

Presidential Address

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Middle East Librarians Association

George Washington University

Washington, DC

17 November 2017



Good morning. Thank you all for being here today.

I am Sharon Smith, founding director of the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT (Cambridge, MA) and, for the next few hours, President of MELA. It has been my pleasure to serve in this capacity for MELA and I thank all those who have assisted me throughout the year, including MELA exec board and membership. My thanks to our presenters, vendors, and participants for making this meeting a success. Thanks to George Washington University for hosting us and to Amanda (who we – under the overarching umbrella of the Aga Khan Program – stole for Harvard).

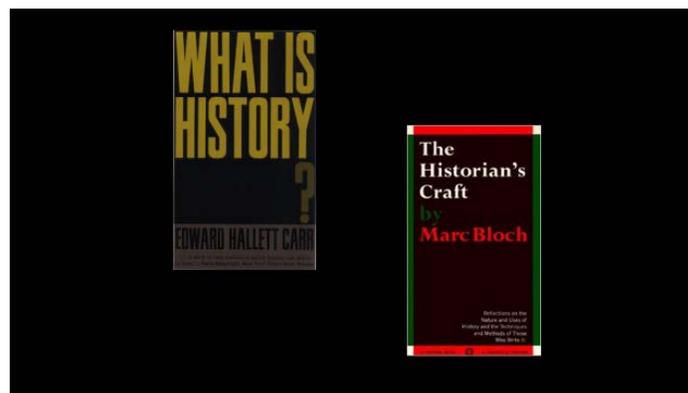
Further, I am especially delighted to usher in our 45th year as a professional organization. A major milestone and worthy of much celebration.

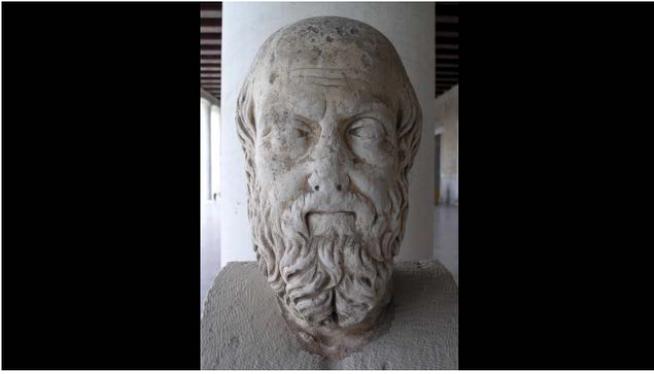
As you all know, MELA is a non-profit, **non-political** body. As my predecessor's year came to an end in November 2016, her presidential address was decidedly and appropriately non-political. Elections in the U.S. were over, and a new president declared, but not in office and not fully understood, almost unknown

entity at that time. Since then, for most, the past year was one spent in an unsettled, uneasy state.

While avoiding political alliances or allegiances, can we really avoid the political atmosphere with regard to our field (Middle East Librarianship/Studies) today. I found this challenging and have struggled in writing my presidential address in a way that does not privilege one political belief over another. For, regardless of one's political affiliation or personal opinion, the impact on our work, on our members, stakeholders, and users, has been and continues to be palpable. Remaining true to our bylaws and identity as a non-political body, what can MELA do?

- Outreach
- Community building
- Communicate, collaborate, and partner (outside the box) with our colleagues and those not represented here. For example, the Iraqi architects archives held in AKDC shared with students at University of Baghdad with technology – allowing them to access to important documents detailing their own history, heritage, and culture.
- Be mindful of diversity, inclusion, and social justice
- Acknowledge the agenda we bring to our work – and we all do have an agenda (in the vein of EH Carr's *What is History* and *The Historian's Craft* by Marc Bloch, it is impossible to separate our own history from that which we produce).





Everyone pictured here has an agenda, even me (lower left).

We have acknowledged an increased need to reach out to MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia); to be inclusive and embrace opportunities to assure, support, and assist when and where possible.

MENASA



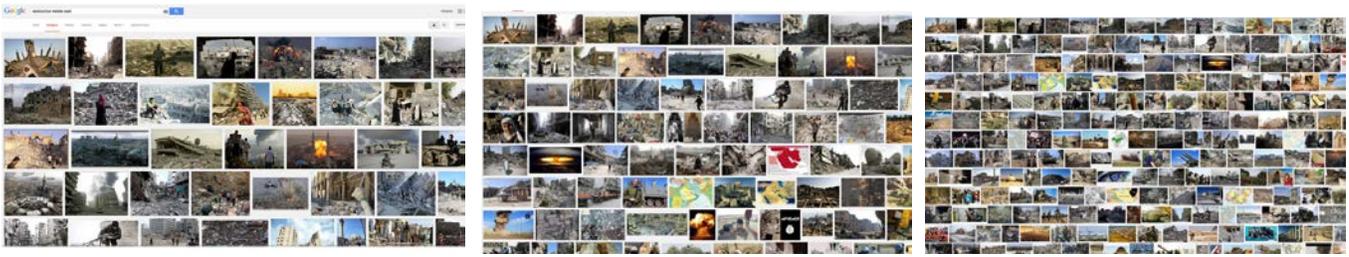
Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia

