Look anywhere online and you will find that an image search for Egypt will produce one of two possible results: either the pyramids and the sphinx or similar pharaonic artifacts or mass protests and demonstrations from the Arab Spring. But beyond the clichés, photography in Egypt has had a long and rich tradition – one of daring portraiture, classic wedding photographs and modern street photography. Listen as this audio documentary delves into that journey.

SFX: Typewriter clicking and ping [RT 00:00:00 – 00:00:07] or duration of narration below

Setting Cairo. Time 1930s.

SFX Radio static [RT 00:00:07 – 00:00:09] cross fade with music below

MUSIC: Title track of El Maganeen Fi Na’eem [00:00:08-00:02:57] fade in under narration then cross fade out with next music track

The Second World War is around the corner and Egypt hovers in the calm before the storm, with Cairo as its bustling cosmopolitan center. Egypt was also then a monarchy, and downtown Cairo, or West Al Balad, was the place to see and be seen

[ Pause 2 seconds]

Professor Paul Geday, visual artist publisher and curator, says Cairo was a grand place to be ahead of the war.

Paul Geday (PG): Cairo was probably the only place in on Earth that was booming while the whole world was in the .. in war. 1930 yeah I mean in Cairo the whole world war two period, 1939 to 1944 but in particular when the Germans were in Alamein in 1942 about to invade Egypt. Fa [so] you have all the British army and the British, New Zealander, Australian etc. and Cairo was a big like party before the guys went and get slaughtered on the front (.39 s)

Wust El Balad, saw many classic photography studios emerge and make a name for themselves like Garo, Armon’, which is where the journey into Egyptian photography will start. But one photographer in particular, truly embodied that era and left behind a complete archive of his work, jealously stowed away in AUC’s rare collections library.
PG: Bossi [you see] Van Leo was a studio photographer, and as such basically uh the work is portraits or studio photographs wedding pictures. (.15 s)

Van Leo shot everyone from Taha Hussein, the famous cornerstone of Egyptian literature, to Samia Gamal an iconic belly dancer. He was a very dramatic photographer, playing with shadows to contour figures, Geday actually describes his use of lighting as quote hollywoodish, and he wasn’t a stranger to heavy postproduction.

PG: We had a friend who actually had a photograph taken by Van Leo and she was Irish and has freckles. So she ended up with a photograph without freckles, Van Leo had retouched her! –Laugh- (.15s)

But his clean mechanics and his eye for perfection, weren't what made Van Leo so big.

PG: He also had the merit of keeping the studio open and staying alive, uh for a long time which meant that before his death he became fashionable with quite a number of people in Cairo, fa [so] it was the fashion to go and have out portraits done at Van Leo. Actually, my portraits – me and my ex-wife – are in the archive of AUC. (.30 s)

Well why was it fashionable then, because he was so good or?

PG: Because it was a dying profession. (.3s)

MUSIC: Fade out title track and crossfade in Egyptian Strut by Salah Ragab and the Cairo Jazz Band [RT 00:02:56 – 00:06:07.] Play under narration then cross fade out with next SFX.

Dying profession indeed — The glamour of the first half of the century gave way to the 1952 revolution which brought the downfall of the monarchy and instilled Egypt’s military regime. This change still holds significant for Egypt today and its aftereffects touched every aspect of Egyptians’ lives — including photography.

[ Pause 1.5 seconds ]

Kernel Gamal Abdel Nasser became President in 1956 and this is especially significant because some of his policies continue to shape the Egyptian republic to this day. Abdel Nasser brought
the Egyptian Press under state control. He even had an appointed photographer from Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram to follow him around and take his picture.

