



The workshop of Egyptian artist Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar.



Sculptures of puppet faces made by Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar, lay on a table at his workshop.



A puppeteer of Egyptian artist Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar's team moves a puppet during a performance at the El-Sawy Cultural Center.

When the Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim sacked Cairo in the 16th century, he was said to have been so amused by a puppet show depicting the hanging of the vanquished Mamluk ruler that he sent the puppeteer to Istanbul to perform it for his son, the young Suleiman the Magnificent. The most famous show of recent times was "El-Laila El-Kebira," or "The Big Night," first performed in 1961. The show recreates a mawlid - a popular street festivals held in honor of local holy figures - with folk songs and dancing. The characters include a village leader, a lion tamer and a belly dancer.



A puppet made by Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar, at his workshop.



Puppets hang on the wall at the workshop of Egyptian artist Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar, in Cairo, Egypt.



Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar, top, prepares puppets during a performance at the El-Sawy Cultural Center, in Cairo.



The face of a puppet in the process being made by Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar.



A puppet made by Mohamed Fawzi Bakkar.

On a recent night at a cultural center in Cairo, Bakkar performed a marionette version of an Umm Kulthum concert, with a puppet standing in for the famed Egyptian diva, who dominated the airwaves across the Arab World from the 1930s until her death in 1975. He laments that there are only two venues for performing puppet shows in Cairo and only a couple dozen marionette artists. "We all dream of having an academy in Egypt that would teach the art of puppetry and to have a theater in every city," he said. "I really dream of having my own theater." — AP