

Wael Shawky

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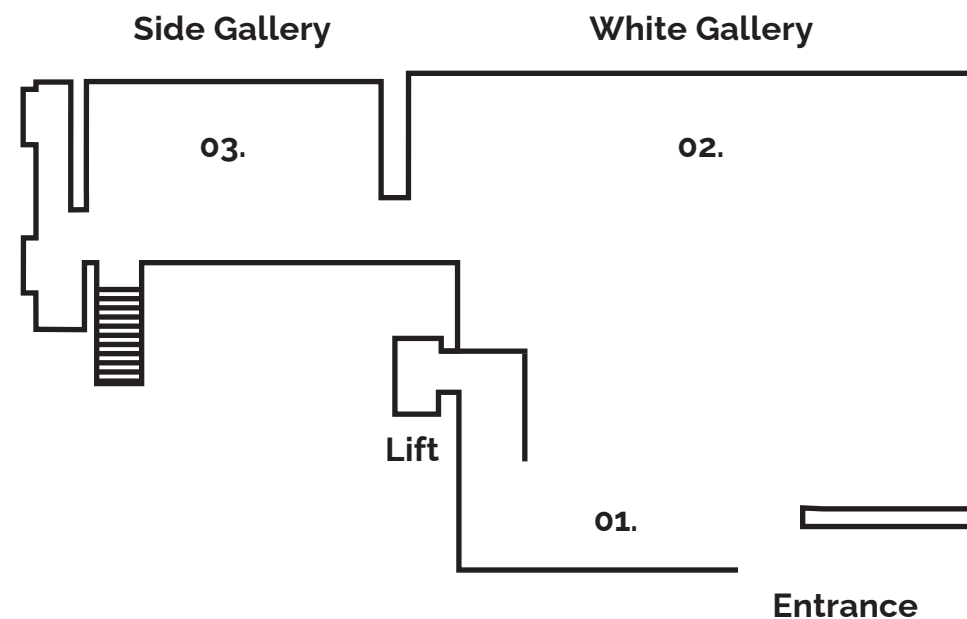
Introduction

Wael Shawky's penetrating film installations explore histories that have shaped our world. Intricately created sets and painted environments become host to exquisitely crafted and costumed characters, who – with a score and libretto written by the artist in classical Arabic – perform versions of history connected to conflicts that continue to rage around us.

In the *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy, Shawky reopens the narrative of the series of religious wars known as the Crusades, telling these histories from an Arab perspective and complicating the idea that the era was defined by a clash of civilisations. In the White Gallery, you will see Murano glass marionettes and static sculptures which perform the two-hour-long *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, a gold leaf inlaid wooden relief, as well as drawings and asphalt flags made by Shawky as he created the *Cabaret Crusades*.

In our adjoining Georgian Gallery is *Drama 1882*, made in 2024 for the Egyptian Pavilion of the 60th Venice Biennale with a cast of live performers in an open-air theatre in Alexandria. Shawky highlights the events leading up to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. He destabilises any singular authority over historical authenticity by embracing the irregular, subjective and contradictory accounts that represent the formation of history. Shawky premieres *Drama 1882* in the UK as blood continues to be shed in the Middle East, stories are revised and accounts changed, calling into question the very idea of truth.

Featuring rare books selected by the artist from the University collections, the exhibition celebrates an extraordinary artist, and honours the Byzantine and Islamic Art Historian David Talbot Rice, in whose memory Talbot Rice Gallery was named when it opened in the University of Edinburgh 50 years ago.



01. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Siege of Acre 1189-91 (after Jean Colombe's After the capture of Acre 1189 by Bourges, 1475)*, 2018
Hand carved wood, gold leaf. 146 x 119 x 6 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

02. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015
HD film, colour, sound, English subtitles. 2 hours.

03. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala* (marionettes), 2014
Murano glass, fabric, enamel, thread. Dimensions variable.

Cabaret Crusades

Wael Shawky

Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Siege of Acre 1189-91 (after Jean Colombe's After the capture of Acre 1189 by Bourges, 1475), 2018

Hand carved wood, gold leaf

Wael Shawky

Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala, 2015

HD film, colour, sound

English subtitles

2 hours

Wael Shawky perceives history as a form of creation and through his artworks provokes history into being a platform for analysis.

The *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy (2010, 2012 and 2015) looks back at the religious wars known as the Crusades that took place predominantly from 1095 to 1291. This was a period of great bloodshed, triggered by a speech given by Pope Urban II in Clermont, France in 1095. Responding to a request for help from the Byzantine emperor Alexios in Constantinople, the Pope called upon his Christian followers to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Land, which was under Muslim control at the time. His call was heeded by British and European knights, royalty, professional soldiers and civilians, and endured over multiple campaigns for centuries.

In researching original manuscripts, paintings and published accounts for the three films, Shawky also incorporated the writing of Arab historians Usama Ibn Munqidh, Ibn al-Qalanisi and Ibn al-Athir, and took inspiration from Amin Maalouf's 1986 book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, giving an Arab historical account of the context and motivation underpinning the Crusades (a word not even used in the Arab world until the nineteenth century). Maalouf's book particularly brought together accounts of brutality, cruelty, mass executions and cannibalism, describing the barbarity of European religious fanaticism from the observations of Arab historians of the time. Across the trilogy, Shawky also shows that not all blood was shed in battle between Muslims and Christians, there was fierce in-fighting for power within both religious camps.

