

RANA ANANI

'One Hundred Years' On: The Worn Away Mask of Jerusalem



...the lived present constitutes a past and a future in time.
Gilles Deleuze¹

On 13 October 1933, an Arab demonstration massed at the New Gate in the old city of Jerusalem protesting against British policies encouraging Jewish immigration to Palestine.² As the British police suppressed the demonstration,³ a photographer from the American Colony⁴ was standing opposite the gate with a camera in hand. He took a photograph of the confrontation: a fallen body, demonstrators en masse flooding the streets, the police armed with guns and clubs attacking the crowds, and men climbing up to the top of the ancient walls of the city to observe the fracas below. This image epitomised the upheaval that was occurring at the time, not only in Jerusalem but also in Jaffa and most of the Palestinian towns. Eighty-four years later, on 24 April 2017, Jack Persekian stood in front of New Gate in the same position as the American Colony photographer. He tilted his camera so that it would be aligned to the same angle in the image of the 1933 demonstration. In Persekian's photograph, he captured a tram passing in front of New Gate, with people and tourists wandering about in what appears to be a normal day—except that it wasn't, as the colonial history of the city continues to cast a shadow upon what might seem to be a tranquil day.

Born and raised in the old city of Jerusalem, the Palestinian-Armenian artist and curator Jack Persekian has witnessed its major transformation in his lifetime. Only a few decades ago, Jerusalem was a hub for Palestinians—economically, culturally and politically, as well as socially. But since the early 1990s, access to the city has been restricted through checkpoints, ongoing closure, the eight-metre high separation wall and a ring of Israeli settlements⁵ that are now connected through the Light Rail, a section of which appears in Persekian's *New Gate* (2017) photograph—these transformations never apparent in the old photographs of Jerusalem that are sold to tourists. Wandering the narrow labyrinthine alleyways and traditional souks inside Jerusalem's ancient walls, one cannot help but notice the Orientalist photographs that are on sale in the small shops lining both sides of the pathways, something that never fails to fascinate Persekian as he encounters them almost on a daily basis. They do not reflect the reality of the city nor the Jerusalem that tourists come to visit, but rather an imaginative place in an augmented reality where time has stood still.

At the time of writing, this year marks the centenary of historical events that have changed the face of Palestine and the entire region—The Balfour Declaration,⁶ the entry of British forces into Jerusalem and the following victory against the Turkish Army in the First World War, which brought about the end of Ottoman rule—and the semicentennial of Israeli rule in East Jerusalem since the 1967 Six Day War. Persekian has taken these events as reference points for his recent project *One Hundred Years*, as he explores the city's photographic history, reflecting upon its radical transformations over the past century. By superimposing a photograph taken today with one from the same location approximately one hundred years ago, he creates a unique series of images giving the superimposed old and contemporary photographs new meanings, while simultaneously creating an alternative narrative deeply referential to its political context and revelations over the years. The project consists of two parts: *After Matson* and *After Whiting*, based on the American Colony photographic collection of historical photographs of the Middle East, of which a large part are panoramas.⁷

Persekian focuses on the historic photographs of Eric Matson (1888-1977) and his colleague John Whiting (1882-1951), both of whom lived a considerable part of their lives at the American Colony commune east of the city, working in the photography department and printing and selling their photographs mainly to an expanding tourist market. The Matson Collection consists of over 2,000 glass and film negatives and transparencies, over 1,000 photographic prints and eleven albums, while the Whiting Collection has 3,200 negatives, including those images that Whiting hand-colored himself. Eventually, both collections were donated to the Library of Congress in Washington. From the Matson Collection, Persekian has chosen panoramic photographs of the old city of Jerusalem from its four corners, while from the Whiting Collection he chose a set of hand-coloured photographs of different neighbourhoods and streets, a number of which consciously reveal Orientalist inclinations.

To understand this project and its basis, it is necessary to examine the history of these photographic archives. Nineteenth century Orientalist photography of the Middle East was a manifestation of the colonial powers' political interest in the region, aimed to visualise a popular biblical narrative in order to justify their agendas. Photography was one of the approaches through which Zionism reinforced its problematic narrative of Palestine, "A land without a people, for a people without a land."⁸ Edward Said additionally points out that, "Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."⁹

Even the Arab and local photographers who were born or raised in the city did not hesitate to take pictures with an Orientalist inclination that emphasises the biblical story of the Holy Land; for example, the Armenian photographer Garabed Krikorian (1847-1920) and his Lebanese apprentice Khalil Raad (1869-1957), both of whom were among the first local commercial photographers in Palestine and particularly in Jerusalem, extensively documented various aspects of Palestinian life, including the political upheavals that occurred during the British Mandate. While the stereotypical portrayal of Jerusalem has not ceased to exist since the colonial powers began exerting their interest in the region, for local photographers and shopkeepers, their motives for taking and selling these photographs, both past and present, has been simply to make a living by appealing to the tourist market.¹⁰

