



Research Article

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Reuniting Text and Puppet: Toward Integrated Documentation of Late Ottoman Damascene Shadow Theatre

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Abstract: Re-examining late Ottoman Damascene shadow theatre (*khayāl al-zill*), this article treats the script, the puppet, and the performance space as a single system of meaning-making. It proposes an integrated documentation method that correlates textual, material, and spatial evidence to reconstruct shadow theatre as lived urban practice. This addresses the field's long-standing fragmentation, which isolates manuscripts from surviving objects and from performance venues. Focusing on *Faṣl al-khashabāt* (The Wooden Pillars Play), the study sets late Ottoman Arabic playtexts alongside leather puppets preserved at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in al-'Aẓm Palace to show how vernacular diction, visual caricature, and gesture articulated critiques of bureaucratic authority and class hierarchy in the convivial coffeehouse. Reading word and image together clarifies how humour functioned as social commentary and political mediation. The article concludes by outlining how this method can inform museum practice and heritage curation. In practical terms, it proposes an interactive museum coupled with a linked digital research archive (virtual museum) that pairs object dossiers with time-stamped script excerpts, sonic cues, and short staged clips keyed at the level of individual puppets. This hybrid model extends scholarly reproducibility and public access, offering a transferable protocol for activating intangible heritage and sustaining performance as a living archive.

Keywords: Ottoman Damascus; shadow theatre (*khayāl al-zill*); integrated documentation; material culture; intangible heritage; museum and archive studies

1 Introduction

Shadow play in Syria was inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2018, a designation that highlights both its ongoing social function and the fragility of its transmission (UNESCO 2022, pp. 24–35). Against this backdrop, scholarship on Arabic shadow theatre has often proceeded through fragmentation at two levels: methodologically, by reading scripts as detachable literary artefacts and displaying puppets as mute ethnographic objects while treating performance space as a neutral container; and historiographically, by isolating local traditions (for example, Damascene and Egyptian) in ways that rarely sustain a unitary analytical model for how meaning emerges across text, puppet, and performance ecology (And 1979; Guo 2020; Kahle 1954; Milwright 2011; Moreh 1987, 1992). Such treatment misrepresents a medium whose meanings arose from the coordination of voice, image, and audience. Rather than isolating texts for philological reading, the present study treats them as documentary evidence to be read with puppets and staging conventions so that the social work of performance becomes legible. The same critique applies to museum practice, where partial vitrine display and storage regimes sever objects from the performative relations that once rendered them intelligible (Alivizatou 2006, pp. 47–57; Ferrer-Yulfo 2020, pp. 95–106).

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Faṣl al-khashabāt is the focal case through which these elements are brought back into conversation (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 63–68; Littmann 1901, pp. 56–63; Qaṭāya 1977, pp. 130–134). Read alongside the Damascene corpus at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in al-‘Aẓm Palace, the play allows the correlation of character language with costume codes, scale, articulation, and pigment, so that verbal irony and visual exaggeration can be studied as a single system (Qasqas 2017). The coffeehouse is treated as the performance frame in which spectatorship and satire were co-produced, clarifying how episodic pacing, metatheatrical address, and code-switching were historically received (Qasqas 2025, pp. chaps. 2–3). Coffeehouses in Ottoman Damascus clustered at urban hinges where movement, trade, and worship converged (Weber 1998, pp. 442–447). They typically occupied three settings: the historic core around the Umayyad Mosque, serving the daily flows of worshippers, scholars, and traders; *waqf* complexes along axial streets such as Darwīshīyya (Marino 1995, pp. 275–294), tied to pilgrimage and commercial circuits, and the northern periphery along the Barada River amid workshops and mills (Raymond 2002, pp. 35–44). Positioned along the city’s primary foot-traffic corridors – especially at gate approaches, market spines, and pilgrimage-facing axes – coffeehouses became nodal “pause points” that helped stitch together sacred precincts, commercial exchange, and craft activity. Around the Umayyad Mosque, everyday routes connecting Bāb al-Barīd to Bāb Jayrūn and the start of al-Qaymariyya Street created recurrent, short-distance intersections of prayer-going, shopping, and neighborhood return, which coffeehouses absorbed and concentrated. They drew cross-class publics, making these venues semi-public arenas for appraisal and talk rather than mere leisure stops (Grehan 2007, pp. 124–155). This urban logic underwrites the article’s claim: because performance unfolded at the city’s hinges, meaning arose from coordinated relations among text, figure, space, and audience (see Figure 1).

