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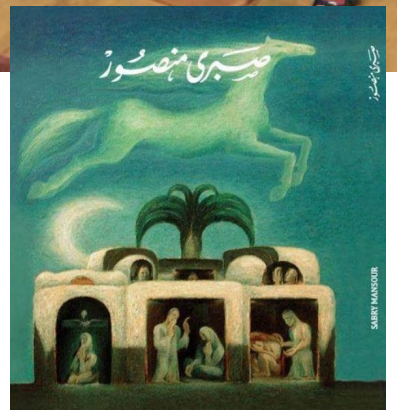

Engaging Faculty, Students, and Donors with an Egyptian Art Archives Project at the American University in Cairo

Stephen Urgola
Rare Books and Special Collections Library
The American University in Cairo

The Project

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Goal

- Assemble and and make available documentation related to modern Egyptian artists
- Expand an existing collecting are for the library

Activities

Oral Histories

- Conduct interviews with senior Egyptian artists
- Connects with Library's oral history program

Artists' Archives

- Acquire archival material from artists
- Process library's existing artists' archival collections

Digital Library

- Make selected material available in digital library

Support

- Internal AUC Research Support Grant (2020-2023)
- Project work by Research Assistants

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Engagement/Collaboration Critical for the Project's Success

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With AUC Faculty:

- Provided contacts with artists who could be approached for oral history interview
- Served as liaisons with potential donors of archival collections
- Suggested young artists who could be hired as research assistants

AUC Arts Faculty Bahia Shehab, Haytham Nawar

Engagement/Collaboration Critical for the Project's Success

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With Experts in the Field of Visual Art:

- Two trained and practicing artists hired as Research Assistants
- Brought subject expertise to the project
- Had experience, having pursued archiving projects with other institutions, and their own collecting/archiving work

Project Research Assistants
Imane Ibrahim, Alaa Abdelhamid

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Oral History Interviewing

- Oral history interview process delayed until early 2021 due to COVID19
- About 20 artists were interviewed, with a total of over 40 hours of interviews
- Project Research Assistants contacted potential interviewees, wrote scripts tailored to their lives and careers.
- Interviews conducted at artists' home or studios, using digital audio recorder.

Project Interviewees at studio

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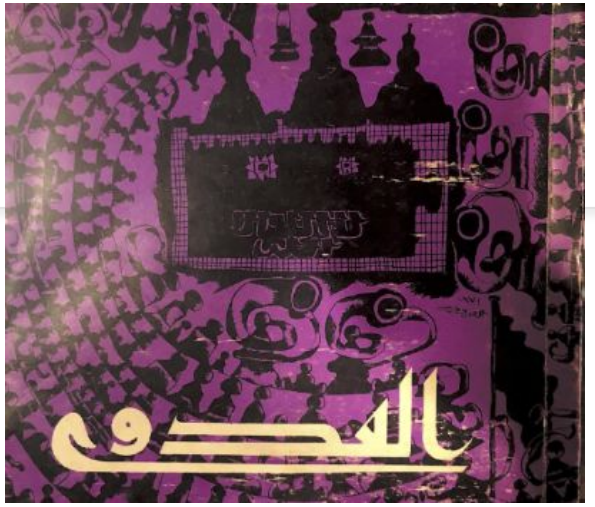
Contribution of Donors

