

Karimeh Abbud: Lady Photographer of Palestine

Web Report – Mary Pelletier

In the male-dominated landscape of early Holy Land photography, Karimeh Abbud stands out as one of the first female Palestinian photographers of the 20th century.

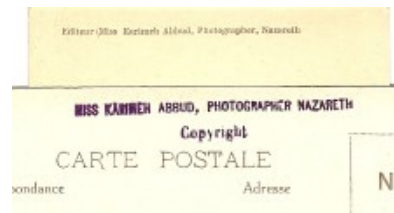


Fig.1

It was on this assumption that I began my research into the life and photographic work of Karimeh Abbud. Very little has been published about Abbud, but one scholarly article, published in English by the *Jerusalem Quarterly*ⁱ provides the basis for her biography. Funded by the Palestine Exploration Fund, my aim was to dig deeper into the archive and photographs of Abbud, and provide context for the images I had seen and would see. I was very grateful for the PEF grant, which provided for transportation costs, as well as costs associated with translating original Arabic documents related to Abbud's life and work.

Reliability and Access

The *Jerusalem Quarterly* article, written by Ahmad Mrowat has been reprinted and repurposed by various online outletsⁱⁱ to help solidify Abbud's reputation as the first 'Lady Photographer of Palestine.' I, too, used this article as the starting point for my research, but while conducting interviews in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah,ⁱⁱⁱ found the article to be unreliable, which altered the course of my planned research.



Fig.2

In the article, Mrowat states that he is the director of the Nazareth Archive Project, and that he possesses the full archive of Karimeh Abbud photographs, including those purchased from family members and an Israeli collector (a statement that later proved untrue). To begin, I aimed to visit the Archive Project, interview Mr Mrowat, and spend time with these photographs myself. But it was early on in my efforts to contact Mr Mrowat that I realised that the archival standards which had been boasted about in the article were not accurate – in fact, it was impossible to contact the Nazareth Archive Project, both by email and by telephone, and informal conversations with other Palestinian art collectors and art historians led me to believe that it did not exist as a public resource – at least not in the way that it had been described.

I began to re-evaluate my primary research questions, which had been twofold: to examine Abbud's access to women and families as a female photographer, and its resulting, perhaps specialised, imagery, as well as her access

to/relationships with male photographers during the British Mandate period. While I had access to images reproduced online,^{iv} the veracity of those images had now been called into question, as well as the motivations for publishing the work as part of a non-accessible archive resource. If I was able to verify Abbud's images, I could begin to unpack their specialised meanings. I began interviewing archive directors and scholars in Jerusalem and Ramallah to figure out this next step, and was sent to Bethlehem, home of the Abbud family and Reverend Mitri Raheb.

Retrieving the facts

Reverend Mitri Raheb, for all intents and purposes, can be described as Karimeh Abbud's biographer. While nearly all English-language information about Karimeh Abbud cites Mrowat as the source of her biographical information, Raheb was able, through his position as head of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, to trace Abbud's family history through church records. It was through conversation and correspondence with Raheb that I learned that the bulk of Mrowat's published photographs had come from two family photograph albums (at the time in the possession of Mrowat, but present location unknown). Over the course a few months, Raheb was able to scan and study the images in the album, which resulted in the authorship of an Arabic-language illustrated biography of Abbud, published in 2011.^v This publication includes a foreword written by Mrowat.

Raheb's text corrects many of the biographical inaccuracies that have made their way around the internet: Abbud was born on 13 November 1893 in Bethlehem to a respected Lutheran family, which was very active in the church. She died 27 April, 1940, and was photographing from around 1915, both studio portraits and landscapes sold as *carte postales*. The photographs reproduced from her family photo albums differ from those photographs disseminated on websites and blogs – where *carte postales* depict commercially-profitable idyllic landscapes of the 'holy land', the family albums are a window into life of intellectual, educated, middle class Palestinians during the Mandate period.^{vi}



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5

The selection of family photographs above (Fig.2-5) were taken from the albums. To fully understand their importance, we must take into consideration the context in which they were made, as well as Abbud's relationship with the subjects. There is an intimacy in her handling of the portraiture, which is owed to the familial nature of the photographic transaction. Both the subject and photographer seem to have a shared goal in creating a portrait that is both noble and affectionate. The poses in Fig.3 and Fig.5, for example, are quite different – the young woman in Fig.3 is contemplative and relaxed in facial expression, but her unorthodox hand placement suggests she was also quite deliberately posed. The woman in Fig.5, by contrast, is flatteringly framed by both her round hat and the soft vignette. This is a more traditional portrait, with her face in $\frac{3}{4}$ view, but the end result of both photographs is the same: we see two women, asserting themselves in front of the camera in different ways, in modern (not costumed) dress. These are portraits for themselves, for their family members, and allow us, as viewers some 80 years after they were produced, to see a part of middle class Palestinian society which has often been overlooked in the photographic history of the region.

