating its importance as a resource for the study of Egypt's heritage. This exploration of the RBSCL's development reveals how a repository emerges from different points of origin, grows, and changes, including how acquisitions opportunities play a part. The description of RBSCL's collecting areas and how they originated and evolved likewise can also offer insight into how holdings are built, and suggest contributions that the library can make to scholarship on Egypt and the Middle East. The activities pursued by the library's team are outlined as well, indicating the multifaceted operations involved in the effort to make heritage resources available for research and showcasing to the public.

The Origin and Development of Special Collections at AUC

The American University in Cairo's general collection library in the university's early decades was a modest affair, typically with a single librarian, focused on supporting the classroom needs of undergraduate students. From time to time rare items were acquired, typically through donation by university officials, but the library made no pretense of serving as a center for heritage documentation or in-depth research. As early as 1923 the university did host a specialized library which was associated with its School of Oriental Studies (S.O.S.) where Arabic language was taught. The library's content included works on Arabic linguistics, Islamics, and Christian missionary material, the latter two reflecting

AUC's Protestant missionary roots, and accepted one of the first book collection donations to AUC, the Douglas Thornton Memorial Library from the Church Missionary Society branch in Cairo. While eventually granting access to external researchers, the S.O.S. library's focus was not that of a heritage materials repository.²

It was the decade of the 1950s when AUC came to host a dedicated repository for rare books and special collections, the key figure being British scholar K. A. C. Creswell (1879-1974), a long-time faculty member (1931-1951) at Egypt's Fu'ād I University (now Cairo University). From his arrival in Egypt at the end of the First World War through the early 1960s, Creswell studied and documented Islamic monuments and other buildings in the country and the wider Middle East region, taking and collecting about ten thousand photographs. To support his pioneering research and writing on Islamic art and architecture Creswell built an extensive personal library, which included important rare works like the illustrated volumes by David Roberts (1796-1864), Owen Jones (1809-1874), and Émile Prisse d'Avennes (1807-1879).

Having reached an advanced age, Creswell made arrangements to sell his library to the American University in Cairo in the 1950s -- a transaction accelerated by the 1956 Suez War, when the Egyptian government was expelling many British residents. As part of the arrangement the university brought Creswell on as Distinguished Professor of Islamic Art (allowing him to remain in Egypt) and to supervise his library, which was moved to the AUC campus.³ His library there became a core resource for AUC's program in Arab studies (a refashioning of the School of Oriental Studies). From

² School of Oriental Studies Faculty Meeting Minutes File, 1921-1944, Records of President Charles Watson, AUC University Archives.

³ Gloria Karnouk, "The Creswell Library: A Legacy," in *Muqarnas VIII: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. Oleg Grabar (E.J. Brill, 1991), 122; Joyce Pressey Tovell, "The Creswell Library of Islamic Art and Architecture at the American University in Cairo Part One: In the Presence of the Original Owner, 1956-73," *Art Libraries Journal* 17 no. 4 (1992): 13, doi:10.1017/S0307472200008051.

this point through the early 1990s, Creswell's library and documentary collections were managed by AUC's Center for Arabic Studies Library, a specialized unit separate from the university library that had incorporated holdings from the former S.O.S, library. The university's Main Library itself housed some donated rare books and photographs managed by a "Special Services Department" (later renamed Special Collections Department) established in the 1960s.

In the early 1970s, AUC's role as an archival repository emerged. Sporadic efforts to document institutional history had been made over the years, such as reminiscences written by early faculty members, presidential documents moved to the library, and oral history recordings made in the late 1960s with alumni and administrators by AUC's alumni director . Concerted action toward the creation of a university archives only took shape in 1972 when Lawrence Murphy, a newly hired history professor, sought to write a book on the history of AUC. Lacking many original documents, he launched a survey that located records around campus, including some stored on the rooftop of a university building.⁴ Murphy collected those records in the library building and by 1973 proposed an official university archives with an ongoing collecting program and its own staff. AUC's library took steps in this direction, and, from 1975 through the early 1990s, the archives of AUC were the responsibility of the Main Library's Special Services Department. Today the University Archives unit within RBSCCL offers records management services and manages records, publications, and photograph and media collections related to more than a century of AUC history.

