Father Carney E. S. Gavin describes his task as “bringing back visions captured in sunlight”—in this case, 19th-century visions that are the earliest photographic records of people and places in the Middle East. Gavin is president of the Archives for Historical Documentation (AHD) in Brighton, Massachusetts, which he founded in 1994 to preserve, restore and share those records—though by that time Gavi and his crew had already logged thousands of kilometers of travel, tracking down long-lost and imperiled photos. 

Their ambitious hunt began in the 1970s when, armed with cameras, tripods and a handful of clues, they turned out across the Middle East, Europe and the Far East in search of historical photographs. They found images in Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon, Italy and the Netherlands (where they also discovered wax cylinders of the oldest vocal and musical recordings from the Middle East, hidden away in the Oriental Institute in Leiden). In the Vatican Archives, they unearthed pictures of an Iraqi monastery. In addition, they inspired the first Middle Eastern photographic “search-and-rescue missions,” presented more than 60 exhibitions in a dozen countries and solved 19th-century mysteries with a tenacity and expertise rivaled only by Sherlock Holmes.

“As we investigated a 250-year-old ongoing detective story, we were following in the footsteps of centuries of great sleuths, savants and symbiosters,” explains Gavi, who happened to be in the right place at the right time when the event that launched it took place. Many stories begin with the spark of an idea; this one began with a bang—on October 1, 1970.

At 5:00 a.m. that day a bomb planted by two Vietnam War protesters blew a hole in the roof of the building that housed the Harvard Semitic Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Police summoned Gavi, then assistant curator of the museum, to examine the damage, which turned out to be minimal. However, under the eaves exposed by the blast was an astonishing find: old crates filled with dust-covered crimson boxes containing 27,000 photographic prints, slides and stereoscopic views of the Middle East taken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This long-forgotten collection had been assembled beginning in the late 1800s by Professor David Gordon Lyon, the first curator of the museum, to teach undergraduates about the region.

From left: Father Carney E.S. Gavi is founder and president of the Archives for Historical Documentation; William Corsetti is curator for educational design; Elizabeth Carella is curator of historic photography. It was Gavi’s archeological experience, says Corsetti, that led him to “look for clues in the photographs to what was happening at the time,” thus leading him to the idea of “photo-archeology.”
The Port of Beirut, circa 1870, by Félix Bonfils. Images such as this offer much information about the extent of technologies and trade. Examining photos in this close way, says one researcher Paul Dunkel, is like “peaking through the knothole of history, and often you stumble on things no one else has seen.”

considerable achievements—photographic, artistic and scientific—of our epoch.” Nonetheless, said curator Carella recalls that in the 1970’s, all the team could learn about Bonfils was that he was “a genius.” Over the course of 12 years, clues from a Bonfils collection found in a barn in New Hampshire and conversations with Bonfils’s elderly grandchildren in Paris revealed that he was one of several family members who produced over 15,000 images of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Greece between 1863 and 1867.

Gavin credits much of his success in reconstructing the history of 19th-century photography in the Middle East to his “fortunate ability to connect with the descendants of the original photographers.” This was the case in the discovery of the Bonfils grandchildren as well as the great-grandchildren of Mendel John Dines, who moved from Odessa, in today’s Ukraine, to Jerusalem in 1848, becoming the city’s first resident photographer. Dr. Henry Berman, an independent film and video producer who joined Gavin’s team in the mid-1970’s, traveled to Paris to record the memories of the

This image, photographed on February 20, 1909 at the Dutch Legation in Jiddah and titled “Recording of Sayyid Mohammed,” led six researchers to a forgotten collection of more than 200 wax cylinders—the oldest known recordings from the Arab world.

A MAN OF MANY TALENTS

Father Carney E. S. Gavin is a man of many talents and a master of each. A modern-day Indiana Jones, he is an accomplished archeologist, author and raconteur who has been dedicated to exploring and preserving the cultural heritage of the Middle East since 1965. An avid historian and scholar with a Ph.D. in Near Eastern languages and civilization from Harvard University, Gavin followed yet another calling in 1965 when he was ordained a Catholic priest.

“Given his pedigree, his archeological background, his understanding of religions and cultures, as well as being brilliant in his own right,” I can’t imagine a person better suited to what he is doing at the Archives for Historical Documentation,” says Henry Berman, former director of educational films.

Gavin has been “excavating” lost 19th-century photographic and photographic documentation of the Middle East for more than four decades. “Even as a young priest, how things can tell us stories always fascinated me,” says Gavin, who loved discovering Civil War swords and World War I artifacts in the attic of his childhood home in Boston. His youthful curiosity whetted his appetite for exploration and led to an impressive collection of academic degrees. In 1959 he graduated summa cum laude from Boston College as the school’s first presidential scholar. A two-time Fulbright Scholar, Gavin later went on to study classics and archaeology at Jesus College, Oxford University, from 1959 to 1961 and later participated in archeological digs in Europe and the Middle East. In 1963 he received his Ph.D. from the University of Innsbruck in Austria, followed by a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1973.