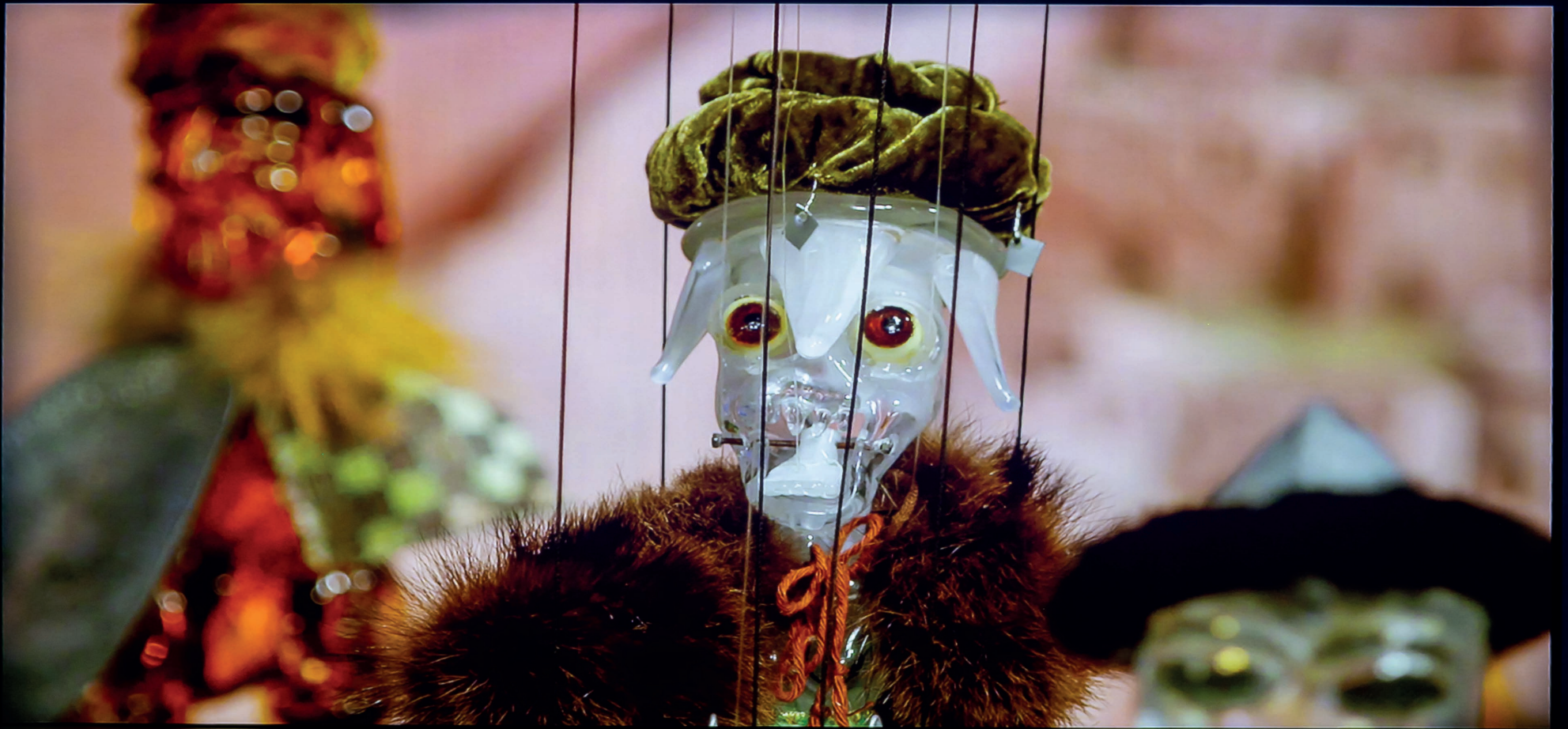
Shawky's cabaret is a "staging" of history, performed by a cast of marionettes changing from wood to ceramic to Murano glass. Across the *Cabaret Crusades* we discover an artist who eloquently weaves quotations of the past together with new, often surreal forms – stunningly evidenced in the wooden relief in this room. With both Christian and Muslim characters speaking in Classical Arabic, Shawky has chosen the lyricism of the language to evoke feeling and nuance, with his own musical score providing the cabaret's soundscape. Across the three films, the music, set, costume, colour, sculpture, libretto, scenography and installation are all conceived as parts of a whole, indicating the painterly tradition that Shawky emerged from as a young artist.

Reflecting on the trilogy that culminates in the two-hour-long *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2015, Shawky refers to the perpetual human anxieties, prejudices and priorities that fuel conflict and aggression then, as now:

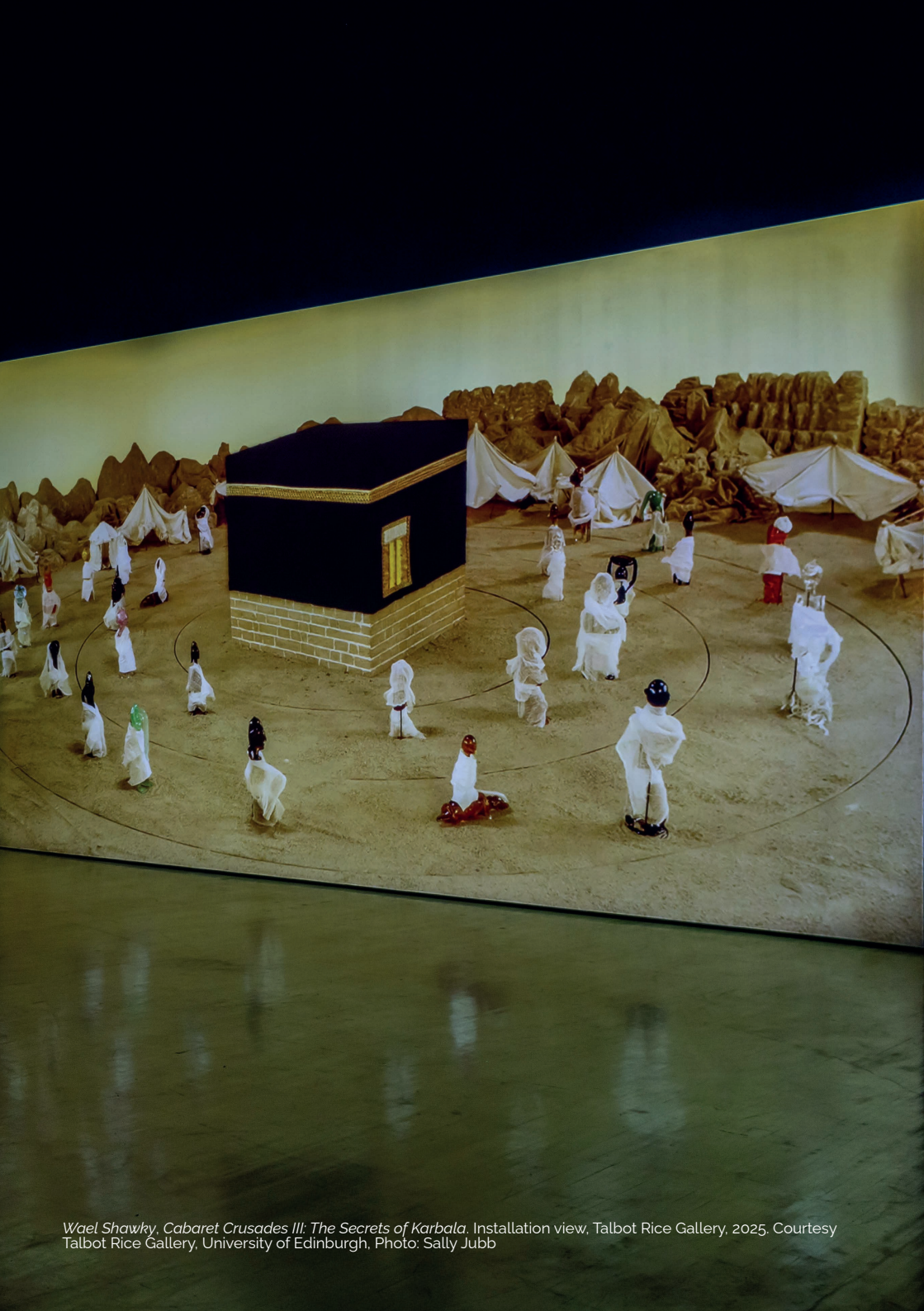
Personally, I believe that the Crusades happened for many reasons: economic, political, religious and personal reasons. I believe that Pope Urban II really believed that the Christians were meant to regain the holy shrine of Jesus Christ. But what happened according to the historical writings is in many ways similar to what is happening today. None of it happened because of people who really believed deeply in God, although the Crusaders were truly religious fanatics. It happened in the name of God, but [not] because of religion. It mainly happened because of political reasons – and the fear of being exploited or attacked yourself.

