The Holy Land Book Collection

The Holy Land Book Collection will enhance study of the photographs and other materials generated by explorers, historians, and photographers who visited the region and traveled throughout the region, lavishly illustrated with 164 steel photo-engravings after the work of the famous French photographer, Octave Forster, who traveled in the region, between 1850 and 1947. This issue of Ivy Leaves introduces the University Libraries' Schottenstein-Jesselson Curator of Judaica and Islamic Art, Werner Pfeiffer, who is leading the project to bring this incredible collection to the public and to scholars.

The collection, which contains some 4,000 items, represents some of the earliest secondary accounts of the region, beginning with the first illustrated travel account of the region, Jerusalem, by Reverend Charles Forster, illustrated his book, The Land of Inheritance; or, Bible Scenes Revisited. Chromolithograph from Lady Catherine Ellis Tobin. London: Bernard Quaritch, 1863. The Holy Land Book Collection presents a rich resource for increasing scholars’ access to critical materials, and upper-level undergraduate seminar, Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and the students in her graduate seminar, Franco-American Relations, were the first to see the materials, and many have expressed their excitement to work with the books, and the photographs and provide important primary source materials for publications.

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The visual evidence in rare, early landscape photographs such as those in the Lenkin Family Collection is crucial in understanding the development of tourism in the Middle East. "When photographers set up shop in Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and Cairo, they captured not just the physical remains, but also the social and cultural fabric of the region," says Peiss. "These visual records become a window into the past, allowing us to see and understand the world as it was before it was changed by modernization." The collection will serve as an important resource for scholars and researchers, providing new insights into the history of the Middle East and its people.

The complexity of developing a shared imagination based on visual materials is evident in the Lenkin Family Collection. "As scholars continue to delve deeper into the riches of the Lenkin Family Collection," says Wahrman, "we are truly grateful to the Lenkin family for bringing this collection to Penn. Without their generosity, we would not have this opportunity to explore the rich history of the Middle East through these visual images."