An active student ambassador for the curator of the Harvard Semitic Museum in the mid-1960’s, Gavin became its curator and associate director from 1974 to 1993. During his tenure, he spearheaded the repatriation of 3500-year-old cuneiform tablets excavated in Iraq in 1928 to the National Museum in Baghdad.

Today, Gavin and his team are busy researching and sharing recovered 19th-century photographs from the Middle East. “I am very proud of releasing to the public the pages of history and restoring to the sight of mankind the masterpieces made by these local photographers,” explains Gavin. “In doing so, we are sharing the consciousness of the future."

Made in about 1872 by an unknown photographer, “Cairo: Southwest View” shows the ruined palace and the intact mosque and minaret of Khair Bey, with the mosque of Sultan Hassan in the background.

“The photos opened a window to the past that adds so much to the visual history of the region, says Rosovsky, and vice president and author of Jerusalem Walks, a guidebook to the city. “It felt like a detective, putting together clues from the past with what I knew from the present to try to date, name and sort the photographs.”

Identifying Bonfils was the first mystery that the team unraveled. Souvenirs d’Orient, an 1878 publication of Bonfils’s photographs, describes the collection of prints as “one of the most

This image of the Nawab Sikandar Begum of Bhopal, India shows her flanked by her prime minister and second minister. It was used to illustrate her book, The Story of a Pilgrimage to Hijaz, published in 1909.
Bonfill's grandchildren, and these interviews are now a part of the ABD’s collections. “Carney knew how important this was to preserving the history,” says Berman. Frith and Good were easier to trace. Frith was a renowned English photographer who made three trips to the Middle East, the first in 1856. He worked in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Good was also from England. He went to Egypt with Frith and continued to travel to the Middle East through the 1870s. He is known for his stereoscopic images.

As an archaeologist, Gavin had interests that extended far beyond archaeology and preserving the newfound historic images. He knew how important they could be for identifying and restoring historic monuments in the region. Because of the Muslim and Jewish proscription of “graven images,” regional historians and scholars had focused their attention on other kinds of records. In the 1970s, they were still largely unaware that photographic documentation in the Middle East actually dated back to the late 1830s. In fact, just weeks after François Arago, president of the Academy of Sciences in Paris, announced Louis Daguerre’s method of metal-plate image-making in 1839, European travelers embarked on the first “photo-voyages” into the Levant and the Holy Land, recording what they saw on daguerreotypes.

The ABD team’s quandary in the 1970s was how best to share the huge trove of photographs from Cambridge with colleagues in the Middle East. Given the volume of material, Gavin asked Berman to videotape selected pages of the prints as the most expedient, least expensive way to make the collection available to others.

“Carney was brilliant, and he was one of the first in his field to animate still photographs in videos. We felt we were pushing the technology as far as we could,” comments Berman, who produced two films based on the collection: “Petra, Jerash and Damascus” and “The Holy Land and the Holy City.”

In 1981, the team attracted the support of two heads of state, helped establish the first regional network to support photographic search-and-rescue efforts, and launched a series of traveling exhibitions and conservation seminars. Gavin found an enthusiastic patron in King Hussein of Jordan, who commented, “I know of no work more important for the understanding of our past or for shaping our vision for the future.” In 1978, he placed Royal Jordanian Airlines at the team’s disposal to assist in photographic exploration in the region. After the second FOCUS conference, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia funded the King Fahd Archive to “find, save and safeguard endangered photographic collections.”

In 1980, six photo exhibitions were held at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., at the UNSECO headquarters in Paris and at the Oxford University, as well as in the capitals of Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Syria. That same year, the team helped launch the Museum of the History of Damascus in the newly restored Khaleed al-Aami Palace by presenting it with a set of 50 prints of previously unknown historic photographs of the city. In Riyadh, it opened the city’s first public exhibition of historic photographs and cultural artifacts in Murabba’ Palace, residence of the late King Abdulaziz. Twenty-one years later, ABD celebrated the opening of the new National Museum in Riyadh with the return of the Barger Steles, one of the oldest Roman artifacts found in the kingdom. Exhibitions in Ramada, Bahrain, in 1980 encouraged the local population to search for family artifacts and photos, which later spurred the creation of the Bahrain National Heritage Center. Carella recalls that seeing images of the pearl trade between India and Bahrain led her, later that year, to search for additional photo archives in India—where she discovered photographs of the Hajj made by Indian pilgrims. During a visit to Doha, Qatar, curators from the team inspired colleagues at the National Museum to archive the artist’s collection of historic photographs. In 1981, Gavin’s team brought an “eye-opening” exhibition of Bonfills’ photographs of Jerash, Amman and Petra to the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Jordan, recall Sahal Bishrath, gallery director. The old photos really touched the soul especially among the older generation of visitors. They lived during that period and could immediately recognize the images.”

