

SURA

Unlocking the Photographic Archives of the Pioneering Years of Egyptology at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels

Contract – Project B2/191/P2/SURA

ABSTRACT

Context

SURA (Arabic for photo; صورة) is an interdisciplinary project that ties together Egyptology, digital imaging, archival studies, and digital humanities to valorise an important but almost completely forgotten historical collection of glass plate photographs kept in the Egyptological library of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH) in Brussels. These images date to the first half of the 20th century and document the pioneering years of Egyptology in Belgium from the perspective of Jean Capart and his collaborators. Over a period of 40 years, Capart and his collaborators built up an extensive photographic archive: images of expeditions to and excavations in Egypt, of Egyptian collections in European and American museums, of everyday life, monuments, and landscapes in Egypt.

Objectives

Despite its great historical value, this collection has been much neglected during the past decades and its existence and content were hardly known to the larger Egyptological community. The most important reason for this was undoubtedly the absence of an online searchable database and the lack of descriptive metadata. The SURA-project, a collaboration between the RMAH and Egyptologists of KU Leuven, was launched in 2020 with the objective to study and digitally disclose this important photographic collection through four clearly defined research objectives.

- 1) Providing detailed and high quality metadata for each image based on thorough research in archives and publications.
- 2) Making the digital images and their associated metadata publicly available in an online database through the RMAH's multilingual central collections management system (MuseumPlus-RIA/Carmentis), which ensures proper search and retrieval.
- 3) Addressing the preservation and conservation of the actual glass plates in order to preserve this collection for future generations.
- 4) Mining the scientific potential of the photographic archive both for the study of the Egyptian collection at the RMAH and its history, as well as for other national and international research institutes. The SURA-project actively searched for new collaborative research opportunities nationally and internationally.

Conclusions

The above outlined objectives were completely or partially met. The entire collection was digitally processed for online disclosure but also for long-term preservation. A large number of photos were fully analysed, provided with new metadata, catalogued in the collection management system of the RMAH, and published online. The RMAH is committed to continue and complete the online publication of the remaining photos. Scientific research on this collection has revealed additional information with regard to the development of this photographic collection, the context in which it was shaped and how it contributed to the creation of a unique Egyptological study centre at the RMAH that received much international acclaim, effectively turning Brussels into a leading international centre for Egyptology in the 1930s. The scientific potential of this collection was mined, and several topics were selected for further research, which resulted in a large number of scientific publications and presentations at (inter)national conferences. At the same time, the many public lectures and papers in popular journals also illustrate the particular attention that was paid to valorise the collection to the general public. Photos from the SURA-corpus also featured in three temporary exhibitions, one in Belgium and two in Egypt. Together with the publication of a monograph, issued in English, French and Dutch, this has contributed to a wide outreach of the SURA-project and has successfully positioned it within current research efforts to study the history of international Egyptology and to disclose photographic archives for continued collaborative research.

Keywords

History of Belgian and international Egyptology; Photographic archives; Jean Capart; Valorisation of unexplored heritage collections