(Wael Shawky)¹

¹ Shawky, W and Blegvad M.K., 'Interview', in Blegvad, M.K. (ed.), *Wael Shawky – The Crusades and Current Stories*, Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (2018) p. 56.



Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*. Installation view, Talbot Rice Gallery, 2025. Courtesy Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Photo: Sally Jubb



Wael Shawky

Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala, 2015

HD film, colour, sound, English subtitles

2 hours

The Secrets of Karbala is the third in the *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy. It largely follows the period between the Second and Fourth Crusades, but opens with a reflection on events 400 years earlier. The Battle of Karbala (a city in present-day Iraq) during the Muslim civil war of 680 led to the split in Islam of Sunni and Shi'a: Shi'a believing that the Prophet Muhammad's successors – the imamate – should descend from the Prophet and that imams are divinely appointed, while Sunnis follow the principle of consensus and electing leaders. This schism in Islam is one of the sectarian conflicts that persist in the world today. Shawky's opening scene depicts a trap being laid for Husayn, the contested heir-apparent and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Their glass heads bowed in despair and glassy wrists shackled in chains, Husayn's supporters are killed or imprisoned and Husayn is attacked and killed at Karbala by the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. The mangled aftermath of the ensuing violence then fades to "Somewhere in Europe, 1145" and the declaration of a new holy war and call to arms by Pope Eugene III.

Over two hours, history unfolds through Shawky's dramatic retelling, destabilising the authority of Western narratives and rewriting the textures of the medieval world. Saladin succeeds in recapturing Jerusalem from the Crusaders and uniting Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia by putting an end to the Shi'a Fatimid Caliphate. Set in a sprawling geopolitical landscape, *The Secrets of Karbala* unfolds in Kufa, Damascus, Cairo, Aleppo, Hittin, Jerusalem, Acre, Venice and the final, dramatic sacking of the largely Christian (Greek Orthodox) Constantinople in 1204 at the instruction of Venetian doge Enrico Dandolo. Drawing on a dense web of intricate power plots and intrigue, sectarian conflict and ongoing war between Christians and Muslims, the moving concentric rings of the stage construction allow for the sense that everything is happening at once, as the Islamic historians had suggested.

The set design was inspired by ancient representations of the earth at the centre of the universe – an example of which you can view upstairs – in an artwork including classical Arabic speech, electronic music, professional singers and traditional Sufi chanting.

Wael Shawky

Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Siege of Acre 1189-91 (after Jean Colombe's After the capture of Acre 1189 by Bourges, 1475), 2018

Hand carved wood, gold leaf

This fantastical wooden relief is largely based on a miniature painting that depicts the capture of Acre in the then-Kingdom of Jerusalem, a strategically important harbour city which was part of Palestine until 1948, today part of Israel. In this work, Shawky has intervened into the history of European painting by inserting a towering pair of otherworldly figures – seemingly in a moment of peaceful, vulnerable embrace – as a scene of human violence and brutality plays out beneath them. The original miniature by Jean Colombe depicts the massacre of Muslim prisoners, ordered by the king of England, Richard the Lionheart. Colombe, who was painting in 1475, was no more witness to the events of 1189 than Shawky was 900 years later, but is thought to be influenced by *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, an illuminated prayer book Colombe was commissioned to complete around 1485-89. The layers of appropriation, interpretation and imagination accumulating within the work support Shawky's assertion of history being an unfixed medium, and more an accumulation of layers of creation and erasure. In *The Secrets of Karbala*, the same episode features from an Arab historical perspective, with the French king, Philip Augustus arriving in Acre and shown singing alongside Richard the Lionheart. Saladin then pleads with Richard to set the captured Muslim soldiers free, but instead Richard has them killed – shown as a heap of impaled bodies in the film.

When you examine historical texts from the Middle Ages, you become aware that parts of them are rooted in true experiences, whereas other parts are myths or propaganda. Manipulated stories – or so-called "fake news" – coming from the media today can be compared to the propaganda hidden in many historical writings and paintings from Europe as well as the Middle East. This is something I try to address in my large woodcuts. There, I take my starting point in the old European propagandistic oil paintings that illustrate some of the events – or non-events – from the era of the Crusades. (Wael Shawky)²

² Shawky, W and Blegvad M.K., 'Interview', in Blegvad, M.K. (ed.), *Wael Shawky – The Crusades and Current Stories*, Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (2018) p. 51

Wael Shawky

Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala (marionettes), 2014

Murano glass, fabric, enamel, thread

Puppets have a history that dates back more than 3000 years. Made in clay or ivory as "walking statues" or within folk art traditions they appear in cultures the world around. They communicate the desires, values and beliefs of the societies that play with them and, with their limited movement, become ambiguous hosts to the story, music and dramaturgy employed around them. For Shawky, in wanting to approach the Crusades from a perspective less familiar to the West, the marionettes are the perfect alienating device – their strangeness provoking a new experience and understanding.

Across the trilogy, the marionettes change: from 200-year old wooden puppets (borrowed from the Lupi family collection in Turin) in the first film *The Horror Show File*; to ceramic marionettes (made in collaboration with École de Céramique de Provence) in the second film *The Path to Cairo*, referencing the French origins of the Crusades; and finally Murano glass marionettes made in collaboration with Venetian glassblowers for *The Secrets of Karbala*, referencing the conquests of the Crusaders led by the Doge of Venice.

