The title is somewhat random – it comes from a novel by Maxim Gorky. It's the only other time I had come across the name Artamonoff before. It also happens to belong to an enigmatic gentleman whose photographs of Istanbul and Western Turkey are housed in the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives at Dumbarton Oaks. Last year at this time, we knew little more about Artamonoff beyond his name and those photos. It was through the journey of piecing together his life that our little department was able to bring to fruition an online exhibition. Of course, much more happened along the way, and that is really the subject of my talk. How we in ICFA used the research process to solve a few problems we faced when I first arrived at Dumbarton Oaks a little more a year ago.
Our collections focus on Byzantine art, architecture, and archaeology. They are rich, but almost overwhelmingly vast. The Byzantine photographs alone number more than half a million items in a variety of media, including photographs, negatives, slides, transparencies, even films. That's not even accounting for archival collections, which form the latter part of ICFA's name and document fieldwork and research projects at Byzantine sites throughout the Mediterranean from the 1930s through the 1980s, including Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, and the Middle East. Most of these fieldwork projects were sponsored by Dumbarton Oaks or the Byzantine Institute, an organization founded in 1930 by Thomas Whittemore and later absorbed by Dumbarton Oaks in 1962.

PROBLEMS

- Collections comprise 500,000+ items
- Inventory never completed
- Only known to a small, specialized audience
- Lack of resources
These include monumental projects, such as the uncovering and conservation of the mosaics at Hagia Sophia in Istanbul undertaken by Whittemore and the Byzantine Institute in 1932 shown here, and the architectural survey of the same building by Robert Van Nice from 1937-1986. More on Van Nice later.
Despite the importance of these photographs and archival collections to the study of Byzantine art history and archaeology, the collections had never been fully inventoried. When I arrived we had no comprehensive database or collection management system to track or catalog these items.

Also, ICFA is only known to a very small and extremely specialized audience. Pretty much, only Byzantinists know that we exist. Even the Byzantinists who come to Dumbarton Oaks come primarily to consult the unparalleled collections of the Research Library and the Museum. So even within our own institution we have a very low profile - a small department consisting of me, as manager/librarian, our resident Byzantine scholar, Gunder Varinlioglu, our Archivist, Rona Razon, and only just recently, we added Anne-Marie Viola, our Metadata and Cataloging Specialist.

Thus, being a very small department within a small institution, we don't have a lot of resources at our disposal. To solve our problems, we had to get creative in devising ways to complete the necessary inventory, while still responding to the ever present institutional imperative to digitize, digitize, digitize. I didn’t think it responsible to continue digitizing material without establishing full intellectual and physical control over our collections, but needed to keep our administration confident that some progress was being made. So, I came upon the idea of starting a pilot project to create an online exhibition to distract – I mean, redirect - my administration's attention from the fact that I had halted all digitization to focus on our inventory. Hence, the Artamonoff business, or the project at hand.
So, here’s what we came up with. Since we were no longer actively digitizing, we needed to re-purpose material so that we could build something quickly and cost-effectively. And we wanted to select a collection that potentially had a broad appeal beyond Byzantinists. Artamonoff’s photos fit the bill, and better yet - being a mercenary-minded manager - they were already digitized, there was legacy metadata that we could clean up, and there were just over 500 photos - a manageable set for an achievable goal.

I assigned Gunder as the project lead, but she couldn’t do it alone. So, we turned to a local university. Prof. Elise Friedland, a faculty member in the Classics department at George Washington University, expressed interest internships for her undergraduate students. So, we set up a parallel pilot project to establish a partnership with GW. Prof. Friedland selected a remarkable junior, Alyssa DesRochers, to be our guinea pig starting in January 2011.

Our idea was to research the collection, collaborate with others as needed to create an online exhibit, and use this tangible end product to promote ICFA and the collection.
First the photos – there were negatives and also contact prints in two old binders, with identifications scribbled in pen on scotch tape beneath each image.