The article terms this stance “integrated documentation,” a method for reconnecting textual, visual, and spatial data to recover performance as a lived cultural process. Textual strata, whether manuscript or print, are read as scripts for action. Object study attends to materials, construction, iconography, dimensions, and wear as indices of gesture and social type. Spatial analysis accounts for acoustic cues, the choreography of attention, and

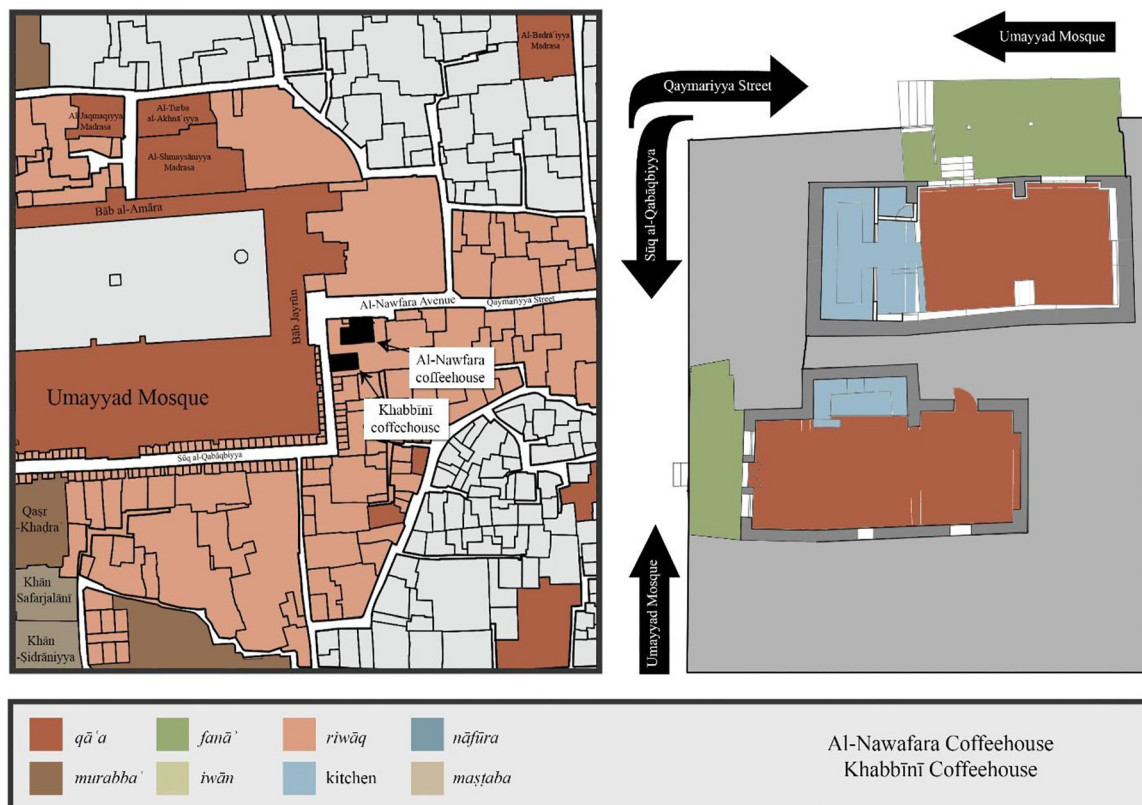


Figure 1: Floor plan of al-Nawfara and Khabīnī coffeehouses and their locations. Drawn by the author, 2017.

forms of audience address that bind utterance to movement and light. The aim is a reasoned reconstitution of relations, not an imagined reconstruction of lost events (Alivizatou 2012, pp. 15–26).

For readers of cultural studies, the contribution is threefold. It offers a way to read vernacular political thought in Ottoman Damascus through attention to performance and humour, showing how code-switching and episodic ruse functioned as techniques of public judgement. It proposes a model of urban publicness that moves beyond European bourgeois paradigms by locating evaluative spectatorship in coffeehouse sociability. It advances a critique of heritage regimes by demonstrating how classification and display manage culture and power, and by arguing for preservation as an act of activation that restores relations among text, figure, space, and audience. From this standpoint, the central question is: how can integrated documentation reconnect textual, material, and spatial evidence to recover Damascene shadow theatre as a form of urban vernacular political thought, and what does this imply for contemporary heritage curation?

Situated within broader debates, the argument contests the routine bifurcation of intangible and tangible heritage by showing that the Damascene shadow theatre refused such a split. Crafted leather figures, tent and lamp, script, voice, and music were interdependent in both production and reception. It contributes to performance historiography by reading the late nineteenth-century textual record as a later stratum within a longer oral continuum and by interpreting the absence of eighteenth-century autographs as a matter of preservation hierarchies rather than a lack of practice. The absence of eighteenth-century writings on coffeehouses and their practices does not indicate their marginality but rather reflects the period's moral and intellectual hierarchies. The Arabic chronicle and other elite genres were authored mainly by members of the 'ulamā' class who "wrote about themselves and for themselves," thereby excluding vernacular, humorous, and socially mixed practices from the historical record. Because coffeehouses were associated with idle talk, music, and mingling across gender or class, they were deemed morally suspect and thus unworthy of scholarly preservation (Rafeq 1990, pp. 180–196; Sajdi 2013, pp. 6–7). It also speaks to museum studies by proposing preservation as activation, in which display and documentation restore dramatic relations instead of isolating aesthetic features.

Guided by this reframing, the study advances a performance-aware protocol that edits for performability, pairs passages with object dossiers, relates scenes to spatial conventions, and incorporates reenactment and workshop practice. Finally, to align method with practice, the article proposes an interactive museum paired with a linked digital research archive. This hybrid model links script lines to each puppet's dossier and to time-coded audiovisual documentation, enabling the integrated method to operate publicly as a reproducible living archive (Chan and Cai 2023, pp. 405–411).