The present model of a special collections library at AUC began in 1992 with the unification of the Main Library's Special Collections Department holdings (including university archives) with the Center for Arabic Studies Library's Creswell collections. The

⁴ *The American University in Cairo: 1919–1987* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1987), vii.

initiative was largely that of AUC president Richard Pedersen (1925-2011), who had focused on professional programs at AUC in the decade after his 1977 appointment, but nonetheless had a deep appreciation for Egypt's heritage; in the 1980s he and members of AUC's Board of Trustees made donations of historical items like photographs to the library. During this period the university purchased a century-old villa near AUC's campus, and during Pedersen's term the idea was conceived for it to serve as the home for a single, dedicated special collections library. When restorations were completed in 1992, AUC's rare books, archives and photograph collections, including the CAS/Creswell Library, were moved there.

That was not to be the last move for the library. The American University in Cairo's relocation to a suburban new campus in 2010 represented another key turning point for the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, as it moved to new facilities in the Library building there. The timing was fortunate as the protests at Tahrir Square of Egypt's 2011 revolution at times saw violence and damage to property, as suffered by the Institut d'Egypte, a research institution established during the Napoleonic presence in Egypt, which burned in late 2011.

RBSCL's Collection Areas and their Development

Rare Books and Manuscripts

With K.A.C. Creswell's library as its foundation, AUC rare book collections were built largely through the acquisition of other private libraries, which became the core of RBSCL's holdings. That of Max Debbane (1893-1965), an Alexandria businessman with an interest in archaeology and a friend of (and editor for) Creswell, represented the first major post-Creswell acquisition, in the 1960s. This collection was significant in growing library holdings in travel literature. The 1970s and 1980s saw the acquisition of the libraries

of two prominent Egyptologists, Labīb Ḥabashī (1886-1961) and Salīm Ḥasan (1906-1984), developing the library as a resource for Egyptology. The largest collection outside of Creswell's to be incorporated into the RBSCL, (in the 1980s), was that of Maḥmūd Sab' (1886-1976), a judge whose travels aided him in assembling one of the largest private libraries in Egypt, encompassing 17th, 18th, and 19th century works on Egypt and the Middle East. Since then RBSCL has continued to acquire works from distinguished scholars and bibliophiles, with leading figures in Egyptian and international social, political, and intellectual life, such as Buṭrus Buṭrus Ghālī (1922-2016), and their heirs donating book collections.

Highlights of RBSCL's rare book holdings include the Napoleonic-era *Description de L'Egypte* (including a complete copy of the first edition) and multiple volumes of the lithographs of Scottish artist David Roberts' paintings of Egypt and the Levant. Beyond these the library possesses a large collection of pre-20th century travel accounts of the Middle East and parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Early travel literature details the journeys of European explorers (the oldest dating to 1556), such as Frederick Ludvig Norden's *Travels in Egypt* (1757), and 19th and early 20th-century guidebooks and travelogues are extensive.

Manuscripts, though not numerous, are also found in the RBSCL's collection. Composed in Arabic, Persian, and French and dating from the 14th to the 19th centuries, these materials relate to various disciplines including religion, law, family life, medicine, poetry, astronomy, and linguistics. Among RBSCL's most notable holdings are two of the library's oldest, a Mamluk-era Quran from around the 14th or 15th century, and an Ethiopian New Testament bound between wooden covers.

An important source at RBSCL for social history and legal is a set of several hundred handwritten Arabic documents from the 19th and early 20th centuries related to matters of marriage, divorce,

and inheritance. Other legal documents offer insight into the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt, chiefly the account of the Battle of Abūkir by French general Jean-Baptiste Kléber (1753-1800) in connection with a legal case. Manuscripts also hold a significant place in RBSCL materials related to Coptic Studies, in particular the ‘Iryān Miftāḥ (1826-1886) Collection which contains handwritten religious commentaries and Coptic language grammars authored and collected by that nineteenth-century scholar.

Archives - Architecture, Women’s History, Egyptology, etc.