Though documenting the Holy Land in the colonial era was never an innocent, legitimate act, some of these photographs are important and still referenced today. For example, the German Army conducted comprehensive aerial documentation capturing over 2,800 aerial and landscape photographs of the city and Palestine during World War I—now available in the Central Archives of the Bavarian State Survey Office,¹¹ their aim at the time being to provide accurate information about the movements of British troops in the region. Researchers have continued to refer to this unique archive as it provides detailed information about the geography of Palestine before the *Nakba*,¹² including some of the many Palestinian villages subsequently obliterated in the process of establishing the State of Israel. In contrast, the goal of Orientalist institutions, such as the Palestine Exploration Fund, responsible for wide-scale archeological research, was to strengthen biblical stories with archeological "discoveries"¹³ emphasising in the process the Zionist narrative and paving the way for the realisation of the next wave of colonial agendas in Palestine. With this in mind, a camera in one hand and the archival photographs in the other, Persekian toured the city in search of the sites from which the original images were taken. Finding their exact locations was complex given the old city's topography having changed acutely over time. By circumventing these challenges and aligning the angles he took a series of new photographs showing what has become of old Jerusalem in the present day.

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RANA ANANI



Persekian’s superimposition of the old and new photographs or side-by-side is not intended to compare or contrast the past and present aesthetics of the locations but rather to emphasise the historical transformations that have taken place. In doing so, the past resonates vividly and allows space for contemplation of the city’s current reality which continues to change at a rapid pace—Persekian offers an opportunity for reflection upon the political changes and the upheavals of the twentieth century, yet with an eye to the future. Walter Benjamin notes that a “painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, [while] the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.”¹⁴ Through this project, Persekian probes the core of the original photographs and delivers them to a contemporary reality. The subtle contrast in the heart of these images is not between the old and new, but between the past, today’s reality and the many layers of colonial history that exist in-between.

In *Al Wad – Khan El Zeit Junction* (2017), Persekian places his contemporary image over the original hand-coloured photograph of a major Old City junction, creating a strange and austere new world where Orientalist romance meets present day reality, being both deceptively simple in its execution and disturbing in its suggestion. This image in particular, in which a soldier’s post makes an appearance in the contemporary photo, brings to mind Persekian’s previous project *In the Presence of the Holy See* (2014) and demonstrates the bleak and mundane existence of the city’s occupation by Israel. Confronted by this actuality, the historic photographs also reveal their hidden motives, which can clearly be seen in *Outside Damascus Gate* (2017) and *Herod’s Gate* (2017), where their Orientalist features are suddenly exposed.

The panoramic view of *Jerusalem from Slopes of Scopus* (2017) subtly shows the major transformations of what has become of the Jewish Quarter since 1967. While the original 1930s photograph shows buildings fusing harmoniously with their surroundings, a striking contrast appears in the present day image as modern buildings have replaced their demolished, historic forerunners. The collocation of these two specific photographs brings the shadows of what was a continuous natural development of past Arab, Muslim, Christian and Jewish cohabitation of the quarter, to haunt the image of the neighborhood completely erased and replaced with new dwellings. This work reminds us of the city’s past, which at the height of Ottoman rule was inclusive, where people belonged regardless of their backgrounds, religions or ethnicities.¹⁵

In contrast, looking carefully at the horizon that runs through several of the images, the urbanisation of the western side of the city is conspicuous, as is the underdevelopment of the eastern side where Palestinians reside. Although subtly apparent, the policies introduced to suppress the Palestinian presence are clearly noticeable. Persekian stealthily inserts his contemporary vision into the old images, conveying them into the present time as a confirmation of the ongoing life of Jerusalem. Digging through the many layers of its history might be the task of an archeologist at the Albright Institute for Archeological Research, where the project was exhibited initially. However, Persekian gives the viewer the chance to become archeologists themselves, encouraging their discovery of what has taken place over the past century and how the seeds of colonialism have grown slowly into a system that has tightened its grip over the city’s future.

Persekian’s practice is rooted in using photo-collage, a technique dominant in his two most recent projects. Through superimposition, he has created a singular and often surreal image that subverts the original view. While it requires a conscious effort to perceive both images as two separate photographs, part of this project is presented with transparent and translucent slides, allowing the audience control of the collage process by freely moving the two images apart and bringing them back

together. Displayed inside illuminated boxes, each work consists of the new coloured image on top of the original black-and-white image, forming a scene that can be viewed as a single work, or explored separately, moving between the two images and different realities. The edges of the archival photographs, the inscriptions at the bottom or at the top, as well as their backgrounds appear throughout in what seems an expression of longing for the textures and aesthetics of traditional photographic processes now lost to the digital era. Persekian has stated that he is attracted to photographic collage for the “dissonance” it creates. He compares it with “counterpoint” in music, where two musical tunes with strong independent identities create a third or perhaps a fourth tune when played together. His interest comes from the unexpected outcome of the combination of two photographs from different times. He notes, “You always get something new, a different meaning, yet it remains part of the overall structure and balance between the two moments in time and the many years in between.”¹⁶