2 The Fragmented Tradition: From Coffeehouse to Museum Case

Khayāl al-zill in Damascus reached modern archives as a broken totality: edited scripts detached from the circumstances of performance and vitrified puppets estranged from voice, gesture, and light. The result is a record in which text survives as literature and figure as artefact, while the relational system that once made them intelligible recedes from view. A coherent account requires reconnecting textual, material, and performative traces into a single medium.

The coffeehouse was the primary matrix of performance, a semi-public arena where voiced narrative and illuminated image met audiences habituated to reading satire as judgment (Marino 1995, pp. 275–294; Pascual 1995, pp. 141–156). Its sociability cut across craft, neighbourhood, and confession, and it cultivated habits of listening through which publics could assess governance, hypocrisy, and social inequity without confrontation. Within this frame, the puppeteer synchronized script, movement, and sound; acoustic signals bound utterance to gesture and focused collective attention.

The textual horizon that survives is asymmetrical. Most Arabic shadow-play scripts were transmitted and recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, preserving narrative structure, stock figures, and speech rhythm but not the kinesthetics of staging. The absence of eighteenth-century Damascene autographs reflects hierarchies of preservation and the vernacular character of the genre, rather than a lack of practice.

These later texts, therefore, constitute a legible stratum of a longer continuum and must be read as documentary evidence of performance rather than autonomous literature.

The material horizon is partial yet rich. The collection at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in al-‘Azm Palace consolidates hundreds of pieces documented in 2015. Leather choice and translucency were optimized for projection, pigment was absorbed into the hide, and articulation at the head, chest, and limbs enabled precise rod manipulation. Edge wear, joint stress, and concavity index frequency and style of use, preserving traces of repertoire and motion within the object, even as display routines present only a small thematic selection and hold the remainder in storage. Editorial labour privileged plot and lexical richness, obscuring blocking, sightlines, and manipulation techniques that are only indirectly inferable; curatorial labour stabilized an object corpus whose materials and joints preserve a physical grammar of performance even as vitrines dampen conditions of reception. In both domains, the medium’s composite ontology was fractured into administrable parts, and the coffeehouse was relegated to the background rather than treated as a constitutive form.

Twentieth-century heritage regimes intensified this fracture by formalizing a policy split between “intangible” and “tangible” domains that the tradition itself refused to accept. Crafted leather figures, tent and lamp, script, voice, and music were interdependent in production and reception, yet listing and display protocols isolated texts, puppets, and oral transmission from one another. What remains, nevertheless, has high evidentiary value. Texts preserve verbal wit, episodic design, and code-switching as traces of social reasoning; puppets preserve material solutions to gesture, visibility, and type that historical audiences read in silhouette; and the coffeehouse frame explains how these traces were synchronized under heterogeneous reception. The task that follows is methodological rather than custodial: to move beyond preserving fragments toward reconstructing relationships among text, object, and performance so that the composite ontology of the form can once again become legible.

3 Scripts and Accounts: Littmann, Kayyāl, Qaṭāyā, Ḥijāzī

Enno Littmann (d. 1958), (Littmann 1901) a non-local scholar who travelled to Bilād al-Shām to deepen his Arabic studies, encountered a shadow play in a Beirut coffeehouse in 1909, and observed several acts locally termed *faṣl* or *bāba* (Aswad 1994, p. 29; Kayyāl 1995, pp. 3–4; Littmann 1901, p. 9). He sought original manuscripts but secured only the script of “Madame Amūn,” though a puppeteer, Rashīd ibn Maḥmūd, who was barely literate, recounted the contents of other plays from his collection; Littmann published the Arabic text of “Amūn” with a transliteration later that year (Guo 2020, p. 23). His further transcripts included *Faṣl al-shaḥḥādīn* (The Beggars) (Littmann 1901, pp. 16–23), *Faṣl al-ḥakīm Afranjūn* (The Foreign Doctor) (Littmann 1901, pp. 24–35), *Faṣl al-afyūnī* (The Opium Addict) (Littmann 1901, pp. 36–43), *Faṣl al-ḥammām* (The Bathhouse) (Littmann 1901, pp. 44–49), *Faṣl al-ṣaḥra* (The Evening Party) (Littmann 1901, pp. 50–55), and *Faṣl al-khashabāt* (The Wooden Pillars) (Littmann 1901, pp. 56–63). In the same period, Edmond Saussey (d. 1937) advanced the study of Arabic shadow plays through fieldwork in Damascus under the auspices of the French Institute, identifying and reproducing 13 plays prepared for publication, although the project was left unfinished before his death; one documented piece, *Faṣl al-ḥammām*, observed in Damascus, was later published (Saussey 1937–38, pp. 7–8, 5–37).