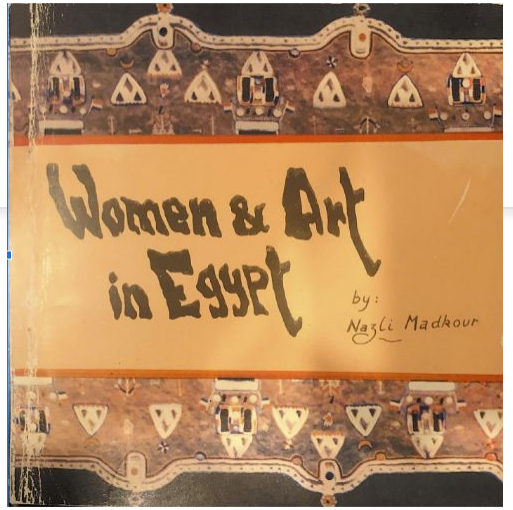


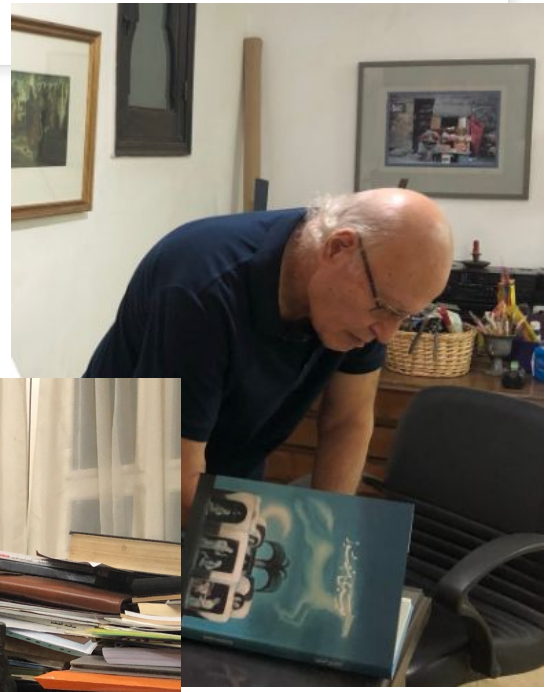
- Oral history interviewees loaned photographs of artwork and events, exhibition catalogs, etc. to the library to be scanned, for digital images to be added to digital library.

- Engagement through the oral history process was essential to building trust and conveying the project's and library's collecting mission.

Contribution of Donors

- Project research assistants coordinated donation process with artists (some oral history interviewees) who gave art books and exhibition catalogs and other archival material to the library.
- Art galleries in Cairo were also approached and donated exhibition catalogs, posters, and other promotional material.
- Donation process with galleries can serve as start of ongoing relationship.





Processing Artists' Archival Collections: Involving Students

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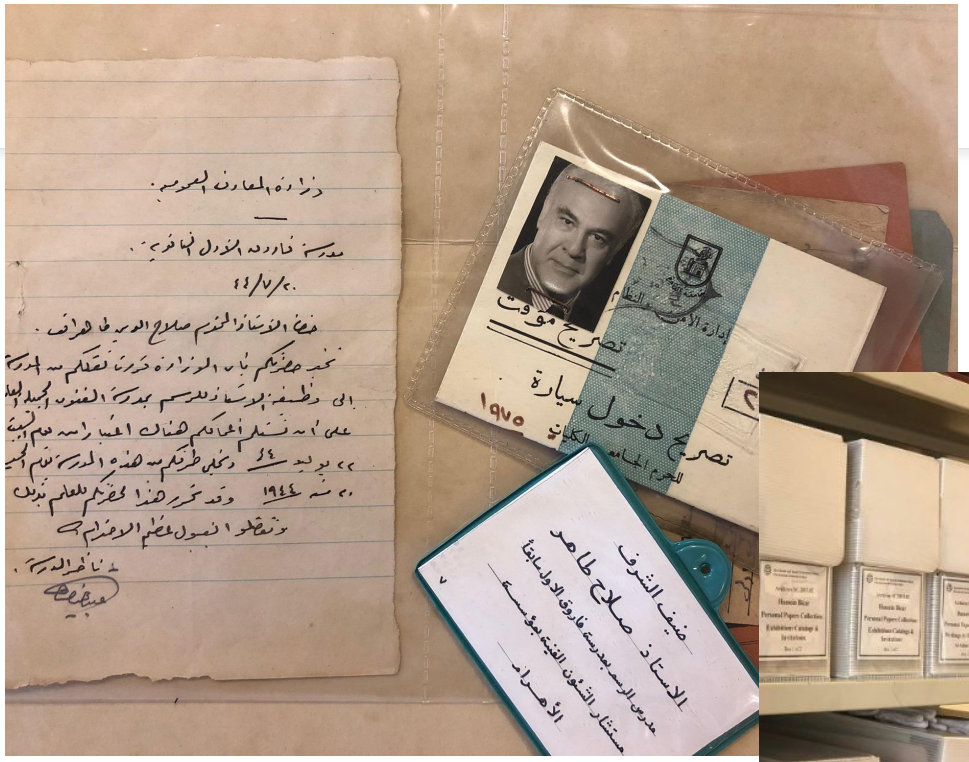
- Project research assistants arranged and described archives of artists already housed at Rare Books and Special Collections Library, including leading artists like Salah Taher and Hussein Bicar.
- Newly-acquired collections and artists' donations also addressed.
- Involved students in processing (tasks like folder labeling, inventory) as work study assistants, or as interns receiving credit for art courses (allowed faculty to incoporate practical class component).