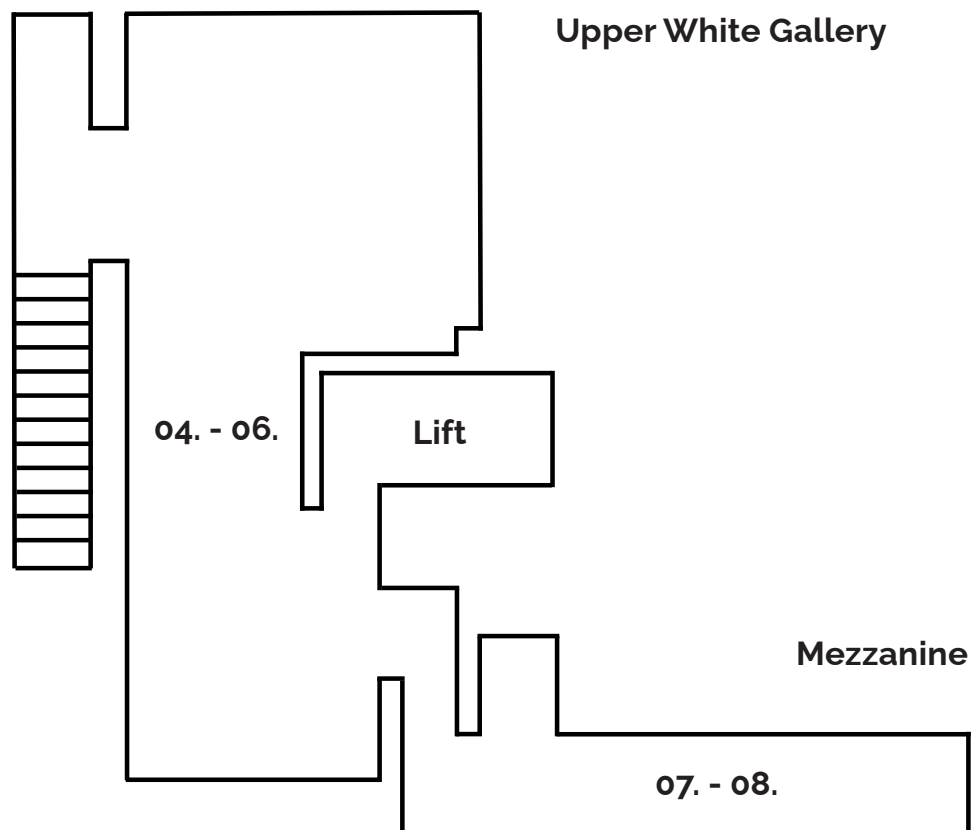
The Murano glass marionettes were made in Italy with masters of a tradition that was enriched through materials and techniques originally acquired from the Muslim world during the Crusades. Their fragile forms – a surreal combination of human and animal features – are an extraordinary achievement, made with moving parts and glass eyes that open and flutter closed. Shawky explains: "I think that this idea about the fragility of a human mortal body [versus] transparency and light as symbols of the human soul, are nicely translated into the glass marionettes of the last film – they are translucent and reflect the light."³

Do we as individuals have singular agency, are we conscious of what we do, are we the authors of our actions, ... and do our choices actually affect the world, or are humans mere puppets and automata subjected to external causes, conditions of fate, forces we neither see nor understand?

(Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev)⁴

³ Shawky, W and Blegvad M.K., 'Interview', in Blegvad, M.K. (ed.), *Wael Shawky – The Crusades and Current Stories*, Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (2018) p. 56.

⁴ Christov-Bakargiev, C., 'Wael Shawky: these are things of this earth, which will persist on this earth', in Christov-Bakargiev, C and Beccaria, M. (eds.), *Wael Shawky*, Milan, Skira Editore (2018) p. 50.



04. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: Drawings*, 2013 - 2015
Fine liner, metallic paint and pencil on paper, 38 x 50 cm

05. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala* (statics), 2014,
Murano glass, dimensions variable

06. Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades: Flags*, 2010
Tar, sandpaper, pigment, paint, galvanised wire, 40 x 50 cm

07. *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* by Muḥammad al-Jazūlī (of Morocco, d. 870 A.H. / 1465 C.E.)
Arabic script in a *naskh* manuscript hand
Illustrated manuscript with views of Medina and Mecca
South Asia, 1220 A.H. (1805-1806 C.E.), with later additions
Or Ms 683

08. Untitled almanac or *rūznāmah*
Ottoman Turkish in the Arabic script
Anatolia (?), circa 1091 A.H. (1680 C.E.)
Or Ms 729

Wael Shawky***Cabaret Crusades: Drawings, 2013 - 2015***

Fine liner, metallic paint and pencil on paper

The drawings shown here have been made alongside the *Cabaret Crusades* and recall Wael Shawky's background as a painter. While he emphasises that all elements of his films are part of a total, compositional whole, in his drawings the line is the protagonist. His surrealist aesthetic is the most pronounced in these drawings where human figures mutate into otherworldly creatures, animals morph into geological forms and architectural features adorn their craggy limbs. His drawings are inspired, in part, by Arabian calligraphers working in the Early Middle Ages – colourists, and storytellers of that era. At times, Shawky depicts figments of the imagination while in other drawings he takes a more rational approach in portraying a historical model of a city or animal. Having encountered the artworks downstairs, you could imagine one of the drawings here as a scene of the besieged town of Acre and a harbour in which boats with bloodied sails, both large and small, swarm the coast. In another drawing, bird-like forms and the limbs of crustaceans are adorned with a puppet master's tools. The choreography of a film set, with collaborators combining their skills to produce costumes, sets, paintings and objects gives way in these drawings to a more ambiguous language. Memory and meaning are less tethered to historical truths and counter-truths, and speculative fiction pervades the landscapes.

Wael Shawky***Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala (statics), 2014***

Murano glass

The static sculptures created alongside the glass marionettes resonate closely with Shawky's image-making. Their gravity-led forms give them a heavy, weighted emphasis that the marionettes defy, and like the drawings they are unfixed in their origins – part imagination, part artefact.

[The drawing is] never really something I know in advance. It can turn into an animal that's connected to a city, for example. What I want from the work is that in the end it has enough precision in its details to ensure that you cannot criticise its parts anymore, because it looks as if it existed in reality, somewhere. It's exactly the way I made all the marionettes – through precision. The marionettes [and statics] are made by blowing and shaping glass, but it's not about blowing, it's about how something can become precise enough so that you believe there's something in reality, that it has a purpose, a function.

(Wael Shawky)⁵

Wael Shawky***Cabaret Crusades: Flags, 2010***

Tarmac, sandpaper, pigment, paint, galvanised wire

The tarmac flags were made early in the creation of the *Cabaret Crusades*, and in their abrasive surface and wire piercings carry with them the notion of brutality that Shawky returns to throughout the trilogy.

The various crosses replicate the standards carried by Crusaders. Rendered in the grey and black of tarmac and sandpaper, the simple thin cross could represent any one of the French, English, Italian, Flemish or Breton Crusaders, Knights Templar or the Order of Saint Lazarus. During this period, a European noble house or church order expressed allegiance through a flag rather than today's idea of a nation-state. In using tarmac, a by-product of the oil industry, Shawky is connecting these various flags around the one raw material that today unites European interests in the Middle East – oil.

The abundance of flags that rallied the various factions to a single crusading cause resonates keenly in the UK – where the St George's Cross, the Red Dragon and the Saltire all co-exist alongside the Union Jack (itself a standard that has been imposed upon numerous other nations as a result of British colonialism). Today, some of these flags have been co-opted as symbols of polarising nationalist politics that they don't necessarily represent.