Munīr Kayyāl’s account functions as an encyclopedic survey of the Damascene repertoire, tracing shadow theatre across Bilād al-Shām, with a sustained focus on Damascus and the practices of early-twentieth-century performers. To address gaps left by scarce manuscripts and uneven publication, Kayyāl undertook extended fieldwork from the 1950s, living among the last Damascene puppeteers, including members of the Ḥabīb family, and documenting performances in coffeehouses in Damascus and the Ghūṭa. The volume assembles 23 plays, stabilizing titles, dialectal usage, and structural features; several of these overlap with pieces previously printed by Orientalists and local editors from Aleppo and the Syrian coast, though under variant titles and with differing details, thus allowing cross-comparison with Littmann’s corpus and with the Aleppine and coastal records published by Salmān Qaṭāyā and Ḥusayn S. Ḥijāzī. Within this comparative frame, Kayyāl includes scripts such as *Faṣl al-ḥakīm* (parallel to Littmann’s *Afranjūn*) (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 53–56; Littmann 1901, pp. 24–35; Qaṭāyā 1977, pp. 115–124), *Faṣl al-ḥammām* (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 57–62; Littmann 1901, pp. 44–49; Qaṭāyā 1977, pp. 81–89), *Faṣl al-*

khashabāt, Faṣl al-shaḥḥādīn, Faṣl al-ta'ṣīl, and Faṣl al-dibs, alongside Aleppine and coastal variants such as Faṣl al-ḥimār, Faṣl ghursattān (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 181–186; Qaṭāya 1977, pp. 135–143), and Faṣl al-majānīn/al-māristān (Ḥijāzī 1994, pp. 209–282; Kayyāl 1995, pp. 197–204). He also preserves items not elsewhere attested in print, including Faṣl al-arnab (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 37–44), Faṣl sarāyā 'Aywāz (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 77–84), Faṣl sarāyā Karākūz (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 85–94), Faṣl Sakaswān wa Sharbakān (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 95–104), Faṣl Shar' al-Labaniyya (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 111–120), Faṣl Shalalub (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 121–134), Faṣl Shamm Arīn al-sāḥira (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 135–142), Faṣl Šūfyā (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 143–148), Faṣl al-tāḥūn (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 149–158), Faṣl 'irs Karākūz (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 159–168), Faṣl al-'imlah qīrāt (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 169–180), Faṣl al-laḥim (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 187–196), Faṣl mawt Karākūz (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 205–212), Faṣl al-mawtā (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 213–220), and Faṣl al-waz (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 221–231), thereby extending the Damascene textual horizon and providing a controlled basis for correlating script, performance convention, and social setting.

4 Shadow Puppetry: Museum Collection

The shadow puppets at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in al-'Azm Palace form the principal material archive for Damascene shadow theatre. The corpus was consolidated under Shafīq al-Imām through staged acquisitions: 11 pieces in 1955 from Muḥammad 'Id al-Ashqar, a further 189 in 1965 from 'Alī al-'Adrawānī, and several smaller lots in 1966 (Bunnī 2005, pp. 170–174). A portion is displayed in the Writers' Hall and the Coffeehouse Hall (see Figure 2); the remainder is stored in cloth bags within boxes with naphthalene. In 2015, each item was photographed, measured, and condition-checked, producing a working catalogue for research and conservation. The documented set comprises 463 items, numbered 5,152–5,684 (Ma'la 2017 pp. 60–61). The figures are cut from semi-translucent animal hide, most likely camel or goat, with pigment absorbed into the grain to project colour under back-lighting. Articulation at the head, torso, and limbs supports precise rod manipulation. Condition notes record dryness, edge wear, joint stress, and slight concavity, which index frequency and repertoire of use. For analysis, the collection can be read through two lenses. By provenance, items cluster around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and the coast, identified through workshop style, construction, and performance testimony.



Figure 2: The coffeehouse hall in the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions. Photographed by the author, 2025.

The second classification is thematic. It includes warrior figures, encompassing knights (*fursān*), heroes (*abṭāl*) riding horses or other animals, and soldiers with war gear, often featured in plays drawn from Arab history such as 'Antar and 'Abla, al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars, and Abū Zayd al-Hilālī. It includes the main shadow-theatre characters, namely *Karākūz*, 'Aywāz, *Qashqū* or *Āsh'ū*, *Bakrī Muṣṭafā*, *al-Mudallal*, *Qurayṭim*, *Dūrnī Zāda*, and *Ṭarmān*. It includes figures from daily life, depicting activities such as cleaning, well-digging, performing magic, religious duties, and household tasks. It contains figures with sexual connotations, representing sexual organs or explicit motifs. It includes mythical and legendary creatures that combine human and animal features or draw on mythology, such as ghouls and dragons. It includes decorations, fixed scenic elements that establish a setting, such as palaces, mosques, courts, and war-related elements like cannons and tanks. Finally, it includes animals, representing aquatic and terrestrial species.

5 Methodological Framework: Integrated Documentation as Critical Reconnection

Integrated documentation is conceived as a triangulated method that reconnects what the archive has separated, combining: archival study of textual sources, material–visual analysis of puppets and scenic devices, and contextual mapping of performance space and audience interaction, so that evidence can be read across voice, body, and space rather than in isolation.

