

# PHOTOGRAPHY AND HERITAGE: VAN LEO BLACK AND WHITE STUDIO PORTRAITS, 1940S-1970S

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## *Abstract*

In this article, I focus on Van Leo's photographic practice in the shadow of major political and social changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Born in Jihane, present Turkey, in 1921 Van Leo was an Egyptian photographer with Armenian origins. Although Van Leo took photographs that were mainly of a commercial kind, he brought glamour to the practice of photographic portraiture in the MENA region, inspired by the cinema industry, particularly Hollywood black and white photography. It was in the early 1980s that the transition from black and white to colour photography took place in Egypt. This happened much later when customs restrictions and supply difficulties occurred due to regional conflicts. In those years, Van Leo's clients were expatriates, Lebanese traders, culture personalities and above all a new generation of aspiring actresses and cabaret soubrettes, sometimes of humble origins, who dreamt of success in theatres or in the fast-growing cinema industry. In post-colonial Egypt, Van Leo embodied a newer generation of Armenian-Egyptian photographers who created glamorous black and white studio portraits, as well as self-portraits that pushed the style to new extremes and extravagances. He thus created a different narrative for his time, echoing and shaping the aesthetic of a nation, its sense of self and the perception of it around the world. This study was conducted researching Van Leo's collection of photographs available on the Arab Image Foundation online digital archive, as well as through a selection of images from the archive of AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library (RBSC). This is in addition to examining a new, monumental publication released on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the photographer's birth and realized by Karl Bassil in collaboration with Negar Azimi and Katia Boyadjian, titled *Becoming Van Leo. Volume I-II-III* (Arab Image Foundation and Archive Books, 2021): more than 600 pages of documents (300+), essays by Negar Azimi, Lara Baladi, and Karl Bassil, a few previously unpublished memoirs and interviews, as well as photographs (2380+), and film stills and transcriptions (250+).

*Keywords:* Studio portraits, photography, Middle East, heritage, modern Egypt

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### *Introducing the Photographic Scene of the Time*

Since its invention, photography has acted widely in creating and shaping class and national identities, including an ambitious and fast-growing middle class comfortably living in urban centres. Technological developments quickly made photographs accessible and cheaper to produce. By the 1890s, several native-run studios thrived in many of the major cities in the Ottoman Middle East, and Egypt was no exception. The Armenian photographers, in particular, were prospering and indicated to have established a near-monopoly<sup>1</sup> of the profession in Cairo, initiated by figures that have become legendary, G. Lekegian<sup>2</sup> being one of them. Along with Ottoman Greeks, Armenians from Constantinople had been at the heart of Muhammed Ali's modernization project.<sup>3</sup> Although at that time the Armenian population in Egypt did not exceed 2,000 people, Armenians were the Pasha's trusted advisers, interpreters, and facilitators of an integration with Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Ottoman persecution in the 1890s and the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916 brought different waves of migration of Armenians to the North African country. Armenian photographer G. Lekegian, for example, had settled in Ottoman Egypt in the 1880s, arriving from Constantinople, present-day Istanbul, where he trained to be a painter by the Italian expatriate painter Salvatore Valeri.<sup>5</sup> He established his own photography studio in downtown Cairo, opposite the world-famous Shepherd's Hotel. The business soon proved to be profitable.<sup>6</sup> Several other photographers opened their premises in downtown Cairo, in the area between Qasr El-Nil Street and Opera Square, leading to the creation of a small, highly specialized commercial district. Well-established Armenian studios in that area included those of Aran Alban,<sup>7</sup> Arakel Artinian<sup>8</sup> of Studio Venus

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1 See, for example, Martina Corgnati, *Un fotografo di nome Van Leo* (Milano: Skira editore, 2007), 10.

2 (1853 – c. 1920). Photographer of Armenian origins, whose first name is mentioned as Gabriel in some secondary source.