⁵ Shawky, W., interviewed by the author in New York, 1 February, 2015, Christov-Bakargiev, C, 'Wael Shawky: these are things of this earth, which will persist on this earth', in Christov-Bakargiev, C and Beccaria, M. (eds.), *Wael Shawky*, Milan, Skira Editore (2018) p. 54.

Collections

Wael Shawky has selected two works from the collections of the University of Edinburgh. The almanac featuring astronomical calculations and the manuscript with views of Medina and Mecca are rare books held in the Byzantine and Islamic collection of the Centre for Research Collections. Throughout his research, Shawky consults archives, collections, museums and databases as he mines historical written and visual sources that relate to his research. The pages on display particularly appealed to his scientific and artistic sensibilities, finding resonance in the works he is showing in this exhibition.

When Talbot Rice Gallery was established in the University of Edinburgh 50 years ago, it was named after David Talbot Rice, the Byzantine and Islamic Art Historian who had dreamed of a gallery where students (and today the public) can experience global artistic practices first hand. This exhibition of Wael Shawky hails the dawn of the next 50 years of Talbot Rice Gallery – a university gallery that is part of a global discourse about art and the world we live in, and determined to unearth histories and share stories of the world around us by artists who help us to stretch the human imagination.

Untitled almanac or *rūznāmah* Ottoman Turkish in the Arabic script

Anatolia (?), circa 1091 A.H. (1680 C.E.)
Or Ms 729

This manuscript features astronomical calculations. The diagram with the green centre has a single paper disc known as a volvelle which can be rotated. It was used to calculate Islamic New Year using different calendar systems. On the exterior, within the semi-circles, are the 12 astrological signs of the zodiac. The interior disc marks the Islamic Hijri calendar, comprised of 12 lunar months, each month beginning when a new moon is sighted. The Hijri calendar begins from the Islamic New Year, which commemorates the *Hijrah* (migration) of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. The Hijri is crucial for Muslims to determine the dates of religious events such as Ramadan, Eid, and the Hajj pilgrimage. The Hijri calendar is lunar, while the Gregorian calendar is solar, meaning it is based on the Earth's orbit around the sun.

Revolving concentric circles move in opposing directions in Wael Shawky's film set *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, evoking the different systems of knowledge used to calculate the passing of time and by extension the multiple versions of history recorded by different cultures.

Dalā'il al-khayrāt by Muḥammad al-Jazūlī (of Morocco, d. 870 A.H. / 1465 C.E.) Arabic script in a naskh manuscript hand

Illustrated manuscript with views of Medina and Mecca

South Asia, 1220 A.H. (1805-1806 C.E.), with later additions
Or Ms 683

The *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* is a widespread collection of blessings in praise of the Prophet Muhammad written in the sixteenth century by Moroccan Sufi scholar Muḥammad al-Jazūlī. On the left is a view of the area surrounding the Prophet Muḥammad's mosque and mausoleum at Medina, with an inscription above in Arabic and Persian, "this is the plan of the Radiant Medina". On the right is a view of the sacred complex surrounding the shrine of the Ka'bah at Mecca. Inscribed above in Arabic, "this is the auspicious plan of the Eminent Mecca, may God increase its magnificence and nobility".

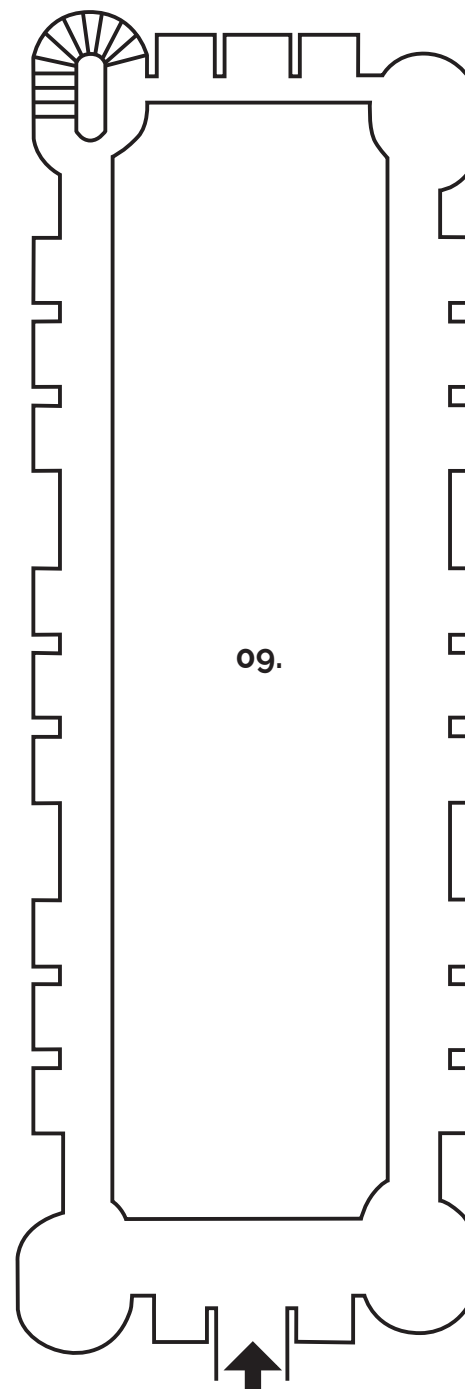
The holiest site in Islam, the Ka'bah is considered to be the *Baytullah* (House of God) and determines the *qibla* (direction of prayer) for Muslims around the world. Circling the Ka'bah seven times counterclockwise, known as Tawaf, is a necessary rite for the completion of the Hajj pilgrimage. Medina is considered the second holiest city and is where the Prophet Muhammad is buried.

This transcription of *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* was made in India but was embellished to look as though it is Ottoman. At the time it was made, works that were associated with Hajj and visitations to Mecca and Medina were very popular with those who went on pilgrimages. The Muslim pilgrimages from India were noteworthy for the British-ruled East India Company, whose records note the vast numbers of pilgrims that travelled to Arabia. Their records also noted that the majority of Indian pilgrims were wealthier than Muslims from the Ottoman Empire, Iran or Africa. At this time, Indian pilgrims tended to invest a lot more in their pilgrimages. They were on good terms with the Ottoman government so benefited from an established infrastructure of places to stay when travelling to Medina and Mecca which were under Ottoman rule. Muslim pilgrims from India took a great interest in Ottoman manuscripts, specifically to do with Hajj and visitations to the Prophet's tomb.

A melting pot of cultures, histories and empire, this manuscript – written by an Indian scribe in *Naskhi* (Arabic) script mimicking Ottoman style, collected by a British official of the East India Company and now residing in a Scottish university collection – captures Wael Shawky's interest in the idea of overlaying multiple historical truths, and how we might experience and appreciate different perspectives other than our own.