- 1) Archival study of textual sources: Scripts, manuscripts, and printed editions are treated as performance documents rather than autonomous literature: edited playtexts are mined for staging cues, episodic units, stock types, register shifts, and code-switching that governed timing and audience legibility. The late nineteenth–early twentieth-century stratum is read critically as a documentary horizon for a longer performative continuum, marked by hierarchies of preservation and the vernacular, and by the often bawdy character of the genre (Kayyāl 1995; Littmann 1901).
- 2) Material and visual analysis of puppets and scenic devices: Object study addresses materials, iconography, scale, and proportion for screen legibility, pigmentation absorbed into the hide for chromatic projection, and condition markers that index repertoire and frequency of use. High-resolution photography and measured drawings are paired with typologies that correlate object features with character functions and gesture vocabularies, allowing figures and props to be read as condensed repositories of performance knowledge.
- 3) Contextual mapping of performance space and audience interaction: The coffeehouse is reconstructed as the semi-public frame in which voiced narrative and illuminated image met heterogeneous audiences; mapping includes spatial choreography (screen placement, viewer proximity, seating flows), acoustic ecology (lamp and room acoustics), and the sonic cueing through which performers coordinated collective attention (Habermas 1993, pp. 43–51). Attention to the puppeteer's real-time synchronization of multiple voices and figures anchors textual and object readings in historically specific practices of reception (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, pp. 367–368).

Integrated documentation resists the policy bifurcation of “intangible” and “tangible” heritage by treating voiced text, crafted body, and performative space as interdependent registers of a single medium rather than separable domains (Alivizatou 2012, pp. 15–26). It reads texts as scripts for action rather than autonomous literature, interprets puppets as indices of gesture and social type rather than mute artefacts, and approaches the coffeehouse not as backdrop but as the constitutive frame through which audiences recognized satire as judgment (Hattox 1988, pp. 92–111). By restoring these dialogues: text with figure, figure with space, space with audience; the method repairs the archival fracture that turned performance into administrable parts and recovers the conditions under which meaning historically emerged.

Because it coordinates textual, material, and spatial evidence, integrated documentation functions simultaneously as a research method and a curatorial protocol. For records, it aligns passages from scripts with object dossiers (materials, construction, dimensions, wear), annotates gestural vocabularies, and cross-references

spatial–acoustic cues so that voice can be re-encountered as movement and light (Aswad 1994, p. 35; Kayyāl 1995, p. 223). For exhibitions, it informs layouts that pair figures with the scenes and lines they activate, choreographs sightlines and sound to approximate coffeehouse attention, and embeds reenactment and workshop practice within interpretation so that knowledge circulates through action as well as description. The same protocol underpins the gallery programme and its companion digital research archive, turning documentation into a public, citable resource without introducing any new numbering scheme.

Framed in this way, preservation becomes a practice of reactivation. Editing, cataloguing, imaging, and spatial analysis are organised to restage the interplay of speech, gesture, and audience rather than to vitrify remnants. The outcome is an archive that can be used, taught, and staged – not merely stored – safeguarding objects and pages alongside the civic memory embedded in their coordinated use.

6 Case Study: *Faṣl al-khashabāt* (The Wooden Pillars)

Faṣl al-khashabāt unfolds through a sequence of ten acts in which Karākūz and ‘Aywāz, tasked by Ash’ū Āghā with transporting wooden pillars from Damascus to Antioch, repeatedly spin fabrications that satirize authority through episodic reversals. The narrative’s cyclical structure repeatedly stages trickery, recognition, and renewed manipulation, with moments of theatrical self-consciousness foregrounding performance as performance. In a tradition with few contemporaneous scripts or visual records, Damascene shadow play persisted as an oral narrative form, whose continuities are legible in later-nineteenth-century texts and coffeehouse practice rather than in fixed manuscripts.

Faṣl al-khashabāt exists in four distinct versions, each reflecting the regional nuances and cultural diversity of shadow theatre tradition in Bilād al-Shām. The first, originating from Lebanon, is documented in Littmann’s account. The second, from Jerusalem, also receives a brief mention by Littmann. Ibid. The third version, hailing from Aleppo, is detailed in Qaṭāya’s account. The Aleppo version primarily draws from the work of Marī al-Dabbāgh, the last active shadow puppeteer in Aleppo. Lastly, the fourth version, from Damascus, is recorded by Kayyāl. Kayyāl, M. (1995). These variations highlight the adaptability of *Faṣl al-khashabāt*, underscoring its widespread appeal and cultural significance across Bilād al-Shām (Kayyāl 1995, pp. 63–68; Littmann 1901, pp. 56–63, 64–67; Qaṭāya 1977, pp. 130–134). This oral-performative logic resonates with the *maqāmāt*, an “assembly” genre of episodic delivery in *saj’* and verse, where deception and rhetorical display are designed for live captation; the Damascene *maqāma* provides a particularly close analogue in form and technique (Moreh 1992, pp. 105–110; Yāghī 1969, p. 16).