3 The Ottoman Albanian governor and de facto ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1848.

4 Youssef Rakha, "A Face in Time," in *A Face in Time. Egypt Photo Studios 1865-1939*, ed. Sherif Boraïe (Cairo: Zeitouna/AUC Press, 2022), 7.

5 For example, see: Stephen Sheehi, "A Social History of Early Arab Photography or a Prolegomenon to an Archaeology of the Lebanese Imago," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007): 177-208.

6 Lekegian is indicated as one of the most prolific portrait photographers ever.

7 (1883-1961). Photographer of Armenian origins.

8 (1879-1974). Photographer of Armenian origins.

located in Kasr El Nil Street, Armenak “Armand” Arzrouni,<sup>9</sup> and Garo Varjabedian.<sup>10</sup> Particularly, during the British mandate, at the outbreak of the First World War, members of the growing Armenian community filled “the photographic void”<sup>11</sup> left by citizens of the Central Powers<sup>12</sup> who were no longer welcome. In these circumstances, Armenians, fluent in Arabic and often multilingual, had the advantage of being Egyptians whose identity was defined and shaped by a transcontinental cultural heritage shared between Europe and Asia. At that time, the Armenian community in Egypt flourished as skilled craftspeople, traders, and cultivators of crops including tobacco. They were famous for their abilities in gold smithing, jewellery making, watchmaking, photography, zinc graphs, and in the fur industry. Among the artists of that time, a group of painters who had studied in European and Egyptian art schools held their artists’ studios in Cairo and Alexandria. To name just a few, they were Ashot Zorian, Baruyr Bardizbanian, Simon Shahrikian, and Diran Garabedian.<sup>13</sup> Among them, there was also Joseph Egoyan,<sup>14</sup> the father of celebrated Egyptian-born Canadian contemporary film director Atom Egoyan. Perhaps facilitated by an ancient familiarity with images and the lack of religious impediments, the Armenians took the photographic profession seriously.<sup>15</sup> They tended to pass on to each other the photographic profession that at the time could only be learned in photographers’ studios. Armenian photographers were artistically skilled and technologically advanced.

Among the artists working with photography in Egypt, there were not only those of Armenian origins. Among those active around the mid-1940s, one can name renowned director of photography (DOP) Egyptian Ahmed Khorshid<sup>16</sup> who worked for celebrated film directors such as Yusuf Shahin;

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9 (1901-1963). Photographer of Armenian origins.

10 (1917-1986). Photographer of Armenian origins.

11 Rakha, *A Face in Time. Egypt Photo Studios 1865-1939*, 8.

12 In World War I, a coalition that consisted primarily of the German Empire and Austria-Hungary.

13 Born in 1882 in Cairo, he can be considered the 1st Armeno-Egyptian artist in modern times who was born on Egyptian soil.

14 (1933-2019). Egyptian painter of Armenian origins.

15 The list of prominent Armenian photographic studios during the Ottoman Empire goes on for pages.

16 (1913-1973). He studied commerce in France and returned to Egypt in 1935 to start his career by joining the Egyptian Photography Company, an affiliate of Studio Masr.

Jewish-Hungarian émigré Etienne Sved<sup>17</sup> was well-known for his photo-montages of architectural forms and ancient pyramids; and Egyptian Boula (Iqbal) Henein, the wife of Georges Henein.<sup>18</sup> An Egyptian poet and literary critic, Henein was a founding member of the left-leaning Cairo-based “Art and Liberty” group (in Arabic: جماعة الفن والحرية – Ġama’at al-fann wa al-ḥurriyyah). Affiliated with the international Surrealist movement, the “Art and Liberty” group was active in Egypt between 1938 and 1948. It brought together artists, writers, and various intellectuals of different backgrounds and national origins, under the shared vision of a commitment against the growing fascism. They were calling into question the academic and nationalist tendency of the bourgeois art; they laid the emphasis on individual liberty and on the rights of artists to create, in other words “to rebel against the status quo, and fully participate in the public sphere.”<sup>19</sup> The group had a far-reaching impact on the artistic scene of the time, showing how avant-garde art was not produced solely in Europe and North America. Among the female photographers active in Cairo and closely following the group’s activities were also Madame Hassia (known just by her first name), and Ida Kar.<sup>20</sup> In the late 1930s, Kar’s first husband was the photographer Edmond Belali, and together they ran a photographic studio in downtown Cairo named *Idabel*. Kar began her career as a photographer in Egypt, before moving back to Europe and becoming a well-recognized name among the Western avant-garde.<sup>21</sup>