This undated portrait of Viceroy Ismail Pasha, Khedive of Egypt and Sudan, was produced as a carte de visite by the Abdullah Brothers, an Armenian trio who served as official photographers of Ottoman Sultan Abdulaziz.

Credits: Simply “Bonfills,” this photo of a Druze bride from Mt. Lebanon, shown wearing a traditional silver tarnour, was most likely taken by Felix Bonfills’ wife, Lydia Cabanis Bonfills, who made portraits of women in the family’s Beirut studio.

In 1978, in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Gavin and his team held a conference at Harvard called the “Finding, Organizing, Copying, Using and Sharing Endangered Early Visual Documentation for the Preservation of Middle East Cultural Heritage Conference,” abbreviated as FOCUS. Among those attending were high-level cultural representatives from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey.

Between the first FOCUS conference and the second, held in 1981, the team attracted the support of two heads of state, helped establish the first regional network to support photographic search-and-rescue efforts, and launched a series of traveling exhibitions and conservation seminars. Gavin found an enthusiastic patron in King Hussein of Jordan, who commented, “I know of no work more important for the understanding of our past or for shaping our vision for the future.” In 1978, he placed Royal Jordanian Airlines at the team’s disposal to assist in photographic exploration in the region. After the second FOCUS conference, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia funded the King Fahd Archive to “find, save and safeguard endangered photographic collections.”
advocates for the preservation of modern cultural heritage in the Middle East-North Africa region, emphasizing photography, music, architecture, video and film. Mwani held its second meeting in Beirut in 2012. www.facebook.com/ MiddleEastPhotos

The Fouad Debba Collection—holding more than 45,000 images, this is the world’s largest private collection of 20th-century photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab Diaspora. www.fouaddebbascollection.org

Modern Heritage Observatory (MHO)—founded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin, nowo

importance of these old photographic documents for the political, social and military history of the Arab world during the 19th and early 20th centuries, he comments. As a result of the conferences, he recalls, Prince Ali Bin Nayef opened a center for old documents in the Royal Palace in Amman and the Jordan Library established a department for historic photographs and documents.

In the decade following the second Fouad conference, the team was constantly on the move. Carella spent four months traveling through Turkey, Greece and most of the Middle East, consulting with conference participants about their archives. Her visit to the Bibliothèque Orientale at St. Joseph University in Beirut inspired Father Martin McDermott, then the executive director, to dig into the archives, where in 1981 he uncovered more than 15,000 photographs taken primarily by French Jesuits, beginning in the 1840’s.

MHO, colleagues in Jordan’s Department of Antiquities used 19th-century photographs compiled by the team to help with a UNESCO-supported restoration project in Jerash, as well as architectural restorations in Petra. Jordan’s photographic archives are “priceless,” says Karim Kawar, a former Jordanian ambassador to the US who interned with MHO during his undergraduate years at Boston College. “Father Gavin and his team have salvaged and restored photos that are of great value historically and culturally. These photographs of Jordan document our rich history and establish a reference point of where we were and how we have grown. This gives us pride in our culture and heritage.”

Many try to marginalize development in the Levant area in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in Palestine,” he says, but the photographs “challenge the notion that this was a barren land that offered little until settlers from western civilizations immigrated and started building... 19th century legacy will be protecting a piece of history and making it available to current and future generations.”

While the group’s exhibitions and conferences in the Middle East continued to heighten regional awareness of the importance of historic photographic documentation, a 1982 grant from the King Fahd Archive enabled the team to produce archaeology search-and-rescue missions in Europe and the United States. Thus the team members were able to spend several years inventorying 66 albums containing 1800 albums prints that had been presented by Sultan Abdul Hamid’s Turkey to the Library of Congress in 1894, finally publishing, Imperial Self-Portrait: The Ottoman Empire as Revealed in Sultan Abdul Hamid’s Photography Albums in 1894.

The work to rescue the photographs, stored away on dusty shelves for nearly a century, would no doubt have pleased the sultan, who once told his chief secretary, “Every picture is an idea. One picture can evoke political and psychological significance, which a hundred written pages could not convey.”

Concurrent with that project, research at the Oriental Institute in Leiden in 1983 uncovered hundreds of photos from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, sent by consuls general of the Netherlands beginning in the late 1800’s. One photo, labeled “The Recording of Sayyid Mohammed—February 20, 1909,” launched what Gavin calls “photo-archaeology.”