Georgian Gallery

09. Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, 2024
4k video, sound, colour, VFX, Arabic
with English subtitles
45 minutes



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, Installation view, Talbot Rice Gallery, 2025.
Courtesy Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Photo: Sally Jubb

Drama 1882

Wael Shawky

Drama 1882, 2024

4k video, sound, colour, VFX, Arabic with English subtitles

45 minutes

Wael Shawky's relationship to historical truth is an uneasy one. His works examine pivotal moments of our shared histories that continue to impact the modern world, injecting them with counter-truths and speculative fiction, creating space for critical reflection and above all, highlighting the effect of the colonial project in the Middle East on the world today.

Drama 1882 brings to life a dramatic café fight in Alexandria which propelled the conflict that led to Britain's occupation of Egypt until 1956, protecting Britain's many interests, including investment tied up in the Suez Canal. Wael Shawky describes the nationalist Urabi uprising and the impact of its ultimate outcome: "this occupation was not like any other ... it was like a turning point in Egyptian history and all the Middle East."⁶

Produced in an historic theatre in Alexandria with a vibrant set design, original libretto and score, and choreography all conceived by the artist, Shawky again stages history as an open, creative process – a cabaret of the past to be entered into. With each scene conceived as a painting, Shawky intentionally removes drama from the production. Introducing stilted, wooden, puppet-like movements into the live performances of the cast, their back-and-forth movements reflecting the oscillation of the political environment, he says, "we are all like marionettes, manipulated by forces we cannot see".⁷

Shown at a time of an increasing historical reckoning for former colonial empires, *Drama 1882* premieres in the UK as blood continues to be shed in the Middle East. Stories are still being written and accounts changed, calling into question the very idea of truth and the making of history.

Setting the scene:

In *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala*, when we left the story of the Crusades with the sacking of Constantinople, we were in the heart of the Byzantine Empire, which had continued more than a thousand years after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. At the end of the Crusades, the Byzantine Empire was soon to begin to disintegrate, and over the next centuries the Ottoman Empire would grow in its place. Conquered by the Ottomans in 1517, Egypt remained under Mamluk rule (the foreign-born Egyptian military caste who had ruled the country for centuries) but was invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte's French forces in 1798. Thus, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Egypt found itself under French occupation. Following the French withdrawal, a power vacuum led to the rise of a dynastic regime, with the ruler elevated to the status of Khedive by the time the events within *Drama 1882* came to pass. Colonel Urabi, the main protagonist of the film, was by then the Minister of War within a revolutionary coalition government, with Khedive Tawfiq as hereditary ruler of Egypt, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire.

Drama 1882 was created for the Egyptian Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024. Written, Directed and Original Score by Wael Shawky. Produced by Mass Alexandria.

⁶ Shawky, W. in conversation with Ryan, T. R. (September 25, 2024) 'Wael Shawky's cinematic restaging of history at the Venice Biennale - Under the Cover', *Artforum video* (accessed Mon 16 Jun 2025)

⁷ Shawky, W and Blegvad M.K., 'Interview', in Blegvad, M.K. (ed.), *Wael Shawky – The Crusades and Current Stories*, Aarhus, ARoS Kunstmuseum (2018) p. 1.



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*. Installation view, Talbot Rice Gallery, 2025.
Courtesy Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Photo: Sally Jubb

Background and Aftermath to *Drama 1882*

Dr Anthony Gorman

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Egypt found itself under French occupation. The French would soon withdraw under pressure from British and Ottoman forces, but the vacuum created allowed an Ottoman officer, Muhammad Ali, to emerge as the leading figure. Appointed as the Ottoman governor in 1805, Muhammad Ali enhanced his position through a series of adept political manoeuvres, and after brutally eliminating his Mamluk rivals, he established a ruling dynasty in Egypt, though still within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the century, another political confrontation between Egyptian and foreign forces would by contrast result in a protracted occupation of Egypt with a compromised ruler.

Although a traditional Ottoman ruler, Muhammad Ali recognised that in order to consolidate his authority and keep European power at bay he needed to overhaul the governance of the country and to equip it with the ability to defend itself. Over the course of his long rule, he laid the foundation of the modern Egyptian state, reorganising its institutions, invigorating its economy and projecting its power abroad. His restructuring of the government, which included the creation of specific ministries, would become the basis of later departments and lead to the expansion of a provincial administration. Largely staffed by the privileged Turko-Circassian elite, the state still remained firmly under the control of the ruler.

Beyond government administration, a dynamic economic policy gave attention to different sectors of the economy. The importance of trade was recognised in the expansion of the canal system that facilitated the more efficient movement of goods and people. Foreign merchants were welcomed to settle in the country bringing their experience and commercial connections with them. Agricultural production was encouraged through regularised land ownership and some generous tax exemptions, even if the monopolistic system forced agricultural producers to sell to the state at a fixed price. Significantly, Muhammad Ali pioneered the cultivation of cotton in Egypt that, in time, would become a great source of international earnings. He also gave attention to the development of industry and trade, establishing state factories again using a monopolistic system.

Competition with Europe also meant the need for an educated class of government officials and administrators. To that end from the 1820s Muhammad Ali supported a series of student missions of young Egyptians to study, particularly in France, from European culture, languages and science. Specialised schools in medicine, translation and administration were also set up in Egypt, often advised or run by European specialists, to disseminate relevant expertise and skills for running the state.

Central to Muhammad Ali's plans was the development of a strong Egyptian army. Up to this time the Turko-Circassian Mamluks had provided the backbone of the military,

but it was clear that a more modern organisation was required. After a failed attempt to base this on Sudanese slaves, he created a conscript army made up of Egyptian Arabic-speaking peasants commanded by Turko-Circassian officers. The Egyptian army would ultimately number over 100,000 well-trained and disciplined troops.

After putting these at the service of the Ottoman Sultan in campaigns in Crete and Greece, but not being fairly recompensed for his efforts, Muhammad Ali reacted by invading Syria in 1831 and occupying it for almost a decade. Only when he appeared to be planning a march on Istanbul itself, was the Sultan able to call on the assistance of European powers to secure an Egyptian withdrawal and a settlement. The terms were not insignificant – Muhammad Ali was forced to greatly reduce the size of his army and to dismantle his state monopolies. In return, however, he was granted the Ottoman governorship of Egypt as a hereditary right. Although frustrated in his greater territorial ambitions and forced to reverse some of his economic policies, by the time of his death in 1849, Muhammad Ali had established a strong, centralised and financially sound authoritarian state and dynastic regime.

