Vibeke Venema, "Zaatari and Madani: Guns, flared trousers and same-sex kisses", *BBC News Magazine*, February 17, 2014

*For many years the pictures that came out of Lebanon were of bomb-damaged buildings and human tragedy, but an archive of photographs from the 1950s to 1970s reveals a very different picture - a record of life long hidden from view.*

Hashem el Madani began taking photographs in 1948 with a box camera in his parents' living room, selling contact prints for the equivalent of 25 cents (15p). After a few years he was able to open a studio - he took photos for ID papers, as well as portraits of babies, newly-weds and groups of friends. On quiet afternoons, he would go out looking for customers in shops, garages, on the beach, even the local prison.

At the height of his popularity in the 60s and 70s, Madani, now 86, would have up to 100 customers a day passing through his studio in the upmarket Shehrazade building, in the port city of Saida. Then came the civil war. When Israeli troops invaded in 1982, a shell blew out the studio's windows, and a friend died. His business never recovered. But 16 years later Lebanon's leading artist walked through the door.

Akram Zaatari, whose films and installations involving historic images are world-renowned, was looking for photos of vehicles. Studio Shehrazade had plenty of pictures of mechanics fixing cars - and 1,001 other things. It was a revelation.

Not only did Madani document 90% of the town's inhabitants over five decades but there are some extraordinary portraits in his archive.

For young men, a studio photo was a chance to show off their muscles and goof around with props - cowboy outfits were popular - others wrestled in front of the camera.

Zaatari says that was normal in the 1950s. "If you had your picture taken you would seize the opportunity to create something different of yourself," he says. "They wanted to look at themselves as if they were looking at an actor in a film." It was fun.

Movies were a great source of inspiration for Madani's sitters. This included acting out a kiss - but only men kissing men and women kissing women. "In a conservative society such as Saida, people were willing to play the kiss between two people of the same sex, but very rarely between a man and a woman," Madani told Zaatari. He remembers that happening only once.

"If you look at it today you think - is it gay culture? But in fact it is not," says Zaatari. Social restrictions were different then. "If you wanted to kiss it had to be a same-sex kiss to be accepted."

Men showed off their photos, but for women a picture was considered intimate and would only be shared with a trusted few. Madani had purposely found a studio space on the first floor, so that women could visit discreetly - seen entering at street level, their destination would not be obvious. Once inside, they could relax - but it did not always end well.

Madani still has the scratched negatives that tell the tragic story of a Mrs Baqari and her jealous husband. When he found out about his wife's pictures, he threatened to destroy the shop and came in to demand the roll of film. Madani refused to hand it over. "In the end we agreed to scratch the negatives of his wife with a pin, and I did it in front of him." However, life proved too hard for Mrs Baqari - she committed suicide. "Years later, after she burned herself to death to escape her misery, he came back to me asking for enlargements of those photographs," says Madani. Her husband cried when he saw the pictures for the first time.

Posing with guns became increasingly popular, reflecting the turbulent politics of the time. From the late 1960s it was common to see armed men on the streets of Saida. When someone brought a gun to the studio, others would borrow it to take a picture.

"I consider the act of posing with a gun as an act of showing off - a display of power," Madani told Zaatari, for his book, Studio Practices, about Madani. "It is part of my role as a photographer to photograph them the way they wish."

Along with flared trousers, resistance politics were fashionable in the 70s. "Everybody wanted to learn how to use guns," says Zaatari, who was growing up in Saida at the time. His parents did not allow him to go to militia training, though many of his friends did. "I don't recall life before the war," he says. "War is like when you are born in the sea. You don't realise that life could be different."

The shifting shadows of politics crossed Madani's lens over the years, but he didn't experience any trouble from the authorities. The closest he came was when he took pictures at a protest against former President Camille Cham'oun and the army came to his office demanding the negatives. His archives also contain photographs of Syrian Intelligence agents, and of Iraqi Baathists who had an office in his building.

Following Egyptian President Nasser's death, mourners grew beards. "They came and acted sad faces," Madani says in Studio Practices. "It was fashionable to be sad when Nasser died."

Madani never refused to photograph anyone. "Let me tell you one thing that I've learned," he says. "If you are tolerant and speak kindly to people, the world will love you."

For Zaatari, Studio Shehrazade was like a trove of buried treasure.

As a child in the war years, it was not always safe to play outside, so he spent hours cooped up in the family's apartment. There he began recording everything around him - taping the sound of bombs as well as his sister's piano practice, taking pictures, and writing in his diary. His desire to document real life stayed with him - he has been called a documentary artist - and he uses photographic archive in much of his work.

This passion led him, with others, to set up the **Arab Image Foundation**. In 1997, he began travelling across the region searching for prints, visiting professional photographers and trawling through hundreds of family albums - yet his greatest discovery came in his home town.

Zaatari decided to approach Madani's life and work as if it were an archaeological excavation. It was the start of a collaboration which has led to the photographs being exhibited across the world.

"I'm really interested in how the personal and the intimate meet history," Zaatari says. "What I'm doing is to write history, or [fill in] gaps of history, by using photographic documents."

"I feel more freedom dealing with distant times as opposed to my times," he says. "That's also my problem with what you see about [the] Arab uprising today in the media. I do not know yet where it's going to lead me, I do not make sense out of it today. With Hashem el Madani, I can say: 'This is the result of 55 years of work in Studio Shehrazade.' But I cannot say that about something that's still ongoing - I cannot understand."

Madani, for his part, doesn't believe in retirement. "Staying at home makes you bored and tired," he says. "During the day I go to my studio and reminisce about the past. I am nostalgic and I want to relive those days. I much preferred it back then. I used to sleep for about four hours a day, and the rest of the time I would be working". He still occasionally takes photographs, now on a digital camera.

He is proud to have been chosen for Zaatari's research and happy that his work continues to be seen. He has accompanied the artist to major international exhibitions, but the project that has meant most to him personally is the Hashem el Madani Walking Itinerary in the old city of Saida where framed portraits of shopkeepers taken in the 1950s were "returned" to the original shops. "I would have liked to photograph all the residents of Saida, because this is where I live," he told Zaatari.

Zaatari currently has exhibitions in Belgium and Canada. What will happen to Studio Shehrazade is unclear - it may become a museum.