The 1990s saw an important expansion in the special collections mission for RBSCL in documenting Egypt’s heritage, when the heirs of Ḥasan Faḥḥī (1900-1989), Egypt’s leading twentieth-century architect, donated his entire personal archive of architectural plans and drawings, photographs, writings, correspondence, and other documents, a library, and artifacts. Reflecting his study and application of traditional Egyptian and regional building techniques and styles (like mud brick, vaults, and domes), Faḥḥī’s collection complemented the library’s existing strength in architecture which had been based on the Creswell collection. The Faḥḥī acquisition drew substantial attention and highlighted an elevated role for the RBSCL in documenting Egypt’s built heritage via archival collections.⁵

The project through which Ḥasan Faḥḥī had achieved worldwide recognition as one of the earliest advocates for environmentally sustainable and affordable architecture was his complex at New Gourna (al-Qurnah) for resettling residents of nearby villages on the west bank of the Nile across from Luxor, built from the mid-1940s through 1950s. The documentation of this project in Faḥḥī’s

⁵ “1994 News Clippings,” AUC Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library, <https://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/digital/collection/aucnews/id/6242>.

archive has been used extensively for scholarly studies and restoration efforts like those led by UNESCO, and exemplifies the value of the Faḥī collection. Like other Faḥī projects in the collection, the New Gourna (al-Qurnah) files contain architectural plans and drawings and photographs (from various stages of the project and restoration initiatives during Faḥī's lifetime). But the presence of contextual documentation about the intended residents, like government surveys dating to the 1920s, elevates the importance of these records as a historical source. And Faḥī's own writings about New Gourna (al-Qurnah), which became the basis for his acclaimed book *Architecture for the Poor*, first published in 1973, offer key insights into Faḥī's architectural philosophy.

In the three decades after the Faḥī collection was acquired, the Rare Books and Special Collections attracted donations of the archives of other leading Egyptian architects, some with styles similar to Faḥī and others pursuing modernism. A former curator of the collection likened this kind of collection development to the phenomena in Islamic cemeteries whereby the tomb of a holy person is eventually surrounded by those of devotees who seek to be buried close by to gain blessings.⁶ This area of growth eventually led the RBSCCL to set up a unit dedicated to architectural archives, something unique in Egypt and the Arab region, used by local and international scholars and as a teaching tool for AUC's architecture program.

Today, the architectural collections at the RBSCCL include the complete works of six pioneering Egyptian architects (including Faḥī). These collections include architectural plans and drawings, photographs, correspondence, scholarly writings, publications, and artifacts. Together, they present a diverse range of themes related to the different architectural approaches, such as environmentalism and traditionalism, as seen in the works of Faḥī and Ramsīs Wīṣa Wāṣif (1911–1974); modernism, exemplified by

⁶ Conchita Añorve-Tschirgi, conversation with author, 2011.

Sayyid Karīm (1911-2005) and Kamāl Amīn (1923–1979); and experimental postmodernism, represented by Jamāl Bakrī (1931-2006). Another collection, that of restoration architect Ṣāliḥ Lamī (b. 1935), documents conservation efforts for Islamic structures like mosques throughout the Arab world, complementing other library holdings like the photograph and book collections of K.A.C. Creswell.

In addition to offering architectural insights, these archives serve as primary sources for understanding Egypt's social, political, and economic transformations across the twentieth century, from the colonial era into the modern period. The RBSCCL's architecture archives also cover the built environment in other countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean region. For example, as several of the Egyptian architects represented at RBSCCL played pioneering roles in designing structures in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, the collection serves as an important resource for studying the architectural and urban history of those nations over the past century. These archives, covering the 1920s through 1990s, also document the evolution of architectural practice, such as drafting technology. This allows scholars as well as architecture students to trace technical advancements as well as aesthetic shifts in regional architecture throughout the 20th century.

Archival collections at RBSCCL extend far beyond architecture in their coverage, documenting areas like social change and activism, women's history, government and civil society, and journalism. An early acquisition by the AUC Library were the papers of Egyptian women's rights pioneer Hudá Sha'rāwī (1879-1947), acquired in the 1980s but brought to light only in the 2010s and now one of RBSCCL's most heavily used collections. Women's history and rights represent a major area of research at RBSCCL thanks to collections like Sha'rāwī's and those of Durrīyah Shafīq (1908-1975), her successor in Egypt's women's rights movement, and of 'Azīzah Ḥusayn (1919-2015), a leader in 20th century social causes.

For both connections with AUC were instrumental in their collections coming to RBSCL; Shafīq's daughters attended and were faculty at AUC, and Ḥusayn was an alumna.