Karākūz is cast as a “man of the people,” poorly educated, sometimes illiterate and credulous, a sympathetic butt whose mishaps secure audience identification (Kayyāl 1995, p. 11). ‘Aywāz, by contrast, is educated, cultured, and shrewd, aligned with Damascene middle-class sensibilities, and he engineers the verbal ruses that convert official pretension into comic spectacle (Kayyāl 1995, p. 10). Ash’ū Āghā condenses Ottoman authority in caricature (bald, comically figured, even with wheels on his shoes) and, read against Janissary insignia and turban codes, signals a fall from dignity and hollowed rank (Rafeq 1980, pp. 66–95). Linguistically, the play works through code-switching and register shifts – alternating coarse local dialect, marketplace slang, and interspersed Turkish expressions – so that rhetorical dexterity itself becomes a tactic for undermining official discourse while remaining performatively permissible. Poetry (notably *zajal*) and proverb usage punctuate scenes, Karākūz’s declamations and ‘Aywāz’s verses both heighten dramatic effect and anchor satire in vernacular communal knowledge, enabling the audience to read critique through familiar poetic-proverbial codes (Ḥijāzī 1994, p. 437). Within the coffeehouse’s semi-public frame, humour operates as a “hidden transcript”: anonymity, euphemism, and ritual inversion enable critique while avoiding direct confrontation, a dynamic the play mobilizes through its episodic deceptions and coarse vernacular (Scott 2008, pp. 136–138).

The successive fabrications that drive *Faṣl al-khashabāt*, the grocer’s “custody” of the pillars for a Majīdī riyāl, the licorice-seller detour, the peaches episode, and ‘Aywāz’s oil-mule catastrophe and invented fine – are staged on bodies whose materials and iconography were immediately legible in Damascus. The ‘Aywāz figure carries a shoulder basket used as a lantern with a candle, and a second basket at the waist. The figure has a groomed beard,

a hat-shadowed face, and an articulated hand cut from camel or goat hide for translucency under light, which aligns deception with guidance and provisioning. The Karākūz figure features asymmetrical arms, a cap that conceals baldness, and oversized footwear, rendering mobility unruly and improvisatory. Ash'ū Āghā's stockier carriage and cane play the foil in scenes where money is dispensed after each tale, tightening the bond between linguistic ruse and visible gesture.

The play's critique turns on the coupling of caricatural bodies and code-shifting speech. 'Aywāz and Karākūz move between marketplace slang and bureaucratic diction, alternating Arabic with Turkish. This tactic hollows out official phrasing at the very moment Ash'ū Āghā responds with yet another coin. This linguistic play operates alongside visual excess – misproportioned limbs, emphatic footwear, dishevelled headgear – so that appearance and utterance perform the same unmasking of petty power. In the semi-public coffeehouse, this convergence remains permissible as a “hidden transcript” of dissent, and its carnival inversions convert command into spectacle (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10; Bowles 2015, pp. 45–61).

Karākūz, housed in the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions at al-'Azm Palace under item number 1546, measures 27 × 14.5 cm and is made of animal hide, most likely camel or goat (see Figure 3). The surface is semi-translucent and was carefully prepared to absorb natural pigments, allowing the colours to appear vivid and luminous when illuminated from behind during performance. His persona is that of a man of the people – often poorly educated, sometimes illiterate and credulous – whose mishaps invite sympathy even as they license satire (And 1963, pp. 32–34). The costume renders this social reading materially: loose, baggy *sirwāl*, a garment widely worn in Damascus for practicality and ease of movement, here appears aged and weathered to underscore classed vulnerability (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, p. 301; Stillman 2003, p. 72). The footwear pairs *mist* (socks) with *jazma* (boots) (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, pp. 81–82), whose exaggerated proportions and decorative bows serve a theatrical function, an ironic elevation that hints at mobility and stage “heroism” while marking the character as socially ambiguous. The *'amāma* is intentionally messy and misshapen, in contrast to the structured turbans of elites. In Ottoman and Damascene practice, the size, style, and *qāwūq* base of a turban signalled rank, profession, and identity; thus, the disordered wrap reads as a visual refusal of decorum (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, pp. 373–379). The emphatic large mustache (*shārip*, pl. *shawārib*), a defining feature of Damascene masculinity, complicates the lowly attire: its exaggerated scale performs bravado and unconventional courage, aligning the “butt of the joke” with a folk hero's resilience. By the late Hamidian and Second Constitutional Eras (1876–1918), the mustache emerged as a symbol of modern masculinity and generational identity, particularly among urban elites such as bureaucrats, military officers, and professionals. In contrast to the full beards of earlier generations – associated with religious orthodoxy and patriarchal authority – the mustache signified progress and reform, reflecting



Figure 3: Photograph of Karākūz Puppet, 19th century, camel leather, 27 × 14.5 cm. Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, al-'Azm Palace, Damascus, Syria. Photographed by Hala Qasqas, 2015.

ideals of urbanity and modern identity while distinguishing them from both the conservative bearded elders and fully Europeanized elites (Wishnitzer 2018, pp. 291–293).