There are 543 of them, mainly depicting Byzantine sites in Istanbul.
Including cityscapes, the Aqueduct of Valens, Hagia Sophia in the distance…
From the Asian side, across the Bosphorus…
Interiors
And occasionally people
Artamonoff also ventured further afield – to Ancient sites in Western Turkey, including Ephesus, Priene, Pergamum, and others
From analyzing the photographs, we surmised that the photographer was a resident of Istanbul, since we have photos from all over the city and from almost all months of the year between 1935-1945. The binders contained no additional information other than the name, so we still had no idea who Artamonoff was and how his photos came to DO.
That name, Artamonoff, was another challenge. Because of the way the Russian name is transliterated, there are literally dozens of possible combinations of variants of the first name and Artamonoff with 2 fs, 1f, or a v. Also, demonstrating the need for our inventory, our predecessors had incorrectly labeled the photos with the Creator as Richard Artamonoff - since the negative numbers started with RA, which they mistook for the photographer’s initials.

So far, this online exhibit was looking pretty pathetic, with just the photos themselves (however nice they are), but a blank page under the About the Photographer section.
We realized that we were grasping at straws when we considered using this picture of feet, which we thought could be the photographers? Clearly, we were going to have to compile some biographical information to contextualize the photographs. Gunder and Aly started on that track while I focused on researching the acquisition history by going through departmental correspondence files, accession logs, and other paper records.

Our first big lead was a confidential report from 1985 that had been compiled by a scholar, Lawrence Butler, for the then director of Dumbarton Oaks, Robert Thomson. The report focused on the status of the fieldwork archives in ICFA, but buried in the text, we found this description: “These 2 ¼ format photos were taken by the son of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey... The negatives and prints were obtained for Dumbarton Oaks by Robert Van Nice... Photos of mosques from the same collection are on deposit at the Freer Gallery.”

We needed to process the Van Nice archive anyway, so I took the opportunity to do a preliminary assessment while doing double-duty looking out for any mentions of Artamonoff. I found a note from Van Nice, were he listed the following clues: a DC address for Artamonoff in 1962, that he had lived in Belgrade as well as Istanbul, and that he was a fine photographer who took the trouble “to examine archaeological sites.” Our unknown photographer was coming more sharply into focus.
With these snippets of information, Gunder and Aly attacked the biographical research. This is where our gamble on an undergraduate really paid off, since her enthusiasm for the project and creativeness with sources to check were stellar – including Ancestry.com, phone books, the Social Security Death Index, probate records, etc. On a hunch, since Van Nice had been connected with Robert College in Istanbul, Gunder checked with the Robert College Alumni association and hit the jackpot.
The yearbook for the class of 1930 included one Nicholas Artamonoff, who graduated from the School of Engineering and is described as “an ardent photographer with a complete knowledge of his subject, Artamonoff has given the College much valuable service with his camera.” His permanent address is listed as Belgrade – corroborating Van Nice’s note. We finally had a real photograph of Mr. Artamonoff. After this point, Gunder and Aly began to make discoveries on an almost daily basis. Artamonoff’s school records, which listed his father as one Victor Artamonoff, a military attache for the Russian czar’s army – so not the son of an ambassador, after all, but close. His employment records – after graduating in 1930, Artamonoff continued to work at Robert College, eventually becoming the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds, pictured here. We even found our elusive photographer’s signature on the annual reports he compiled.

These additional leads allowed Gunder and Aly to piece together Artamonoff’s entire life – born in Greece in 1908, educated at boarding schools in England while his family lived in Russia and Serbia, high school and college in Istanbul between 1922-1930, working at Robert College in the 1930s and 1940s (the years covered by our photographs), and then emigrating to the United States in 1947. He and his wife, Natalie, settled in the Washington, DC area, where he had a successful career as an engineer at several government agencies, including the US Geological Survey and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Eventually, Artamonoff and Natalie retired to La Jolla, CA, where he died in 1989.
All told, Gunder and Aly’s biographical research paints a picture of a passionate amateur photographer, who was deeply interested in his surroundings and had an appreciation for architecture and archaeology. After the foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923, archaeological activity in Istanbul peaked starting in the late 1920s and through the 1930s and 40s, with German, French, British, and Turkish teams actively excavating sites throughout the city and the Americans (the Byzantine Institute and Van Nice) busy at Hagia Sophia, which had been converted from a mosque to a museum in 1935.
I'll single out the Church of St. Euphemia, which was discovered by chance in 1939 during the demolition of the old central prison in Istanbul. Byzantine frescoes were uncovered at the site, but exposed to sun and rain (and reportedly damaged by children) until the German archaeologist A.M. Schneider was given permission to excavate in 1942. Thankfully, Artamonoff photographed repeatedly at the site in 1940, 1942, and 1946, providing valuable visual documentation of the compromised site. These photographs were published in this popular article by a Robert College colleague, Sven Larsen, in the Illustrated London News, as well as in Schneider’s scholarly publication on the excavations – though sadly for Artamonoff, never attributed to him.
In the letter of acknowledgement addressed to Artamonoff - a copy of which we eventually found in a filing cabinet under “Washington, DC Miscellaneous” - Ernst Kitzinger, then Director of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, specifically cites these photographs of the St. Euphemia frescoes as “invaluable.”
It was during precisely these years of archaeological activity that Artamonoff was living in Istanbul and actively photographing, demonstrating a curiosity for architectural remains, a keen eye for details…
A sense of the dramatic and a gift for composition. A truly gifted amateur photographer.