We will find/develop mechanisms for outreach and mutual participation – and mutual it must be. As information workers, we should be ever vigilant to ensure that one's culture is not dominated over or dependent upon another; rather, we should seek a global approach to comprehend the links and interdependencies that have formed and informed, and continue to form and inform, all cultures within our purview. The view expressed here is that this globalism should not be evaluated simply by how one society might compare to another, but rather as a commensurate evaluation demonstrating the significant achievements of each and all societies.

The theme of this conference, *Digital Scholarship and Middle East Librarianship*, is broad and was addressed by a variety of wonderful and engaging speakers yesterday. A large part of the discussion was around how **Digital Scholarship** (emphasis on the digital) can work with very real and immediate affect and result. As we know, cultural heritage and the built environment throughout the Middle East (writ large) is at tremendous risk.

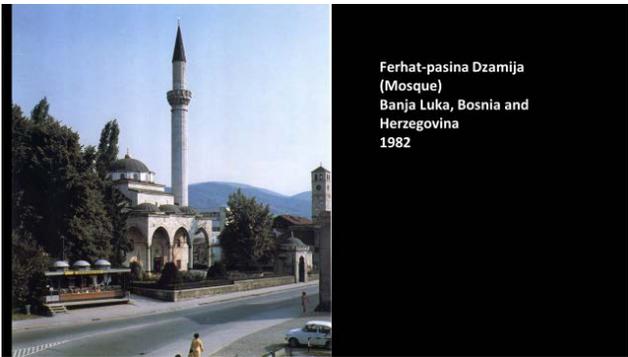


The ravages of war have become part of the vernacular through the advancements of technology. Inundated by the daily explosion of media from, and on, the Middle East, presented rapid fire from a plethora of producers and meant to be consumed wholly and without cognizance of the creator's intent, context and meaning are lost.



As librarians, indeed as curators and creators of information (I will return to this terminology shortly), we consider the opportunities, constraints, intentions, and consequences--planned and not--of the production, presentation, and dissemination of these materials with focus on the digitization of materials about and/or from the Middle East and Muslim societies.

Can Digital Scholarship defend social justice? Clearly, the use of such media helped my colleague, mentor, and friend, Andras Riedlmayer, when he testified at The Hague regarding the systematic eradication of cultural monuments and destruction of cultural heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war. His pioneering work set the standard for such cases.





So, here, I give a resounding **YES**.

However, with any discussion of digitization, I believe we must acknowledge the issue of the “digital divide”. There are very real social and economic inequities of this digital era and their effect cannot be minimized; further, these inequities can contribute to a “digital colonization” process. Therefore, while digitization--the apparatus of digital scholarship--is most often viewed as philanthropic, and I believe everyone in this room and organization has the very best intentions and is prepared to deal with this issue, there remains an inequality and--food for thought--this inequality is important as it can be used to prevent, assert different narratives.

Why curators? Why creators? I use this terminology very deliberately. We are Middle East Librarians--says so in our name--however, our role is/has changing/changed dramatically over recent years. There are now huge amounts of data and a vast array of content types to deal with, no longer the simple pleasures of a book! In this ever-growing assortment of materials and types, we are making decisions that lead to overall knowledge production: Our curatorial role and the decisions made are impacting the same.

Digital library or research portal? Metadata schema, standards, naming, quantity versus quality, and the numerous technological challenges we face have made our jobs that much more complex--throw in languages, and even more so!

Is there an obligation to participate? Well Some of you may be familiar with these words, “The past is knowledge; the present our mistake; and the future we always leave too late”.



(Paul Weller [Style Council] "My Ever Changing Moods" from album Café Bleu. London: Polydor Records, 1984)

In this time of diminishing (or diminished) understanding of cultures and societies outside on one’s own, let us not leave the future until it is too late. View the present for what it is; address the issues that it created/creates; and participate through actively ensuring our work informs not only our immediate stakeholders, but truly informs a generation, and those to come, to build a more inclusive, diverse, and just world through disseminating knowledge.

All my best wishes and support for our incoming executive board and our new President, Akram Khabibullaev.

Dr. Smith’s PowerPoint images have been merged with the text.