Since this project invites the people of Jerusalem to reassess their relationship with the city and observe the daily details that go unnoticed around them, it was essential that it be exhibited in a public space. The garden of the Albright Institute of Archeological Research, off a main thoroughfare in the eastern part of the city, was the perfect location to attract Jerusalemites strolling through the heart of the city, thus creating direct exchange and wide engagement with its residents. His previous project, *In the Presence of the Holy See*, also presented in a public space, was based on his conviction that art should converse with the public in the street rather than with the elite in a white cube, without compromising quality or creativity. As he says, “I am a bit apprehensive presenting art in a venue that resembles an adulated place, therefore, I prefer to exhibit my work in public spaces which are different in nature and essence to where artworks are normally exhibited.”¹⁷ In his opinion, the public should be able to assess, comprehend and enjoy the work, realising that these conditions offer no shelter for feeble artworks in disguise.

These artworks are executed on a smaller scale in comparison to *In the Presence of the Holy See*, which were displayed on huge billboards in Manger Square in Bethlehem on the occasion of Pope Francis’s visit to Palestine in 2014. At about 80cm. x 110 cm. each, exhibited in light boxes on tables, they are ideal for display in a public space—curious faces could be seen gazing through the transparent photographs, comparing the details with great interest.

Considering that one hundred years have passed since Matson walked around the city looking for locations to photograph, if alive today what would he document? Imagery similar to Persekian’s that reflects the current reality of the city—the Light Rail, the tourists passing by New Gate and the changes in the Jewish Quarter, or would he preserve the biblical narrative? While Persekian has not created this series to appeal to the tourist market he nevertheless has used historical archives to create a new portrayal of Jerusalem. The duality of his approach, an aesthetic quality that reflects the intrinsic beauty of the city and an exploration of its details, succeeds in wearing away its mask of history, revealing the hidden narratives behind what would seem to be innocent photographs for sale in souvenir shops.

‘One Hundred Years’ On: *The Worn Away Mask* of Jerusalem

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 73

² Under British protection, the Jewish population of Palestine grew from 56,000 in 1917 to 174,000 by 1931, to 553,600 in 1944. See Walid Khalidi, ‘The Hebrew Reconquista of Palestine’, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, 2009/2010, Volume 39, p. 24

³ The protests in 1933 took place in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and Nablus. For details of the Jerusalem demonstration see, Tali Hatuka, ‘Negotiating Space: Analysing Jaffa Protest Form, Intention and Violence, October 27th 1933’, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, issue 35, 2008, p. 9

⁴ The American Colony was a utopian Christian community formed by religious pilgrims who immigrated to Jerusalem from the USA and Sweden. Further information can be found at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/colony.html>

⁵ Since 1967 until 2001, around 47,000 residential units were built for Jews on confiscated Palestinian private land and not a single residential unit for Palestinian residents who form one third of Jerusalem’s population. See B’Tselem’s statistics on Jerusalem at <http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem>

⁶ The Balfour Declaration in 1917 promised a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine as part of the British Empire’s policy to dominate the strategic region and its immense oil wealth. See Etienne Balibar and Jean-Marc Levy-Leblond, ‘A Mediterranean way for peace in Israel-Palestine?’ *Radical Philosophy*, Nov/Dec 2006; https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/wp-content/files_mf/rp140_commentary1_amediterraneanwayforpeaceinisaelpalestine_balibart_levy_leblond.pdf

⁷ Read more about the Matson Photograph Collection; <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/background.html>

⁸ For further reading see Diana Muir, ‘A Land without a People for a People without a Land’, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp. 55-62; <http://www.meforum.org/1877/a-land-without-a-people-for-a-people-without>

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 3

¹⁰ Michelle Woodward, ‘Orientalism in Photography’, see <http://www.photorientalist.org/about/orientalist-photography/>

¹¹ See Nada Atrash, ‘Mapping Palestine: The Bavarian Air Force WWI Aerial Photography’, *Jerusalem Quarterly* Winter/ Spring 2014, issue 56, p. 95

¹² The landmark year of 1948, which witnessed the displacement of over sixty percent of the Palestinian population

¹³ Laura Robson, ‘Archeology and Mission: The British Presence in nineteenth century Jerusalem’, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Winter 2009, issue 40, p. 14

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken/Random House, 1969

¹⁵ “The Ottomans scrupulously continued the Muslim tradition of tolerance toward Christian religious interests in Palestine. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem was acknowledged in the sixteenth century as the custodian of the Christian holy places, and from about the same time France became the guardian of the Latin clergy. Like earlier Muslim powers, the Ottoman Empire opened its gates to hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Spain and other parts of Christendom. But the vast majority, as in the earlier centuries after the Crusades, did not choose to live in Palestine.” See Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A photographic history of the Palestinians, 1876-1948*, The Institute of Palestine Studies, pp. 27-35

¹⁶ Conversation with Jack Persekian, Ramallah, 9 September 2017

¹⁷ Ibid.