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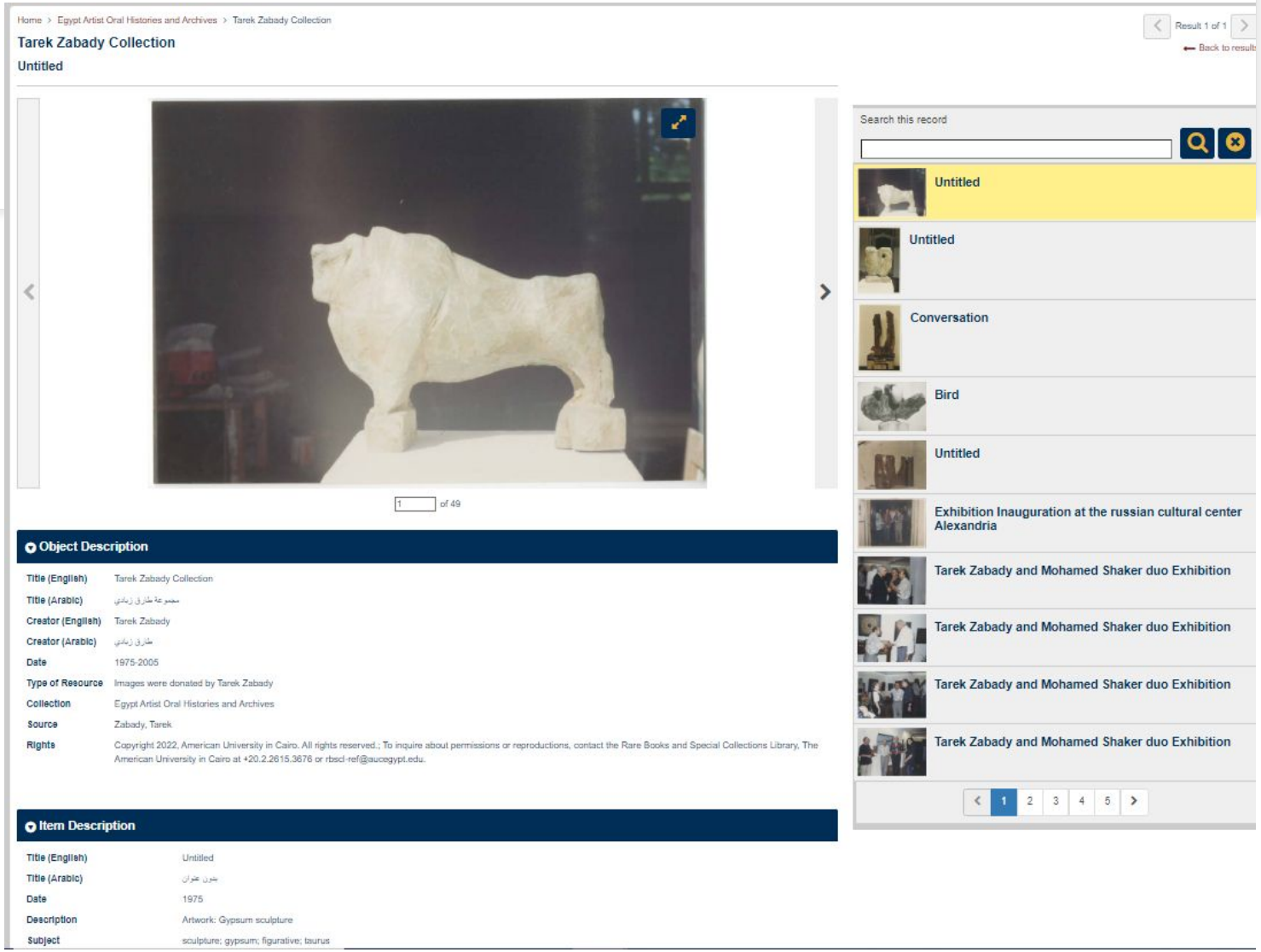
Digital Library Collection

- AUC RBSCL Digital Collections Archivist Irina Schmid worked with RAs in developing metadata.
- Students were involved in editing oral history transcripts for later ingest to digital library.
- Discussions held with faculty about how they can use collection content for own research, student work.



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Project Takeaways

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- Interaction with Faculty a key factor in documentation projects from conception to implementation to collection usage.
- Student involvement supports projects but also can be a form of experiential learning, within and beyond the course setting.
- Relationship building with donors or oral history interviewees is essential for growing contacts, collections.

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