Abbud's younger subjects in Fig.2 and Fig.4 display another dynamic. The young girl in Fig. 2 may not be too comfortable in front of Abbud's lens, but her stance, and the possession of a book demonstrate how seriously she takes the process. Her likeness reveals her to be determined and intellectual, despite her young age. Scattered throughout the album, too, are photographs of younger children, such as the young boy in Fig.4. He is both delighted and a bit on-guard in front of the camera, dressed in a terrifically modern coat, hat and boots. This image is a valuable document in its distance from the oriental images that have become synonymous with early 20th century Palestine^{vii} – much like the rest of Abbud's portraiture.

Continuing Research

My initial investigation into Abbud's work has raised further questions than I anticipated. In addition to a personal interest in the few hand-coloured photographs within the family albums and their religious iconographic leanings (Fig.6), I am eager to see a larger selection of her photographs, outside of the family albums. As noted in Mrowat's foreword, a second group of photographs by Abbud are in the possession of an Israeli photography collector named Bokie Boaz. Through correspondence^{viii} with Boaz, I learned that he possessed approximately 150 photographs by Abbud, primarily landscapes. However, these images were the subject of a court case between himself and Mrowat, and thus far, I have not received access to these images. The personal interests of those in the possession of these archives cannot be separated from my further investigation, and neither can the ways collectors might capitalise by 'owning' a fashionable identity (in this case, male photography collectors who may exploit the identity of the *first female Arab* photographer). This is complicated by the nature of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian, where access is based on trust of both collector and researcher. I will continue to try and access these never-before-seen photographs, with the aim of contributing a paper to the annual Women in Photography (UK) conference at the beginning of 2018.

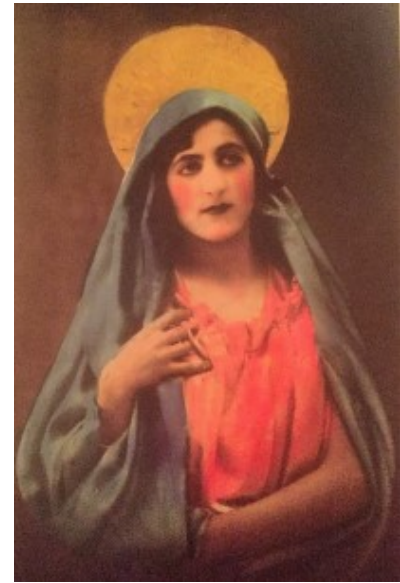


Fig.6

ⁱ Mrowat, Ahmad. "Karimeh Abbud: Early Woman Photographer (1896-1955)." *Jerusalem Quarterly* Summer 31 (31): 72-78. Print.

ⁱⁱ Peric, Ivana. "The Mystery of Karimeh Abbud: Lady Photographer of Palestine." *Muftah*. N.p., 15 May 2016. Web. 25 June 2016.

"20th Century Hidden Treasure: Karimeh Abbud, Palestine's Lady Photographer." *Middle East Revised*. N.p., 02 Apr. 2014. Web. 5 July 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Interview with Jean-Michel De Tarragon." Personal interview. 1 June 2016.

"Interview with Issam Nassar." Personal interview. 16 Aug. 2016

"Interview with Rev. Mitri Raheb." Personal interview. 1 July 2016.

"Interview with Salim Tamari." Personal interview. 17 June 2016.

^{iv} "Karimeh Abbud." *Pinterest*. Miscellaneous, crowdsourced. Web. 5 July 2016.

"Photographing Palestine." *BuzzFeed*. *Palestine Studies*, n.d. Web. 25 July 2016.

^v Raheb, Mitri. *Karimeh Abbud: Pioneer Female Photographer of Palestine*. Bethlehem, Palestine: Diyar Consortium, 2011. Print. Arabic language

^{vi} Nassar, Issam. "Early Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud." *Jerusalem Quarterly* Summer 46 (2011): 23-31. Print. Archived online: http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/46-Early_local_photographer_2.pdf

^{vii} Behdad, Ali. *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2016. Print.

^{viii} Boaz, Bokie. "RE: Photography Research Enquiry." Message to the author. 2 Aug. 2016. E-mail.

Fig.1: From the Abbud Family Albums; Raheb, Karimeh Abbud, p. 50

Fig.2: *Ibid.*, p. 65

Fig.3: *Ibid.*, p. 75

Fig.4: *Ibid.*, p. 76

Fig.5: *Ibid.*, p. 62

Fig.6: *Ibid.*, p. 104