New collecting areas in archives have continued to emerge at RBSCL in recent decades. The mid-2000s saw the beginning of the collection of artists' archives, including major figures like Ṣalāḥ Ṭāhir (1911–2007), Ḥusayn Bīkār (1913-2002), and later Margo Veillon (1907-2003) and Nāgī Shākīr (1932-2018). At roughly the same time cinema-related archives were acquired, including a collection of promotional material for Egyptian movies and the papers of a local film critic, and in the last year the records of the studio of leading producer Hilmī Raflah (1909-1978) were added along with those of the important Muḥīb animation studio which had been active from the 1960s.

The latest major new direction for RBSCL is the acquisition of the archives of Egyptian Egyptologists. This initiative has been inspired by an emerging research area within Egyptology, reconstructing the evolution of the discipline with a focus on Egyptians in archaeology. Over the last five years AUC's RBSCL has invested significantly in acquiring, through purchase and donation the personal papers and archives of Egyptian Egyptologists. Foremost were those of Salīm Hasan (1886-1961) and 'Abd al-Mun'im Abū-bakr (1906-1984), leading figures in the discipline in the first half of the 20th century. Their collections contain notes, letters, and research and teaching materials, plus over 20,000 photographs of archaeological sites, images that depict objects as well as inscriptions and scenes from tombs and temples, some of which no longer exist intact.

This core, the Hasan and Abū-bakr archives, represented the starting point for a collecting effort that secured other important personal papers collections of Egyptian Egyptologists. These include those of Cairo University professor Jāb-allah 'Alī Jāb-allah (1939-2012), pyramids studies expert Nabil Swaylam (1930-2015),

and Zakī Iskandar (1916-1979), who had served as Head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service's Restoration Department. Another key addition has been the records belonging to the Antiquities Service, the entity in charge of the management and conservation of all antiquities in Egypt, documenting day-to-day business from late 1920s to the early 1970s. These records have been a critical primary source for new studies examining, for example, the Antiquities Service's management system and the significant role of the Egyptian workforce in excavations.

Beyond offering crucial insights into development of Egyptology from the 1920s through the 2010s, these collections reveal the significance of Egyptian nationals who worked in archaeology but who have not received the same attention or recognition as their Western peers. By building collections that document those neglected actors and "hidden hands,"⁷ RBSCCL personnel have played a role, like many others at heritage repositories around the world, to "decolonize the archive."

Photographs

Photographs were a special collections area that expanded substantially during the first decade of AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library. To that point, K.A.C. Creswell's photograph collection represented the core of the library's holdings, along with other photograph albums and loose 19th and early 20th century images by commercial photographers (among them Sebah, Béchard, Bonfils, Beato, Zangaki, and Lékegian, Fiorillo and 'Abdullāh Frères) that had come to the library over the years in piecemeal fashion. Depicting architecture, views of urban and rural life, and ancient monuments, these early images include formats like prints, stereograph cards (such as those by the

⁷ Stephen Quirke, *Hidden hands: Egyptian workforces in Petrie excavation archives 1880-1924*. (Duckworth Egyptology, 2010).

Underwood and Underwood Company). A 20th century postcard collection features similar images.

In 1998 RBSCL moved into documenting Egyptian studio and art photography with the acquisition of the work of Van-Leo (1921-2002). Under that pseudonym Leon Boyadjian, a member of Cairo's Armenian community, came to be Egypt's leading studio photographer of the mid-20th century, producing portraits of famous actors, singers, dancers, film directors, and other celebrities, and Egyptians from various walks of life. Van-Leo became known for his creative compositional, lighting, and printing techniques, as well as avant-garde self-portraits he made (many depicting him in varied personas). Having attended AUC as a university student, in 1998 Van-Leo donated to RBSCL the corpus of his life's work of over 25,000 prints and negatives and his personal papers and studio records.

In the years since, purchases have been made of unusual formats like aerial photography and stereoscopic images (notably "taxiphote" slides of Egypt from 1919 including views of demonstrations supporting Sa'd Zaghlul's revolution, with its viewing device), but most growth has been from donors contributing rich photographic collections. These include researchers' collections from the mid-20th century related to Egyptian regions, such as Nubia prior to flooding behind the Aswan High Dam (supplementing 1960s images in Hasan Fathi's archives and Social Research Center Ethnographic Study documentation in the AUC University Archives). Authors of books on Cairo's various neighborhoods have donated photographs as well. As mentioned, architects' and Egyptologists' personal papers generally include photographic components. Artists' archives are especially in demand for the depiction of their works and images of social interactions with their artist colleagues, as well as their own photography like the extensive travel and landscape images by the prolific painter Margo Veillon. Family photographs and travel views of Egypt represent other additions.