The picture showed several musicians sitting in front of an Edison horn to make wax-cylinder recordings. Gavin, Corsetti and Carella searched for and discovered the instrument’s attic and discovered hundreds of more than 200 wax cylinders, stored in old cardboard boxes covered with notations in Dutch, Arabic and Malay. One photo and three determined explorers led to the discovery of the oldest known film from the Arab world in Arubá, and five languages of present-day Indonesia.

Dietrich Schueler, emeritus director of the Phonogram-archief of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna, recalls when the researchers arrived with suitcases packed full of cylinders, “We had just built a new machine to record old cylinders...” he says. “We discovered many unexpected things on these cylinders which are incredibly important. They are the oldest records from this part of the world.” The discovery and restoration of the cylinders led to research efforts in the late 1980’s by specialists at the Hajj Research Center in Jeddah and at the University of San’a in Yemen.

In 1989, the MHO team was asked to check whether a group of glass-plate negatives, found by photographer John Barnard at a Minnesota yard sale, could be the long-lost work of Mendel John Dines, who emigrated from Jerusalem to the US with his family in 1860. Gavin and his crew not only identified the photos as works by Dines, but also located his descendants.

Paul Dunkel worked with the team on the exhibition of the Dines photos, called “Jerusalem Re-Discovered,” that opened at the Hebrew Semitic Museum in 1993, showed at Boston College in 1996 and 1997, moved to Europe in 2004 and continues to travel internationally. “With high resolution you can find things in a photograph that you couldn’t see in the original,” explains Dunkel, who owns The Archival Image in Windsor, Vermont and has collaborated on numerous projects. “Sometimes you zoom in so far you forget where you are. When you do this, you are at an incredibly intense level, peering through the knothole of his... and often you stumble on things no one else has seen.”

In one Dines photo, for instance, he was able to bring out the domes of a mosque, identified by an architectural historian as an important Hanbali center of learning, that once stood in the southeast corner of the Haram, Jerusalem’s great sanctuary.

Today, MHO is recognized as the pioneer in the recovery, preservation and sharing of the photographic heritage of the Middle East.

“Until [Gavin] started this, there was no other institution doing anything like it,” says Luke Pontifel, owner of Thornwillow Press in Newburgh, New York, which this year plans to publish Millennium Cities: A Portfolio of Photographs Prints using historic prints of Cairo, Makkah, Mideast and Istanbul from the MHO collections.

“Father Gavin has a passion for the photographs; he wanted to create an archive that would bring all these documents from many different institutions around the world together in one place,” explains Pontifel. He notes that Gavin took sun from “a flush of an idea to the actual execution of an enormous project that seemed almost impossible to achieve...” establishing “standards for recording, keeping and preserving the material and making it accessible, all through [MHO’s archives].” That is a remarkable feat.”

“I am very proud of having set free forgotten local photographic geniuses from the Middle East,” says Gavin. “And has learned much from those whose visions, captured in sunlight, we are privileged to bring back. Some of that knowledge comes not out of the photos but out of the quest for understanding.”

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Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (www.annu.matthew.com) is a photo-based artist in Providence, Rhode Island. She is represented by SepiaEye, New York and Taosvei, India. She is also a professor of art specializing in photography and director of the Cantor for the Humanities at the University of Rhode Island.

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Between Salt and Sea
Written by Louis Werner
Photographed by David H. Wells

India’s largest district since 1947, once-independent Kutch remains something of a place apart, with sea-level flats that produce half of India’s salt, a coast that harbors historic ties to Arabia, Persia and East Africa, and villages where traditional textiles are as diverse as Kutch’s own peoples and its fusions of cultures.

Morocco’s Threads of Red Gold
Written and photographed by Jeff Koehler

When autumn afternoons turn chilly in the hills around Telouine, lavender blossoms of Coccus cacti dot the brown fields. The flowers’ red stigmas are hand-harvested to yield the world’s most expensive spice: saffron.

An Opera for Egypt
Written by Jane Grutz

October marks the bicentennial of the birth of composer Giuseppe Verdi, whose Aida ranks among the most popular operas of all time. Egypt’s theatre wanted a new opera composed to celebrate his new Suez Canal, but Verdi put him off until he saw a story he liked. Even then, the music almost never rose on this masterpiece’s 1871 premiere.

A Portrait Gallery
Written by Tim Mackintosh-Smith

From pre-Islamic poetry to classical scholarship, vivid sketches of people “illustrious” countess Arabic books. Fanful, factual and intimate, this splendid harvest reveals a few memorable faces from an often invisible, historic crowd.