If Muhammad Ali's rule can be characterised as that of a strong authoritarian moderniser, this stands in contrast to that of his grandson, Ismail, who came to power as the ruler of Egypt in 1863 and set the country on a different course. Unlike his grandfather who had relied heavily on his military forces to project Egyptian power and his own authority, Ismail pursued the development of the country through a programme of public works, sponsoring a series of infrastructure projects dedicated to the improvement of transport and communications. Roads, rail and irrigation systems better connected the country while a telegraph system facilitated the transmission of news and information.

The flagship project of this programme was the Suez Canal. Long a dream of rulers and hydraulic engineers, a connecting waterway between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea began to become a reality when Said, Ismail's immediate predecessor, signed a concession granting the right to its construction to Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1854. Work began five years later and, at great cost in money and manpower, the canal opened in 1869 to great fanfare with many European members of royalty and various luminaries in attendance, entertained with a performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Promoted as a great benefit to the country, the canal in fact would turn out to be a very mixed blessing. While it certainly facilitated the transport of goods and people between Europe and Asia, the canal thereafter made Egypt a country of critical geopolitical importance and its control assumed international significance.

The other major element of Ismail's policy, consistent with his mantra that Egypt was part of Europe, was the promotion of high culture that testified to Egypt's credentials as a civilised country. To that end Ismail extensively expanded the city of Cairo westwards to the river Nile with European style street planning and architecture, including an opera house in Cairo, a requirement then for any respectable European city, and a commitment to an extensive programme of theatre. In addition to schools, cultural and

educational institutions such as the Teachers College (Dar al-'Ulum) and a National Library (Dar al-Kutub) gave further evidence to this vision. Such developments provided a conduit for new ideas concerning not just culture but politics and society.

In pursuing these policies Ismail encouraged foreigners to migrate to the country, as Muhammad Ali had done before him. Over time a considerable resident presence made up of diverse communities of Greeks, Maltese, Italians, Armenians, Jews and Syrians established themselves largely in the cities and especially in Alexandria. Some of these, members of the haute bourgeoisie working in international commerce, big business and high finance, formed part of the celebrated cosmopolitan elite. The majority, made up of skilled workers, artisans, small businessmen, shopkeepers and professionals, often living in popular neighbourhoods side by side with Egyptians, came to play an important economic and social role in the life of the country. However, this great intermingling of ethnicities and faiths among the popular classes was underwritten by certain structural inequalities, such as the Capitulations, the system of legal and economic privileges accorded to those who held foreign nationality. So, while relations among these diverse groups were often harmonious during times of political tension, whether spontaneous or contrived, they could erupt into social disorder and street violence among its unruly elements.

By the 1870s Ismail's programme of public works began to place an intolerable strain on the Egyptian Treasury especially when export revenues from Egypt's cotton crop began to contract with the end of the American Civil War. The situation was exacerbated by his use of money to secure political favours from the Sultan, among them the title of Khedive, which indicated a more exalted status than that of Ottoman governor, and the right to borrow money without needing permission from the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. Yet Ismail continued to borrow money from exploitative European banks on poor terms. The expense of Ismail's extravagant personal lifestyle only worsened the financial situation.

To meet his mounting debts, Ismail offered tax concessions to increase government revenue in the short term but to the detriment of the longer-term health of the Treasury. When Egyptian finances came under greater pressure in 1875, he was forced to sell his shares in the Suez Canal Company, which were promptly snapped up by the British Government for four million pounds, but to little avail. The following year with tax revenues insufficient to meet its commitments to European banks the country defaulted on its loans. The subsequent bankruptcy settlement required the setting up first of a Debt Commission, then the system of Dual Control that gave British and French representatives a place in the Egyptian cabinet and a role in advising on how to restore the national finances.

This also brought significant political costs. A Commission of Inquiry set up to examine Egyptian finances in March 1878 reported back with a series of recommendations that included the formation of a cabinet based on the principle of ministerial responsibility, a move which effectively undermined the authority of the Khedive. In an increasingly

fraught political atmosphere, the Chamber of Delegates (*Majlis al-Nuwwab*), a body that Ismail had established in 1866 as a means to gain support for his financial decisions, would come to play a significant role. Originally given no real legislative function, the body of 75 indirectly elected members assumed an emerging constitutional significance.

In early 1879 the protest by military officers against their demotion on half pay, one of the measures taken as part of the politics of economic austerity, presaged the rising disquiet among Egyptians. The following month, Ismail used the occasion to seek to reassert his position by endorsing the recommendations of the chamber against European financial advice. Concerned to defend the interests of their creditors, European governments responded by lobbying Sultan Abd al-Hamid II in Istanbul to dismiss the Khedive in June 1879. The Sultan assented and replaced Ismail with his pliable and inexperienced son, Tawfiq, who sought to defend a compromised position amidst the competing claims of both Egyptian and foreign interests.

The next two years of social and political crisis were thus not simply a matter of financial rectitude but also involved constitutional issues, a struggle between the Turko-Circassian elite of the old political order and the rising Arabic notability, as well as a broader political canvas that included informal political groups and secret societies and an increasingly vociferous press. It also raised questions surrounding the status of Egypt within the Ottoman Empire, which had been going through its own constitutional crisis, and relations between the Sultan and predatory European powers.

At the beginning of 1881, elements in the Egyptian military once again sought to challenge the policies of the Egyptian government and the Khedive by protesting budget cuts and the continued preference given to the Turko-Circassian officers over Arabic-speaking Egyptians in the military. Colonel Ahmed Urabi, an Egyptian of peasant background who had unusually reached senior rank in the Egyptian army, emerged as the leader of this movement and was later to be appointed War Minister. Over the next 18 months, this revolutionary group attracted a broad coalition of support made up of Arab notables, some Turko-Circassians, urban intellectuals, merchants, artisans and the Egyptian peasantry (*fellahin*). Captured in the slogan of "Egypt for the Egyptians", the Urabists put forward their political programme that drew on elements of nationalism, constitutionalism and Islamic modernism. It consisted of two principal elements: firstly, to resist the increasing influence of foreign interests on Egyptian finances and administration; and secondly, to call for a new constitution to clearly limit the powers of the Khedive and empower the Chamber of Delegates as representatives of the people. The movement stood in opposition to a weak and wavering Khedive Tawfiq, who was supported by the majority of the Turko-Circassian elites, rural notables, and a British government, keen to defend the interests of European bondholders and its own larger imperial concerns. For some months, political manoeuvring continued among these players but in September 1881 a second military demonstration in front of Abdin Palace, the official residence of the Khedive, set in train a dramatic series of events that would eventually lead to a British invasion of the country.