Historical Magazines

RBSCL hosts contemporary and legacy journals covering disciplines like Egyptology and Islamic art and architecture, but in recent years has made its mark through its collection of historical magazines and newspapers, assembled through donations and purchases. The bulk are periodicals published in Egypt in Arabic, English, and French dating from the 19th century through the end of the 20th. Taken together these comprehensively document political, social, economic, and cultural currents and transformations in Egypt and the wider region.

General interest magazines represent a significant portion of the collection, with holdings like the weekly magazine *al-Muṣawwar* (1924–present) and its French-language counterpart *Images* (1929–1969), as well as *L'Égypte Nouvelle* and the Arabic *Miṣr al-ḥadīthah*. Covering wide-ranging topics like current affairs, arts and entertainment, social issues, and politics, their extensive photographic content has attracted much research interest. Aspects of these magazines like their advertising layouts offer valuable insights into Egyptian society and media practices of the time.

Users may also find at RBSCL magazines focused on more specialized topics and audiences. *The Sphinx: English illustrated Weekly* (1906-1947) catered to British expatriates and elite Anglophone readers, offering coverage of news and the social scene of its readership base, as well as novel pursuits like Egypt's early automobile culture. The *Egyptian Radio Magazine* (1935-1951) and *Al-Kawākib (Celebrities, 1932-2014)* magazine are vital sources for the study of Egyptian music, cinema, and other media. Finally, with the support of a dedicated endowment fund RBSCL has built holdings focused on gardens and botanical life in Egypt and beyond, such as *Majallat filāḥat al-basātin al-miṣriyah (Gardening*

Egyptian Gardens, 1927-1941) and *al-Majallah al-zirā'iyah* (*The Agriculture Magazine*, 1961-1972).

Titles offering political and social commentary represent another important segment of the collection. These include early political opposition magazines like *Al-Mushīr* (*The Counsellor*, 1896-1898), which presented critiques of Ottoman politics and early use of caricature, and *Al-Kashkūl* (1922-1930), known for its satirical caricatures by Spanish artist Juan Sintes. Egypt's early feminist press features prominently at RBSCCL with publications associated with leading Egyptian women's rights advocates: *L'Égyptienne* (Hudá Sha'rāwī), *Bint al-nīl* and *Femme Nouvelle* (Durrīyah Shafiq), *al-Mar'ah al-jadīdah* (Balsam 'Abd al-Malāk), and *al-Nabḍah al-nisā'iyah* (Labībah Aḥmad). These periodicals reflect the evolution of Egyptian feminism and women's roles in public and modern family life during the 20th century.

These holdings have proven to be key sources for historical and interdisciplinary research by scholars and students alike, used for studies ranging from urban development to the evolution of fashion and graphic design. Magazines have also served as the basis for numerous exhibition displays, such as one on national and international perceptions of Egypt's Princess Fawzīyah (1921-2013).

In recognition of the varied uses to which these can be made, historical magazines have been prioritized as an area for digitizing. Collaborations have accelerated this effort, as through a 2021 initiative with American University in Washington, D.C. to acquire and digitize titles related to Egyptian cinema from the 1930s through 1960s. RBSCCL has provided the Centre d'Études Alexandrines with francophone titles for scanning, and has digitized others as part of the Middle East Materials Project. Presently thousands of issues are available on AUC's digital library, and the value of these digitized, searchable holdings is made evident by the heavy usage they receive on that platform.

Maps

Maps and atlases represent another important format of special collections at RBSCL, numbering over 5,000 items dating back to the 19th century and focused largely on Egypt (and to a lesser extent other areas of the Middle East). Maps in Creswell's library were the original basis for the collection, which has grown through donations ranging from the Egyptian topographical map collection assembled by anthropologist *Robert La Tonsky* to the personal papers of scholars (from architects to Egyptologists) that contain cartographic material. A regular purchasing program continues to develop these holdings.