‘Aywāz, housed in the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions at al-‘Azm Palace under item number 5299, measures 28.5 × 8 cm and is made of animal hide, most likely camel or goat (see Figure 4). Its surface retains traces of fine pigmentation in red and green tones, applied to the hide to enhance visual depth and legibility on the illuminated screen. The build is elongated and composed, articulated in multiple segments, with a lantern-basket slung over the shoulder to hold a lit candle and a second basket at the waist for collecting and distributing food, object cues that stage guidance, provision, and social address (Guo 2020, p. 197). The costume consolidates this reading for a Damascene audience: fitted trousers, in contrast to Karākūz’s baggy workwear, mark deliberation and self-control; mist worn with structured jazma, often finished with decorative bows, presents disciplined movement on the screen; and a meticulously wrapped *‘amāma*, likely on a *qāwūq* base, signals education and urban propriety, aligning him with the city’s mercantile-scholarly decorum (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, pp. 373–379). His neatly trimmed beard and mustache further register authority and self-discipline within Damascene aesthetic norms, reinforcing a persona of cultivated intelligence. In performance, this respectable body authorizes the ruse: attire, bearing, and object accoutrements make credible the verbal strategems by which ‘Aywāz – figured across the tradition as educated, cultured, and aligned with the middle strata – maneuvers and unmask officious speech (Aswad 1994, p. 20).

Āshū’ Āghā, housed in the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions at al-‘Azm Palace under item number 1546, is a nineteenth-century leather figure measuring 31.5 × 8.7 cm. The puppet retains the texture and translucency characteristic of Damascene craftsmanship, with visible signs of age, such as dryness, slight concavity, and edge wear, that testify to repeated handling during performance (see Figure 5). Despite these traces of use, the fine detailing and smooth finish demonstrate a high degree of technical skill and aesthetic refinement. He is bald and, in some accounts, fitted with small wheels on his shoes – comic devices that render movement as mindless bustle and that the dramaturgy converts into an index of manipulable authority (Aswad 1994, p. 115). The figure is explicitly read against Janissary visual codes in Ottoman Damascus (Ibn Budayr 1959, pp. 108–110), where turbans, robes, and accessories indexed identity and rank; the unwinding or loss of the headdress signaled dismissal, so the stripped head functions as a visible sign of fallen office even as gestures of command persist (Rafeq 1980, pp. 66–95). The character’s speech is repeatedly punctuated by Turkish expressions and by fresh payments at each deception, Majīdī riyāls handed over as the tale renews, so that authority appears linguistically and materially pliable within the coffeehouse optic.

James C. Scott’s notion of the “hidden transcript” provides a precise vocabulary for describing how Damascene shadow theatre encoded dissent in forms that could circulate without provoking direct sanction (Scott 2008, pp. 136–138). In Scott’s terms, performers and audiences cultivated an offstage repertoire of critique – articulated through anonymity, euphemism, and “grumbling” that could be voiced within the public transcript while



Figure 4: Photograph of ‘Aywāz Puppet, 19th century, camel leather, 28.5 × 8 cm. Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, al-‘Azm Palace, Damascus, Syria. Photographed by Hala Qasqas, 2015.



Figure 5: Photograph of Ash'ū Āghū Puppet, 19th century, leather, 31.5 × 8.7 cm. Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, al-'Azam Palace, Damascus, Syria. Photographed by Hala Qasqas, 2015

maintaining the appearance of deference (Scott 2008, pp. 154–156). This framework aligns with the coffeehouse setting, where everyday resistance took shape not as open confrontation but as coded speech and symbolic inversion, giving spectators a means to negotiate power collectively and safely. The result is a performative vocabulary in which humour functions as critique and intelligible commentary on governance and social hierarchy (Figure 4). Importantly, this critical register can support the investigation of historically specific moments, not only as “satire” but as a narrative method for reconstructing how power is staged and negotiated – for example, in recent graphic-historical storytelling that makes Karagöz and Hacivat protagonists around the 1923 Congress of Lausanne (Conlin et al. 2024, p. 104).

Faşl al-khashabāt exemplifies this dynamic. Through a sequence of episodic ruses, Karākūz and 'Aywāz deploy euphemism and inversion to expose Ash'ū Āghā's inconsistencies, embedding censure within comic misrecognition rather than explicit denunciation. Code-switching between local dialect and Ottoman bureaucratic phrasing further accentuates the gap between official language and lived reality, enabling audiences to “read” authority's vulnerabilities while remaining within the bounds of sanctioned amusement. In the coffeehouse, this interplay of linguistic irony and staged exaggeration transforms performance into an act of aesthetic resistance: laughter becomes a collective act of judgment through which spectators confront, interpret, and momentarily reconfigure the social order that governs them (see Figure 6A and 6B).

In Damascene shadow theatre, meaning emerges from the conjuncture of voiced narration and song, the illuminated leather image in motion, and the responsive coffeehouse audience, rather than from any element in isolation. This composite logic is articulated as a unified expressive system in which words, gestures, light, and audience response cooperate to generate sense on the screen. The puppeteer's craft depends on synchronizing script, character movement, and sonic cues in real time, a coordination that sustains multiple voices and images in concert (al-Qāsimī et al. 1988, pp. 61–62; Kayyāl 1995, p. 11). The device of *girza* formalizes this reciprocity by inserting interludes that recalibrate rhythm and attention in response to spectators, making audience feedback part of the textual flow (Pavis 1998, p. 186). Acoustic signals such as the three opening taps, heel percussion, and the *ṭuwayṭa*, which marks moments of exaggeration or surprise, bind utterance to gesture and focus collective attention (Aswad 1994, p. 35; Kayyāl 1995, p. 223). Material technique underwrites the same effect: dyed, semi-translucent leather, articulated joints, and precisely fitted rods translate speech acts into visible motion and chromatic play, rendering “voice” legible as light and movement before a gathered public (Ma'ālā 2017, pp. 43–44).