### *When Van Leo Developed an Interest in Photography*

Van Leo was born in Jihane, present-day Turkey, on November 20, 1921, by the name of Levon Alexander Boyadjian, and was the young-

17 (1914-1996). Hungarian-born French-naturalised photographer and poster artist. In face of the rising threat of Nazism, Sved fled to Egypt in 1938. Sved remained in the country until 1946 and through his friendship with the writer and intellectual Georges Henein, founder of the surrealist “Art and Liberty” group, he worked as a photographer at the French paper *Le Progrès Egyptien*.

18 For example, see: Maria Golia, *Photography in Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2010).

19 Salah M. Hassan, “Van-Leo, The Photographic Image, and Egyptian Surrealism,” in *Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist*, ed. Salah M. Hassan and Ola Seif (Ithaca: The Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University and Ithaca Press, 2018), 11.

20 (1908-1974). Kar was born Ida Karamian (or Karamanian) at Tambov in Russia. Her parents were Armenian.

21 Hassan, “Van-Leo, The Photographic Image, and Egyptian Surrealism,” 10.

est of three children. Fleeing from the Armenian Genocide, his parents reached the peaceful Egyptian coastal city of Alexandria in 1923. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alexandria was often described as a beautiful cosmopolitan city, where foreign communities (Greeks, Italians, Jews, Levantines, Armenians, etc.) lived in harmony and cooperation with the Egyptian population.

Van Leo's father was employed in a tobacco factory, and his three children, who were brought up as Christians, could study in the Armenian school of the Delta town of Zagazig (1927-1930). The family eventually settled in Cairo. Egypt had just acquired its independence from the Ottoman Empire, and under the British protectorate it appeared to many as a safe and welcoming place. Levon's first encounter with a camera probably occurred in Zagazig in 1927 or 1929<sup>22</sup> where the Armenian photographer Garo Varjabedian took a photograph of the family.

The Chinese businessman and amateur photographer Liu Shi Chang (also spelled Liu Chi Chang) also influenced Levon's approach to the photography profession. A merchant who resided in Cairo from the 1930s until the 1960s, Chang lived in the same building as the Boyadjians in the district of Faggala. He is the one who taught the young Levon how to use the camera: in the back of one of Chang's portraits taken years later (ca. 1950) by Van Leo in his Cairo studio, an inscription says: "He inspired me to do photography."<sup>23</sup> It was at the age of eighteen that Levon found a career opportunity and took up a 10-month unpaid apprenticeship in Studio Venus. Owned by the Armenian photographer Arakel Artinian, the studio was located in Qasr El-Nil Street, Cairo, and it was specialised in studio portraits and wedding photography. Levon's apprenticeship in this studio didn't last but a few months. However, one of the Artinian's clients – a British guy – convinced Levon's father that his son had talent and could take up the profession seriously.<sup>24</sup> Levon opened his first photographic studio with his brother Angelo in 1941.<sup>25</sup> It was initially located in the apartment where the

22 Akram Zaatari, "On Photography People and Modern Times," filmed in 2010, in Cairo, Egypt, video 1:02:00.

<https://vimeo.com/499096153?login=true>

23 Negar Azimi and Karl Bassil, eds. *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, (Berlin: Arab Image Foundation and Archive Books, 2021), 338.