Highlights of the 19th century holdings include an 1864 seven-sheet map of Egypt by Great Britain's War Office Intelligence Division, the 1874 *Plan Général de la Ville du Caire*, Falakī Bey's 1876 map of Lower Egypt, and Antonio Figari's geographic and geological maps of Egypt and Palestine. Important sources on Cairo and Alexandria's urban development are sets of 1898-1905 insurance maps as well as the Egyptian Survey Authority's cadastral plans covering the 1920s through the 1950s. Extensive publications by the Survey of Egypt produced throughout the 20th century offer thorough nationwide documentation.

Besides supporting scholarly research and popular publications, maps in RBSCL's collection have recently featured in exhibitions on Cairo's evolution and the history of its neighborhoods, and served as the basis for digital geospatial initiatives like *Al-Madaq* website about the layout of the 19th century city. Cartographic holdings have also informed urban and rural heritage preservation projects for such diverse areas as Cairo's downtown Ezbakīyyah Garden and the Giza plateau.

Given RBSCL maps' substantial international demand and the goal of reducing physical handling, digitizing the collection became a

priority in the past decade. This paralleled an effort to enhance access and discoverability by applying Resource Description and Access (RDA) cataloging standards and alongside Dublin Core metadata standards. A substantial portion of the RBSCL historical map collection is now available online via the Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library, making these invaluable resources accessible to a global audience of researchers, educators, and heritage professionals.

Media Collections

In recent years media collections have come to the forefront as an area of documentation at RBSCL. Besides AUC institutional historical and promotional films and student journalism video collections in the University Archives, the library has acquired resources like the sound archive of the Voice of America branch active in Egypt from the 1970s through the 2000s.

Oral history is the most active endeavor, however, for both Egyptian and AUC institutional history. Building on the two dozen oral histories done with university personnel in the 1960s and 1970s, since 2005 roughly three hundred have been conducted since 2005 to reflect the history of AUC. Several dozen oral histories have been conducted with varied contributors to Egyptian life, like prominent artists and architects, members of minority ethnic groups like Armenian Egyptians, and residents of Egyptian villages. Other oral histories are added through donations and transfers, like that of AUC's Economic and Business History Research Center that interviewed Egyptian government and business leaders. The largest initiative in oral history at AUC was the University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution project, a collaboration among units at AUC to collect signs, photographs, and artifacts from the 2011 protests against President Husnī Mubārak's (1928-2020) regime, but with a special focus on oral histories. Starting with AUC staff, faculty, and

students, the project eventually conducted over four hundred interviews with a variety of participants in the demonstrations.⁸ These resources are available to users in the RBSCL's digital library.

Collections Treatment, Use, and Outreach

Parallel with building collections, the formation of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library in the 1990s involved the professionalization of the care and treatment of its holdings. This included the creation of a Conservation Laboratory, supported by bringing in international experts to advise. Over the years the Conservation Laboratory built up its equipment and personnel expertise, and has been essential for making damaged and fragile materials usable. The repair and rebinding of manuscripts, rare books, and historical magazines has been a major focus, as well as the creation of custom-made boxes to fit fragile items like the library's Mamluk-era Quran. The Laboratory staff have been sought out to provide training for other organizations, and contributed their expertise to institutions in need, as when they responded to the call to help salvage items damaged during the 2011 fire at the Institut d'Égypte.

The Conservation Laboratory's contributions have been critical for fulfilling grant projects supporting the treatment of RBCL collections. These included awards from the Getty Foundation (1997) and the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities (2009-2010) to preserve the Ḥasan Faṭḥī and Ramsīs Wīṣa Wāṣif Collections, involving flattening, cleaning, and repairing the architectural plans and drawings and encapsulating many in

⁸ Stephen Urgola and Carolyn Runyon, "Participatory Archives: Building on Traditions of Collaboration, Openness, and Accessibility at the American University in Cairo," in *Bridging Worlds: Emerging Models and Practices of U.S. Academic Libraries around the Globe*, ed. Raymond Pun, Scott Collard, and Justin Parrott (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), 96.

custom-made archival mylar envelopes. A 2005-2006 Getty Foundation grant for the Creswell Photograph Collection supported treatment like removing photographs from the original acidic albums and cleaning the prints to permit housing in archival pocket pages and album-boxes. Efforts like these have been essential for permitting digitization initiatives to proceed.