And when we followed up on the lead for the Smithsonian’s Freer-Sackler Archives, we discovered that Artamonoff’s collection had been split up in 1962 when Dumbarton Oaks selected the Byzantine material, while the Freer acquired photographs of Ottoman mosques and everyday life in Istanbul.
The Freer photographs were a revelation, adding another dimension to Artamonoff’s photographic personality. A sensitivity to the ebb and flow of daily life. And the power of photography to distill everyday details and infuse them with a sense of monumentality.

The Freer’s photographs and lantern slides add more than 400 images to Artamonoff’s ouevre and added more nuance to our profile of him. We had seen glimpses of his interest in documenting everyday life in the Dumbarton Oaks set…
when he would shoot the facades of monuments like Kariye Camii, but then also the people and neighborhoods surrounding the building.
By now, we had amassed enough information to create the web site. As I pointed out in the beginning, we are a small department within a small institution, where there is only one full-time IT staff member. With these limited resources, we decided that an open-source software, OMEKA, was the best solution. We reached out to contacts at the Center for History and New Media at nearby George Mason University, since we had already been using their bibliographic management tool, Zotero, to share citations with each other. Using OMEKA's documentation and active user forums, and with much assistance from OMEKA developers, Gunder and Aly were able to create the online exhibition that we launched in December 2011.
You can browse by site
Or tag
Each individual record contains our repurposed metadata – which had been exported from a legacy database. Omeka also allows for geolocation, so you can see exactly where this particular site is located on a Google map.
Or see all the sites where Artamonoff photographed plotted on a map.
Thanks to our collective research efforts and collaborations with scholars, librarians, and archivists both in the US and Turkey, we were finally able to compile a profile for the About the Photographer page. Just over a year ago, this page would have been blank or shown disembodied feet, but now this previously unknown amateur photographer now has an identity.

The final step in this process was to promote, promote, promote the site and the project. Upon launch, we posted to listservs serving various communities - mainly with an eye to reach those additional audiences that might not have known about ICFA or its collections. We also tried to be creative about additional channels for outreach.
We designed bookmarks, which we brought everywhere we went, particularly Gunder, who presented on Artamonoff for audiences such as the Byzantine Studies Association of North America and the College of Art and Design at Louisiana State University. Since Gunder had developed a relationship with the alumni office at Robert College, she was able to write an article on Artamonoff for their quarterly magazine, which focused on his Robert College connections and which we used to further promote the project. These initial promotional efforts led to increased attention and eventually…
a feature in the Harvard University Gazette, where Gunder was interviewed and highlighted the value of Artamonoff’s photographs for documenting the changes to Istanbul’s urban fabric. Our outreach efforts also drew the attention of the American Friends of Turkey, who invited Gunder to give a lecture at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC this past January. Here is Gunder and Aly right before the talk, which was very well attended.
At this point, the Artamonoff project is essentially complete, but still a going concern. Its outcomes will be long-lasting. Through the strategy laid out at the beginning of the year, we were able to re-purpose images and metadata and successfully create a proof of concept for future digitization projects once we complete our inventory. Better still, the success of the project solidified the institutional support that we needed to continue with our inventory, despite no new digitization. Our collections research also underscored the necessity of the inventory for contextualizing collections like Artamonoff, which might otherwise have been classified as problematic. We have accumulated a body of knowledge that can only serve as the foundation for future collections research, description, and dissemination. For instance, all of our Robert College research will be useful as we continue to process the Van Nice archive.