24 Van Leo, interview by Akram Zaatari, in *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, eds. Azimi, Negar, and Karl Bassil (Berlin: Arab Image Foundation and Archive Books, 2021), 357.

25 Angelo Studio remained open from 1941 until 1960.

two young brothers lived with their parents and a sister, Alice Bojadiyan (she left Cairo around this time, for Britain, and then settled in Canada). Luckily, Angelo Studio soon acquired a certain popularity in Cairo, as well as in England and South Africa through established business connections. He could secure an agreement with MGM (Metro Goldwyn Meyer) which commissioned him to produce photos of film stars of the time.<sup>26</sup> The Second World War was raging. At first, the two brothers' clientele consisted of foreign troops from the British Empire – many from the South African unit – stationed in Egypt for operations throughout the region, who wanted studio portraits for themselves and their families. Angelo Studio was also attended by cabaret dancers, and expatriates, mostly engaged with the entertainment units of theatre actors who joined the army to see the world. This clientele was such as to convince Levon to take up the profession together with his brother. Their father made a contribution and for the occasion provided the two brothers with the equipment needed for the studio activity. In January 1941 he bought the camera that Levon would use for all his life: a 10 × 10 inch (ca. 25 cm) studio camera made of wood, leather, and brass. He also purchased a Voigtlander Heliar lens, complete with shutter, a real gem that Angelo took with him when, years later, the two brothers went their separate ways. The father also purchased the necessary lighting equipment.

Back in the 1940s, Cairo had been experiencing a lively wartime nightlife, profiting from a timid but convincing *belle époque* climate.<sup>27</sup> It was at that time that Angelo became an assiduous patron of the Emad el-Din Street casinos, in downtown Cairo, where he could find his way into entertainment circles. To attract new clients, the two brothers started by offering to photograph actors and actresses in exchange for free advertising in theatre posters, gaining a lot of business from the wartime entertainers. Europe was at war. Some were new foreign residents who turned Cairo into a “cosmopolitan watering-hole, filled with those actively pursuing the war and those avoiding it.”<sup>28</sup>

After the two brothers went their separate ways in 1947, Levon opened his own photo studio in a building located at 7 Avenue Fuad I in Cairo (currently 26 July Street). It was there that he took up the pseudonym of Van Leo, an approximate anagram of Levon, the Armenian equivalent of the French name Leon. In 1947, he purchased *METRO Photo Studio*

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26 Bassil, *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, 315.

27 Fatma Bassiouni, “Van Leo’s Unrivalled Images of Cairo’s Belle Epoch,” *Middle East Times*, December 2-8, 2000.

28 Ibid.

located in Fouad Street 7, to become subsequently known as Van-Leo Studio.<sup>29</sup> This was the name with which Levon began to sign his photographic portraits. For some, this creative choice suggests a homage to expressionist painter Vincent van Gogh, about whom he had purchased several books.

### *The Van Leo Collection*

In 1998, Van Leo, by then old and weary, was persuaded to donate the studio's archives to AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Library (RBSCCL). Members of the Arab Image Foundation of Beirut who visited the photographer in various times in the past, according to their capacity, also acquired some images from his collection. The Van Leo Photographic Collection preserved at AUC's RBSCCL includes prints and negatives spanning his career from the 1930s to 1990s, along with works by and jointly produced with his brother Angelo from the years when they operated a studio together. The collection consists of approximately 13,000 photographic negatives and 12,000 prints of portraits and self-portraits.<sup>30</sup> Working to safeguard the entire collection, the academic institution also retains Van Leo's personal photographs and some correspondence between members of his family and friends, as well as his photographic equipment and books.