Librarians at the Rare Books and Special Collections Library have strived to offer access to its regional and Egyptian heritage and institutional history collections to researchers from around the world via visits to the library or remote reference assistance over email or other digital platforms. For almost twenty years, RBSCL has employed digital technologies to broaden awareness of and access to its collections through the efforts of its Digitization Center. Among the kinds of Egyptian and regional heritage materials available through the Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library are photographs dating back to the 19th century, architectural plans, maps, historical magazines, and audio recordings (like oral histories and the sound archive of the Egypt branch of Voice of America); university materials like student newspapers and promotional films (some dated as early as the 1920s) have also been digitized to showcase AUC's history. The library has in recent years collaborated with owners of personal and family archives to produce digital versions to add to RBSCL holdings, and has also increasingly been accepting digital donations, such as collections of born-digital images from photographers.

Throughout the last thirty-five years, the RBSCL has invited the AUC campus community and the general public in Egypt to view exhibitions of its holdings. Recent exhibitions have covered Egyptian diplomacy, Egyptian neighborhoods, and the anniversary of the 1922 discovery of the tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun. Through reproductions and loaned originals, RBSCL materials are also showcased at exhibitions throughout the world, such as photographer Van-Leo's photographs and personal artifacts at the

Hammer Museum on California in 2023, and drawings of houses designed by architect Ḥasan Fathī shown at the 2025 Venice Biennale. In these ways, the library has brought international attention to Egypt's heritage.

Conclusion

The path of special collections stewardship at the American University in Cairo was not an obvious one. The directions taken were driven by unexpected opportunities at some junctures (the 1950s Creswell library sale, the 1970s discovery of university records, 1994 Hassan Fathy archives donation), and by intentionality at others, like the 1992 unification of units that formed RBSCL. As a relatively small and young university, AUC was an unexpected venue to host the library of the leading Islamic art and architecture scholar of the period. AUC's status as a foreign institution did not seemingly make it the natural landing place for the archival and book collections of national leaders in areas like architecture, women's rights, and Egyptology. But alumni affiliations and reputation developed over the years benefitted the library for being seen as a destination for heritage collections.

In the development of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library and its predecessor units, local traditions of how rare materials are held did not offer the model followed. University-based special collections libraries were not prevalent in the 20th century in Egypt, nor are they today; with exceptions like Al-Azhar and Cairo universities, very few of the more than one hundred universities in the country maintain heritage materials. In Egypt government institutions predominate, like the National Archives (Dār al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyyah), National Library (Dār al-Kutub), and Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Maktabat al-Iskandarīyyah), in size and prominence. Alongside these in the rare materials landscape are a variety of research centers, from international ones like the Institut français d'archéologie orientale (the French Institute of

Oriental Archaeology) to subject-based repositories like the Women and Memory Forum.⁹ Thus RBSCCL did not emerge among a cohort of other university rare book and special collections libraries as it might have in the United States or Europe.

In 2022 AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library received the UNESCO/Jikji Memory of the World Prize sponsored by the United Nations agency and the Republic of Korea "for preserving and enabling access to Egyptian documentary heritage of global significance."¹⁰ This reflects the significance of RBSCCL holdings for documenting Egypt and the Middle East, but also the diverse activities of library personnel to care for and disseminate these resources. Those initiatives have established RBSCCL as a hub for heritage collaboration. These collaborative partners range from the donors (prior and after RBSCCL's formation) who saw AUC as the appropriate place to give their collections, to local repositories seeking advice and training in areas like conservation and archiving, to organizations seeking to pursue projects together on pursuits like oral history. The Rare Books and Special Collections Library's role in documenting Egypt and the Middle East may be larger than expected, given the American University in Cairo's particular niche in the country, but its tradition of heritage stewardship is a long one with lessons to offer.

⁹ Bradley Bauer, Samar Mikati Kaissi, Ryder Kouba, and Stephen Urgola, "What's in a Name? Archives and Special Collections at American Research Institutions in the Middle East: Repositories at the American University of Beirut, the American University in Cairo, the American Center of Research in Jordan, and New York University Abu Dhabi," *The American Archivist* 86, No. 2 (No. 2 Fall/Winter): 390–418; Kian Byrne, "A Survey of Middle East Archives: Egypt," *Sources and Methods* (blog), Wilson Center, April 20, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/survey-middle-east-archives-egypt>.

¹⁰ "The American University in Cairo to Receive 2022 UNESCO/Jikji Memory of the World Prize," UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/american-university-cairo-receive-2022-unescojikji-memory-world-prize>.