PG: I think what happened in the studio happened in the studio. I think there was the press being nationalized, you had all the press photography being at the service of the state. You had also it was a police and army state so you had this mamnou’ [forbidden] culture which persists till today – so this fear of the image being taken. (.23s)

Professor Heba Farid who teaches photography and visual art at AUC also describes this persistent fear,

Heba Farid (HF): Photography is always has been something feared, in a sense. Especially with the rise of news agencies and wire agencies that use and send images a lot and having photojournalists based here for example, for quite a period of time covering events and news … so photography for the regime was always feared somehow. (.26s)

This “fear” continued to weigh heavy onto the Egyptian conscience well into the 70’s spanning Egypt’s 1973 war with Israel over the Sinai Peninsula. Then-President Anwar El Sadat enacted more open economic policies to try and push down remaining tides of Arab socialism in the country and cement his position as Egypt’s important ruler. Listen to how Farid describes studio photography at the time,

HF: You get the impression that it was a ritualistic thing, that people would go to the studio every year, they would have their special events photographed. They would always keep kind of on record the evolution of the members of their family over the years uh, so it was really mostly about uh people. (.23s)

But earlier Geday said studio photography was a dying art, and it was at this point in time – Say around the 1980s – that it began to decline.

HF: After the introduction of the digital camera and people felt more confident somehow with the tool that they were using that it was compensating for light and color and things and the production improved, uh people started doing it themselves. (.20s)
Things in Cairo remained stagnant for the coming few decades. Studios primarily did wedding shoots and passport photos. Kodak was the place to go to get photographs developed, and families would keep private albums stowed away in an old tin box or on a shelf somewhere in the house. In a way, mirroring the pace of life. That is, until the 25th of January 2011.

*MUSIC: Fade out Egyptian Strut*

*NAT SOUND: Fade in and out of sound of protests 9 seconds [RT 00:06:07 – 00:06:17]*

*MUSIC: Fade in A Tribute To The Sun Ra by Salah Ragab and the Cairo Jazz Band over and under narration then fade out at the end. [RT 00:06:14 – 00:09:13]*

On that day, and in the subsequent 18 days, history unfolded once again in Wust El Balad. Egypt’s famed revolution erupted in Tahrir – the heart of Cairo. And the revolution marked a turning point for the country, not just politically and socially – even photographically.

*PG: The revolution have made a boom for photography. Everybody was a photographer, everybody was posting on Facebook. I personally think the revolution was a photographic revolution – revolution in photography. Something that, a date that would stand out in the history of photography. I mean, I don’t know if you recall, but at the time the amount of pictures that were uploaded on the net was absolutely phenomenal. I mean, everybody, I mean and still now, there are initiatives about how to archive the revolution ... what to do with all these photographs. (.32s)*

Essentially, the photographic output of the revolution was twofold: First millions of images uploaded online to platforms like Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. Second, the revolution sparked a near obsession with documentation. Habiba el gendy, a graphic design student at AUC and a photographer in her own rite, has this to say

*Habiba El Gendy (HG): Before the revolution you would notice that people feared the camera itself and they would think of you as just like, a spy and something so suspicious if you’re just taking photographs around. When, when the revolution happened they realized the importance of the camera. They realized what it’s like to document and everything, to document history – these moments that they really need to reference (.25s)*
El Gendy runs an Instagram account where she regularly uploads photographs she takes from the streets of Cairo using both a professional camera, and her phone. But she isn’t the only one. Hundreds of young people take to the streets to photograph the day-to-day happenings of the city.

*HG:* Especially social media has really showed that there is a large number of Egyptians who really want to do this and they really want to contribute as much as they can and um they were so unheard and unnoticed before, so now they have the platform and the option to do all of this. (.18s)

Photography in Egypt has come a long way – much has changed. From using brownie cameras to iPhones -- Even the culture of how Egyptians remember what they do, and hang on to fragments of their past has transformed. Geday puts it best.

*PG:* I think, you know, our parents’ generation left us you know little boxes with things in them and we’ll be leaving, you know, our children a flash drive. –Laugh- (.11s)

This audio documentary was produced by Nadine Awadalla for the audio production course at The American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in spring 2015. Special thanks to my interviewees Professors Heba Farid and Paul Geday and fellow AUC student Habiba El Gendy. Music is the opening track of 1952 movie “El Maganeen Fi Na’eem”, and the tracks “Egypt Strut” and “A Tribute to the Sun Ra” by Salah Ragab and the Cairo Jazz Band. Sound effects courtesy of Soundbible.com