Van Leo was little inclined to theoretical speculations and was scarcely interested in avant-garde philosophical texts and doctrines. Rather, he was fascinated by photography, its various techniques as an artistic practice. He owned books that were practical treatises on photography, and collected Western photography magazines, such as the American "Popular Photography."<sup>31</sup> Among the different titles that Van Leo purchased, there were Edwin Smith's *All the Photo-Tricks: Ways and Ideas off the Beaten Track*<sup>32</sup> and *Photography Yearbook*, edited by T. Korda.<sup>33</sup> His library also included

29 Van-Leo Studio remained open from ca. 1950 until 1995.

30 Organized in various sections: Personal photographs; Self-Portraits and photos of Van-Leo by other photographers; Angelo Studio (1941-1947); Women "Ladies" and Men "Gents"; Weddings; Families and Children; Passport Photographs; Egypt and Foreign Travel; Collected commercial portraits of movie stars; others.

31 Bassil, *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, 497.

32 London, Focal Press, 1942.

33 London, Cosmopolitan Press, 1935. Seen in: Mona Seif, "Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist", in *Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist*, eds Salah M. Hassan and Ola Seif (Ithaca: The Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University and Ithaca Press, 2018), 58.

books about Vincent van Gogh's paintings, such as *Vincent van Gogh* by J.B. de la Faille.<sup>34</sup> Another interesting book title is *Cette guerre* (in English, *This War*, dated 1945), a collection of caricatures drawn by Alexander Saroukhan.<sup>35</sup>

Van Leo photographic collection includes some shots of photographic nudes that he began to take and work on around the 1950s. Photographers in Egypt had a tendency to do nudes: it was the extension of a painting tradition.<sup>36</sup> At that time, Egypt was more of a secular and largely tolerant country, where religious fundamentalism was neither a limit nor a danger to freedom of expression. Models, personalities from the entertainment world, and sometimes friends visited Van Leo's studio to ask to be photographed undressed. They were men as much as women, with the men photographed in athletic poses. Van Leo kept one book on the subject, titled *The Nudes of Paris*.<sup>37</sup> Regrettably, Van Leo burnt hundreds of photos and negatives from his collection of nudes,<sup>38</sup> though a few did survive. He was afraid of the fundamentalists, but also of the conservative threats that the new socio-cultural circumstances had posed to art. The rise of fundamental Islam in the late 1970s affected the practice of photography and fine art in general in Egypt. The acts of violence of the *jihadists* included attacks on unveiled women and assaults on artists and artistic venues.

*"The Reluctant Surrealist". The Young Van Leo and the Birth of a New Nation*

A noteworthy segment of the collection is the set of hundreds of self-portraits Van Leo made between 1942 and 1946, typically depicting himself in various guises. Besides his daily work making portraits to order, Van Leo began shooting self-portraits for his own pleasure, in which he embodied a series of alternate identities. These self-portraits provided a ground for artistic experimentation away from the limita-

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34 Paris: Hyperion Press, 1942.

35 (1898-1977). Born in 1898 in a town under the Russian Empire, Saroukhan was a prominent Armenian cartoonist and caricaturist, and a contributor to the foreign press of the time in Cairo. He lived in Istanbul, Vienna, and Cairo.

36 Barry Iverson, a short memoir collected by Karl Bassil, in Maadi, Cairo, in March 2010, in *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, eds. Negar Azimi and Karl Bassil (Berlin: Arab Image Foundation and Archive Books, 2021), 577.

37 Ibid. He had probably bought it during one trip to Paris.

38 Akram Zaatari, dir., *Him + Her, Van Leo*. (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation and Akram Zaatari, 2001).



tions and constructions of popular commercial portraiture. In the first half of the twentieth century, his series of about 400 self-portraits was unequalled across the Middle East. In relation to the times in which they were made, these black-and-white self-portraits had been produced in quality, despite the fact that Van Leo humbly claimed to have made them as a “hobby and curiosity.”<sup>39</sup>

