

Editorial

Visual Culture and Remembering the Forgotten

Visual culture, inasmuch as it relates to both culture and the image, has a great potential to provide important insights into the history and society of the Palestinians. Images are cultural artifacts that form part of the material culture of any people. A photograph captures a certain moment and preserves it beyond the time in which the event, and the photograph, was born. However, the photograph is usually seen outside of the context in which it was produced, and outside the time in which what it captured took place. The photograph is often seen as a timeless object. Still, when we view pictures we do usually imagine the lapse of time; we see photographs looking for that special person or the special event documented by them. Our preconceived notions determine to a large degree our perceptions of what a specific photograph is about. These notions are not only personal, but also aesthetic, ideological, communal, and socially constructed.

Although *Jerusalem Quarterly* is devoted to all aspects of the history, current politics, and life in Jerusalem, we have, since our inception, given close attention to the visual culture, especially in the realm of photography, of the city, the country, and the region. In the many essays we have published on these topics, special attention was given to how to think about photographs as historical documents. In the context of the study of Palestine using photographs as archives of lives, we believe we have done more than any other journal to give such prominent attention to the significance of visual culture of Palestine.

This issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* is devoted in its entirety to the critical study of visual culture. The contributions interrogate photographs and works of art in order to further shed light on the modern history of the Palestinians. They discuss images in relationship to the context – historical, social, and artistic – of their production and

continuous uses. In this context, photographic archives, and other visual archives, are used as sites for the ongoing act of narrating the history that unravels through the photographs, or what Ariella Azoulay describes in her essay “Photographic Conditions” as a “potential history.” Examining archival practices of political and nationalist control, Azoulay argues that the potential history of the Palestinians and the Israelis begins when the archive is no longer seen as a depository of documents, but “as a site for the ongoing struggle over sovereignty.” She argues that the archive has the potential, if one can cast aside notions of exclusion and difference, to aid the struggle for civil sovereignty that is denied in the reality of the current nation state.

In “Portrait Paths: Studio Photography in Ottoman Palestine,” Stephen Sheehi examines what he describes as the *networks of sociability* connected with portrait photography and these networks’ crucial role in the construction of the class consciousness of the “new men and women” of Palestine and the Ottoman empire at large. Insisting on the inclusion of the historical contexts, he sees portraiture and photo albums as part of the new imagination of the Palestinian self, or at least the bourgeois self, “attuned to the laws of the market” more than to the forces of tradition.

A connoisseur of family photographic collections, Mona Hajjar Halaby unearths from her archive an example of both Azoulay’s potential history and Sheehi’s refashioning of self-image. In “The Proverbial *Shatha* in Early Twentieth-Century Jerusalem,” she illustrates picnics and outings as an element of life in Jerusalem before the Nakba and describes how the amateur photographers that recorded the participants in these activities mimicked those appearing in great nineteenth-century impressionist and romantic arts.

Photographic works are not the only aspects of visual culture that are highlighted by the contributors in this issue, however. Rochelle Davis and Dan Walsh discuss the collection of posters in the Palestine Poster Project Archives. These posters serve as political artifacts as well as visual cultural, narrating the struggle of the Palestinian national movement. In the context of archiving visual culture, Nada Awad reviews an altogether different kind of archive: the newly established American Colony archive in Jerusalem, with its large collection of photographs, manuscripts, crafts, and books. The archive documents the life of this utopian messianic community of Americans and Swedes from the late nineteenth century all the way to the period of Israeli occupation of 1967. Covering turbulent periods in the modern history of Palestine, the archive has the potential to shed light on important moments in that history.

Another sort of visual archive is described in the essay of artist Samia Halaby, in which she discusses the largely untapped collection of one of the earliest modern Palestinian painters and artists, Sophie Halaby. Tragically, the collection was sold without concern for its importance as an element of the collective Palestinian artistic legacy. Though private Palestinian collectors rescued some of Sophie’s work, much was lost.

Finally, in “This Wall Speaks,” Ashley Toenjes examines yet another kind of archive: the living library of ever-changing graffiti on the apartheid wall. Looking at several specific locations in particular, including the area where the wall separates Jerusalem from Bethlehem, Toenjes argues that the Palestinians and their supporters tactically employ

the wall to reach transnational communities through global messages that are different from those to be found on the walls of refugee camps and cities.

In some sense, this issue is not just about the visual, it is also about the archive in all of its manifestations, including exhibiting. The act of narrating the modern, overlapping, and sometimes competing, histories of Palestine is, as is the case with any other historical narrative, a process of remembering and forgetting at the same time. Many contributions to this issue attempt to remember what has been forgotten; the presence of the Palestinians in their country, a presence that is conspicuously forgotten in the dominant Israeli historical narrative. In the photographs, posters, paintings, and graffiti discussed by the various contributors, the Palestinian presence constitutes an act of refusal – a refusal of the way they were made absent from the landscape, both social and natural, and the historical imagination.