Aftermath

After the naval bombardment of Alexandria and the landing of troops in the north and at Ismailia on the Suez Canal, the British expeditionary force defeated the Egyptians on the battlefield at Tel al-Kabir in the delta on 13 September 1882 after an early morning surprise attack. The following day British forces marched on to Cairo, where Urabi and his supporters surrendered. Tried for treason against the Khedive and subsequently found guilty, Urabi and his companions were sent into exile to Sri Lanka although some, such as Riyad Pasha, had argued for the death penalty. Urabi would return to Egypt in 1901 but took no further part in public life and died in obscurity in 1911.

The defeat of the Urabist revolution began a long period of British occupation. Despite many promises to withdraw from the country the British government actually set about incorporating Egypt into its imperial vision and colonial economy, while the Khedive and his successor Abbas Hilmi II were left with little authority. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the Ottoman Empire now a hostile power, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate. For many Egyptians the memory of the Urabi Revolution was written off as a failure and the cause of the loss of national independence.

The postwar settlement that followed the defeat of the Ottoman Empire saw Britain further extend its influence in the region. While the national protests across Egypt, known as the 1919 Revolution, had forced Britain to grant it limited independence in 1922, British policy was elsewhere contradictory, inconsistent and self-serving. Following an exchange of letters in 1915-16 with Sharif Husayn of Mecca, the British government had promised to support the establishment of an Arab state after the war in return for Arab forces assisting in the war effort against the Turks. The following year, the British Foreign Secretary (and longtime Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh), Arthur Balfour, issued the declaration that stated British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It looked like double-dealing.

In fact, it was the secret Sykes-Picot agreement signed with France that played the greater role in determining the new political landscape. The newly-formed League of Nations conferred Britain mandatory authority in Iraq and Palestine (and Transjordan), while France took charge in Lebanon and Syria. During the interwar period this ostensible commitment to prepare the mandates for independence provided the window-dressing for the extension of European imperial power. In Palestine, the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 erupted following civil protest against the continued policy of immigration and settlement of Jews. Brutally put down by British troops, the revolt resulted in the death of over 5000 Arab Palestinians, as well as the decapitation of the Arab leadership, and some hundreds of Jews and British nationals. However, with war looming in Europe, Britain realised it needed to shore up its position by conceding greater sovereignty to Egypt and by proposing a short-term route to Palestinian independence that was soon overrun by events.

In the aftermath of World War II, political violence again broke out in Palestine. The bombing of the King David Hotel, the headquarters of the British mandatory administration, by the underground Zionist Irgun was one of a number of actions that persuaded an exhausted Britain to pass the matter of Palestine to the United Nations at the beginning of 1947. In November later that year the UN General Assembly voted for partition, dividing Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The following May Britain withdrew in disorder as Zionist forces defeated first local Palestinian militias then international Arab armies to establish the state of Israel in 1948. Over 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes.

In Egypt, the government, discredited by its failure in the Palestine war and a disintegrating political order, was overthrown in July 1952 by a group of young military officers led by Colonel Gamal Nasser. The new revolutionary government proceeded to establish a republic then negotiated the withdrawal of British forces in early 1956. The Suez Crisis, the coordinated invasion of Egypt by British, French and Israeli forces later that year in response to Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, ended in a political debacle for Britain and American censure. The passing of imperial influence in the region from Britain to the United States, already in evidence with developing American oil interests in Saudi Arabia and the role of the CIA in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadeq in Iran in 1953, was clear and lasting.

Artist biography

Wael Shawky was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1971 where he lives and works, and where, in 2010, he founded MASS Alexandria, an independent nonprofit school for contemporary art, offering spaces for studio work, interdisciplinary research, and critical thinking education. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at MOCA, Los Angeles, USA (2025); Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, South Korea (2024); the Pavilion of Egypt at La Biennale di Venezia (2024); Pompeii Archaeological Park, Italy (2023); M Leuven, Belgium (2022); Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, USA (2021); Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE (2020); ARoS - Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark (2018); Yinchuan Museum of Contemporary Art, China (2017); Castello di Rivoli, Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy (2016); Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria (2016); Fondazione Merz, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); MATHAF, Doha, Qatar (2015) and MoMA P.S.1, New York, NY, USA (2015); K20 Düsseldorf, Germany (2014-15); Serpentine Galleries, London, UK (2013-14); KW Contemporary Art Institute, Berlin, Germany (2012). Wael Shawky participated in the 14th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey (2015); the 11th Sharjah Biennial, UAE (2013); Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany (2012); the 9th Gwangju Biennial, South Korea (2012); SITE Santa Fe Biennial, NM, USA (2008); the 9th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey (2005); and the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy (2003).

Events

Talbot Rice Gallery invites audiences of all ages and backgrounds to connect with contemporary art. All our events are free and can be booked via our website.

Afterhours Making

Explore the exhibition after hours with a hands-on workshop. Spend time with the artwork, meet our team, enjoy a complimentary drink and express yourself.

Saturday Afternoon Talks

Drop-in on a Saturday for a relaxed introduction to Wael Shawky, delivered by members of Talbot Rice Gallery's team.

Academic Tours

These informal events invite a specialist from the University of Edinburgh to take a selective route around an exhibition that expands key themes through their research interests.

British Sign Language (BSL) Tours

Join us for a deaf-led tour in British Sign Language. Explore the exhibitions, exchange and share your ideas.

Sensory Friendly Mornings

We welcome children and adults with sensory needs to enjoy the galleries with adjusted lighting and sounds within the exhibition.

Self-led Trails

Self-Led Trails for young people aged 5+ are available at the front desk and online.

Welcome Week / Mon 8 to Sun 14 Sept

We welcome all new and returning students with a week of tours and events.

Doors Open Days / Sat 27 and Sun 28 Sept

Talbot Rice Gallery is part of the citywide initiative to open doors, celebrating places and stories, new and old.

Edinburgh International Festival / Sat 2 to Mon 25 Aug

We are proud that Wael Shawky is presented in association with Edinburgh International Festival, making it part of their hand-picked programme of the finest performers in dance, opera, music and theatre.

Edinburgh Art Festival / Thurs 7 to Sun 24 Aug

We are delighted to present Wael Shawky as part of this year's Edinburgh Art Festival. Head to www.edinburghartfestival.com to find out more about the programme, and free exhibitions from galleries across Edinburgh.

Thanks

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Texts

Prof Tessa Giblin
P. 01 Introduction
P. 04-05 Cabaret Crusades
P. 09 Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala
P. 10 Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Siege of Acre 1189-91 (after Jean Colombe's After the capture of Acre 1189 by Bourges, 1475)
P. 11 Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala (marionettes)
P. 14 Cabaret Crusades: Drawings, Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala (statics)
P. 15 Cabaret Crusades: Flags
P. 18 Collections
P. 22-23 Drama 1882

Melissa MacRobert
P. 18 Untitled almanac or rūznāmah
P. 19 Dalā'il al-khayrāt by Muḥammad al-Jazūlī

Dr Anthony Gorman
P. 26-31 Background and Aftermath to Drama 1882

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