Notably, Van Leo shot photographs that were merely in black and white, though he used hand-colouring techniques to heighten the realism of the image or for artistic purposes. For example, we see that one of his early black and white self-portraits, dated 1937, depicts the vivid image of a young Levon with his lips hand-tinted in red”.<sup>40</sup> In many ways Van Leo’s self-portraits explored his search for possible identities, resulting in a proliferation of invented selves: in one he played the role of a gangster, in another an aviator in uniform. Van Leo created light setups for shooting images that reflected a painterly fascination with photography. In a series of shots with complex studio settings and photomontages, Van Leo staged self-portraits with ‘illusionary’ women.<sup>41</sup> He resorted to a surreal photographic imagery to depict unconscious ideas and dreams. He utilized early analogue photographic techniques that included solarization, use of glass shields and filters, and sandwiched negatives to create ‘surreal’ depictions of himself and the others. The use of such photographic procedures came to occupy a central role in the Surrealists’ photography. In these series made in the most surrealist and experimental period of his career, around the mid-Forties, Van Leo shows an affinity with hard-edge photographers, which were popular in Europe, such as the Surrealists Man Ray and Maurice Tabard. Van Leo met at least some members of the prominent Cairo-based “Art and Liberty” group, affiliated with the international Surrealist movement. In 1946, Van Leo produced a portrait of the Italian artist Angelo De Riz at his home in the Citadel, in Cairo. The house was located in an Ottoman building in the heart of an old quarter, Darb el-Labbana, near the Surrealists’ headquarter, *La Maison des Artistes*.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Barry Iverson, “Van Leo: una biografia,” in *Un fotografo di nome Van Leo*, ed. Martina Corgnati (Milano: Skira editore, 2007).

40 Seif, *Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist*, 31.

41 Seif, *Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist*, 30.

42 Seif, *Van-Leo: The Reluctant Surrealist*, 54.



1 – *Self-portrait*. Taken by Van Leo in ca. 1944 in Cairo, Egypt. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 39.7 × 29.8 cm. Van Leo Collection, courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

In an escalation of decolonization, profound political, economic, and societal changes occurred in the aftermaths of the 1952 Revolution in Egypt, orchestrated by the Free Officers Movement of Gamal Abdel Nasser, with its pro-Soviet policies, and fierce nationalism. In 1953, the newly established Republic of Egypt began to distance itself culturally and politically from Europe. Meanwhile, the emergence of the United States of America as a world power, following the Second World War saw American interests in the Middle East, develop further. At that time, the U.S. lived on the reverberation of the victory, as an element of recognition; theirs was a positive image, a model of well-being. In those same years, Van Leo applied to study in Los Angeles, U.S., at what was then known as the Art Center School, after seeing an announcement in a magazine<sup>43</sup>; he was admitted but eventually withdrew.

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43 Bassil, *Becoming Van Leo Vol. III*, 563.

Violent riots broke out in Cairo between late 1951 and early 1952: the luxury emporiums belonging to the foreign community, including the Jewish ones, numerous in the area between Qasr El-Nile Street and Opera Square, were set alight – the situation worsened after the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli wars. The jewellery shop on the first floor of the building where the photographer established his studio was also set on fire.<sup>44</sup> At that time, Van Leo was restless in his search for self-affirmation through his studio work, while he was witnessing the birth of a new nation. Following the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, many foreigners abandoned their homes and properties in Egypt and resettled abroad, including members of the Surrealist group. Among those who left there were also Armenian photographers such as Arakel Artinian. Gradually losing his clientele, he was forced to sell his business and emigrate from Egypt in 1963. Van Leo's brother Angelo grew unhappy with the climate change and moved to France in the early 1960s with his family. In 1955, he had married a French woman, Colette Membrat, whom he had met at the cabaret *Le Tabarin*.<sup>45</sup> At that time, she was a dancer, working for a Marseille-based troupe that had moved from Istanbul to Cairo.