The project has expanded our profile, both in the wider community and within Dumbarton Oaks itself – where we are now known as the little department that could. Thanks to those of you who forwarded our initial announcement on the ARLIS listserv or posted it to your institutional blogs, we have reached audiences beyond Byzantinists, including scholars in other fields, people interested generally in the history of Istanbul and Turkey, even a local government official in Ephesus, who was looking for historical photographs for their new cultural center.

Throughout the research process, we developed relationships that we can continue to draw upon in the future. The OMEKA programmers we contacted continue to be
interested in further development of plugins for maps and timelines that we requested. The kind archivists at the Freer have been so helpful and supportive of the project and down the line, we hope to reintegrate Artamonoff’s dispersed photographs virtually through the web site. We have now established a formal internship program with George Washington University, hosting two additional interns since Aly, and receiving additional interest from faculty at other area universities.

Finally, the Artamonoff project has provided us with a template for future initiatives, which will continue to focus on expanding the audience for our collections. The formula of a scholar, working in conjunction with a librarian and archivist, with the assistance of an outstanding intern, has proven successful. This is a model that we will continue to apply in future.
As you can see from the long list of acknowledgements on the project site, this was truly a team effort. In the end, the most valuable outcome of our year-long project was team-building. By setting an achievable goal with clearly defined roles and taking advantage of the professional strengths of each staff member, a small team of a Scholar and Intern, working with Librarians and an Archivist was able to pull together a project that no one person had the expertise to pull off alone. This faceted approach to project development was ideal, since it allowed us to work simultaneously on a special project like Artamonoff, while continuing to make steady progress on larger, long-term projects such as the inventory and archival processing. More intangibly, Gunder and Aly’s detective work produced a very exciting and stimulating work environment that sparked the team’s creativity and enthusiasm for all our other projects. We want to do what we did for Artamonoff – giving him an identity and giving his photographs a new life in the digital realm – for all of the individuals represented in our collections, such as Robert Van Nice and Thomas Whittemore.
And now, we have a whole new audience for our work… Whether blogs by scholars, like the Ancient World Online, technology blogs, blogs by other libraries, archives, and museums like the Smithsonian, even our own processing blog for Van Nice, where our other intern Clare Moran has done some cross-promotion for Artamonoff.
Perhaps even more excitingly, Artamonoff is gaining an audience among image users for their intrinsic value as photographs of exceptional quality, whether by enthusiasts on tumblr, faculty and students at visual resources collections, or artists and photographers on Pinterest.
All this for a Russian engineer from Turkey, who wasn’t a Byzantinist or a scholar of any sort and just happened to be a talented amateur photographer during a time of unprecedented archaeological activity in his adopted city. And who until recently was just a mysterious name on some old binders. Over the past year, through the creativity of Gunder, Aly, and the rest of the ICFA team, and with the invaluable assistance and collaboration of wonderful people along the way, we have managed to put not just a face, but also this impressive body of work, to that name.
Up to this point, we had collaborated with scholars, librarians, and archivists, both here in the US and in Turkey to track down information about Artamonoff. But, more importantly, we collaborated with each other and worked as a team. As each person focused on their own projects, we kept an eye out of any mentions of each other’s subjects. This led to some rather exciting and serendipitous finds, such as when our research into Robert Van Nice turned up someone who actually knew Artamonoff. As Van Nice conducted his architectural survey of Hagia Sophia, he routinely recruited students from the Engineering Department at Robert College (Artamonoff’s alma mater) to assist him with measurements as seen here, drawings, and sometimes, acrobatics.
One of the student helpers was a man named Evgeni Vernigora. We contacted him to ask questions about Van Nice and at the end of the phone call, we asked him whether by any chance he knew a man named Artamonoff. We were shocked to hear him say yes. He knew him as a boy in Istanbul, as part of the Russian émigré community, which had been evacuated through Istanbul in 1920 after the Russian Revolution. Evgeni told stories about growing up as a neighbor to Natalie, Artamonoff’s future wife, and his admiration, as even a child, for Artamonoff’s talent for photography. Eventually, he and his sister, Tatyana Thilmany, allowed us to scan two photographs of themselves as children – taken by none other than Artamonoff himself.