*Iconizing the Egyptian society. Van Leo's black-and-white commercial studio portraits*

By the end of the Second World War, Van Leo had acquired sufficient experience to set up his own studio, which quickly rose to being one of the most popular in Cairo. Customers became expatriates, Lebanese traders, different culture personalities and, above all, a new generation of aspiring actresses and cabaret soubrettes, sometimes of humble origins, who dreamt of success in theatres or in the fast-growing cinema industry. Albeit interested in photography as an artistic language, Van Leo took photographs that were mainly of a commercial kind: commercial portraits (mostly half figure) of everyday men and women, and movie stars, as well as weddings and family's portraits. He brought glamour to the practice of photographic portraiture in the studio. He put special emphasis on the charm and beauty of the subject, who could be seen undressed, attaching less importance to any other element in front of the camera.

44 Van Leo, "On Photography People and Modern Times," interview by Akram Zaartari, *Vimeo*, 2010, video 1:02:00.

45 See, for example, Boyadjian, Katia. "Angelo Boyadjian," accessed October 1, 2022 [www.angelo-boyadjian.com](http://www.angelo-boyadjian.com).

In his portraits, Van Leo instrumentally combined the use of cosmetics and hairstyles following the fashion of the time. The 1950s was a time for experimentation when it came to hair, most frequently being shorter hairstyles rather than long. Van Leo also played with light to devise a creative use of deep shadows that could generate attention. He practised photography based on his personal and artistic mindset. But the roots of Van Leo's career can be found in Armenian-Egyptian society. Under the Ottomans, many Armenians served the mighty Sultans as court photographers. However, the ubiquitous *tarboosh*, covering the head of officers as part of the European-style uniform, does not appear in Van Leo's photography, nor do Egyptian officers in uniforms or members of the royal family. Officials had abolished the use of *tarboosh* in 1958, as it was considered "a relic of a by-gone and backward times" and an emblem of "the colonially compromised monarchy."<sup>46</sup> Instead, Van Leo's images reflected the contemporary culture of the time, and the dramatic shifts in the Egyptian society during the 20th century. The photographer explained in an interview that he had been influenced by the Hollywood movie magazines. The Hollywood film industry was a key component of film culture in North Africa and the Middle East from the early twentieth century to the present.<sup>47</sup> Particularly in the 1950s, Van Leo became known in Cairo for portraying an abundance of personalities from the entertainment world: writers and singers, as well as actors and actresses of the so-called Golden Age of Egyptian cinema, between the 1940s until the 1960s.<sup>48</sup> The oldest and largest in the region, Egyptian cinema displayed the characteristics of a popular art form. The nascent art of cinema captured the imagination of many in Egypt and led to the establishment of production companies with a strikingly cosmopolitan character.

Van Leo's archive of photographs includes the portrait of young cinema actor Omar Sharif,<sup>49</sup> who, like many others, visited the photography studio.<sup>50</sup> Wearing a suit with a jacket and tie, he is portrayed holding a cigarette in one hand, in a typically masculine gesture, while keeping the other hand in his trouser pocket.

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46 Rakha, "A Face in Time," 9.

47 On this topic, see: Nolwenn Mingant, *Hollywood Films in North Africa and the Middle East: A History of Circulation* (New York: Suny Press, 2022).

48 John Zada, "The Iconic Portraiture of Van Leo," in *John Zada* (blog), July 17, 2014 <http://www.johnzada.com/iconic-portraits-van-leo-armenian-egyptian-photographer>

49 (1932-2015). Born Michel Dimitri Shalhoub.

50 This portrait was very likely one of those staged at Angelo's studio in Cairo as part of a collaborative project, as indicated by Van Leo's niece, Katia Boyadjian, in an interview to Karl Bassil in *Becoming Van Leo: Vol. III*, 399.



2 – *Raga Muhammad Serag, Egyptian film star*. Taken by Van Leo in 1953 in Cairo, Egypt. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 39.9 x 29.8 cm. Van Leo Collection, courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Van Leo's assistant and actress Raga Muhammad Serag was portrayed (half figure) in a pose similar to that of a popular Hollywood star, giving a meaning to a new idea and practice of beauty: bare shoulders and crossed arms, she exhibits her beauty in a dazzling full-lipped smile; in the background, a glimpse of typical furnishing with a motif depicting flowers and birds. Her portraits seem to advocate the need to document and sustain beauty while young.

Van Leo's portrait of the highly esteemed Egyptian writer and minister of Education Taha Hussein,<sup>51</sup> blind and bespectacled, captured against a pitch-black background, is also an iconic one, a picture that created a legend. It was a precious item that was sold and resold.

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51 (1889-1973). Egyptian writer, teacher, and politician.



3 – *Doctor Taha Hussein, writer*. Taken by Van Leo in ca. 1950 in Cairo, Egypt. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 39.7 x 30.4 cm. Van Leo Collection, courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

The Van Leo's collection also includes a portrait of Farid Al-Atrash,<sup>52</sup> unusually signed by Van Leo in Arabic. Also, a colour portrait of Dalida,<sup>53</sup> in Egyptian costume, was produced in the 1980s. Born Cristina Gigliotti, she was portrayed by Van Leo when director Yusuf Shahin wanted her in the 1986 Egyptian film *The Sixth Day*. Dalida was the protagonist in that movie, playing the role of a poor Egyptian woman. Her portrait – hand coloured at a time when black and white photography had already become something of a collector's item – had been retouched in order to smooth over any wrinkles and remove any signs of ageing. Although Van Leo never married, he loved the company of women, who would acquire fame and success thanks to his photographic portraits. He portrayed them in striking and spectacular ways, notwithstanding their true appearance.

52 (1910-1974). Composer, singer, oud master and actor of Syrian origin – who was a friend.

53 (1933-1987). Born in Egypt but to Italian parents, she was a French singer and actress.

Van Leo's fascination for the Hollywood dream trickled down on to more ordinary people too, as he worked to give the appearance of glamour to ordinary people; he concealed physical defects and gave the illusion of beauty while personality should not emerge; he restored youth where age had made its rounds; gave warmth to neutral or rigid features.



4 – *Miss Nadia: Egyptian Theatre Beginner Actress*. Taken by Van Leo in 1954 in Cairo, Egypt. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 39.7 x 29.9 cm. Van Leo Collection, courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

### *Conclusion*

Van Leo remained a resident of the Egyptian capital for all his life until his death in Cairo in March 2002. In 2000, he was the first photographer ever to receive the prestigious Royal Netherlands Prince Claus Prize,<sup>54</sup> which contributed to the revival of critical attention to his work. On the occasion of receiving the prize, the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo

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54 The prize is awarded in support of artists and cultural practitioners in countries where culture is under political pressure.

dedicated a major retrospective to him, and many others have followed since.<sup>55</sup> Thanks to the efforts of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in Beirut, the photographic works of Van Leo have been introduced to an international audience.

Van Leo was not a militant intellectual, but rather an introvert who believed in his ideas and work. In his portraits, he captured ordinary people as well as personalities from the entertainment world standing in front of a camera, much like on a theatre or a cinema stage. He gradually moved away from a surrealist aesthetic to begin a new *discourse*. The photographer challenged the representation of the Egyptian society of that time by turning his clients into icons and finding nobility in everyday Egypt.

In the shadows of the Second World War, Van Leo's photographic camera was a device instrumental to the creation of portraits in the studio. He turned the camera indoor to push the style to new extremes of extravagance. In a time when the American Dream was weaponized through a new visual imagery, Van Leo emerged from a newer generation of Armenian-Egyptian photographers not only as a prominent artist but also as one of the icons of this phase. His photography evoked as a dream of prosperity for the country's youth in that the promises of nationhood, progress and civil life could come true.

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