Read across text, object, and reception, the shadow play appears as vernacular political thought made performative, a medium in which humour organizes shared recognition and critique. In *Faşl al-khashabāt*,



Figure 6: Al-Nawfara Coffeehouse: Historical Reconstruction and Present Form. (A) Imaginative sketch of al-Nawfara coffeehouse, reconstructing its historical setting with a maṣṭaba and traditional communal seating arrangements. Drawn by the author, 2024. (B) Photograph of al-Nawfara coffeehouse in its present form, illustrating the architectural and social transformation of coffeehouses in Damascus. Photographed by the author, 2017.

episodic deception and direct audience address stage bureaucratic inefficiency and the absurdities of hierarchical power as matters of common sense, inviting collective assessment rather than deference. This political consciousness is embedded in ordinary expressive forms such as proverbs and verse, market slang and bureaucratic jargon, as well as familiar melodies and sound cues, all of which allow coffeehouse audiences to read authority against the grain while remaining within the bounds of permissible performance. In this configuration, laughter functions as a socially intelligible judgment: the art of everyday recreation becomes a site of cultural critique and subtle resistance in Damascus (Bakhtin 1984, p. 18).

7 Rethinking Heritage: From Preservation to Activation

Current heritage practices, whether articulated through international listing frameworks such as UNESCO or through local modes of museum display, often immobilize a once-living dramaturgy by reducing it to a series of curated fragments (Alivizatou 2006, pp. 95–106; Ferrer-Yulfo 2020, pp. 47–57). In practice, exhibition protocols privilege conservation over the performative relations among voice, light, and audience, while most materials remain inaccessible in storage. The same fragmenting tendency appears in text-only editorial traditions: modern compilations by Kayyāl and by Qaṭāyā and Ḥijāzī render the repertoire legible as literature but risk disembedding it from its visual and spatial matrices. More fundamentally, a policy habit of bifurcating “tangible” and “intangible” heritage codifies the split that Damascene shadow play historically refused to accept, since the practice depended on the interdependence of crafted leather figures, tents, and lighting with script, voice, and music. As an alternative to activation, this article pairs an interactive museum with a virtual museum (a linked digital research archive) that reunites these registers by cross-referencing object dossiers with annotated passages, recorded cues,

and brief restagings, so that preservation proceeds through restored relations rather than static accumulation (al-Qāsīmī et al. 1988, pp. 367–368).

An alternative to custodial stasis is an activational model in which documentation reconstitutes the performative system of voice, image, and space rather than isolating its parts. Editing and archival work proceed alongside material study and high-resolution imaging, and the resulting materials are shown together in contexts that restore the relations on which meaning depends. More broadly, the articulation proposed here – linking archival study, digitisation, and the reactivation of relationships that generate meaning – aligns with a wider shift in exhibition-making toward relational and collaborative approaches. In several recent ethnographic cases, such approaches have been mobilised as an emancipation strategy, restoring visibility and shared interpretive authority for communities previously marginalised within museum narratives (Paride and Marco 2021, pp. 27–48). To preserve only the script is to keep a voice without a body; to preserve only the puppet is to leave a body without a voice. Preservation is thus reconceived as staged practice: galleries pair original figures with the specific scenes and lines they animate; a performance hall mounts documented plays so that audiences witness the interplay of words, gesture, light, and response; and community workshops transmit craft and technique through embodied practice. A companion virtual museum extends the same programme online as a navigable, citable corpus – bringing manuscripts, recordings, interviews, and design materials into a single interface with concise restagings and annotated sonic cues – so researchers, teachers, and practitioners can move between text, object, and performance without leaving the archive.

By design, this is performance-aware documentation: it requires that sonic cues (the three opening taps, heel percussion) be recorded and annotated, that the puppeteer’s orchestration of multiple voices and movements be documented and transcribed (Aswad 1994, p. 35; Kayyāl 1995, p. 11) and that the coffeehouse’s semi-public spatiality be mapped and, where feasible, approximated, so that these elements are treated as integral evidence rather than paratext. The same logic guides the method: a triangulated record integrating textual, visual, and historical analysis, expandable with ethnographic parallels and lightweight digital reconstructions. Within the virtual museum, these materials are rendered as linked layers: synchronized timelines that align transcript, cue notes, and brief re-stagings; object pages that gather high-resolution imaging and measured drawings; and an interactive plan of the coffeehouse that visualizes sightlines and acoustic focus. In short, preservation becomes a mode of reanimation – returning the shadow to its light by restoring the interdependence of text, object, and scene in forms that can be performed, taught, and contested (see Figure 7).

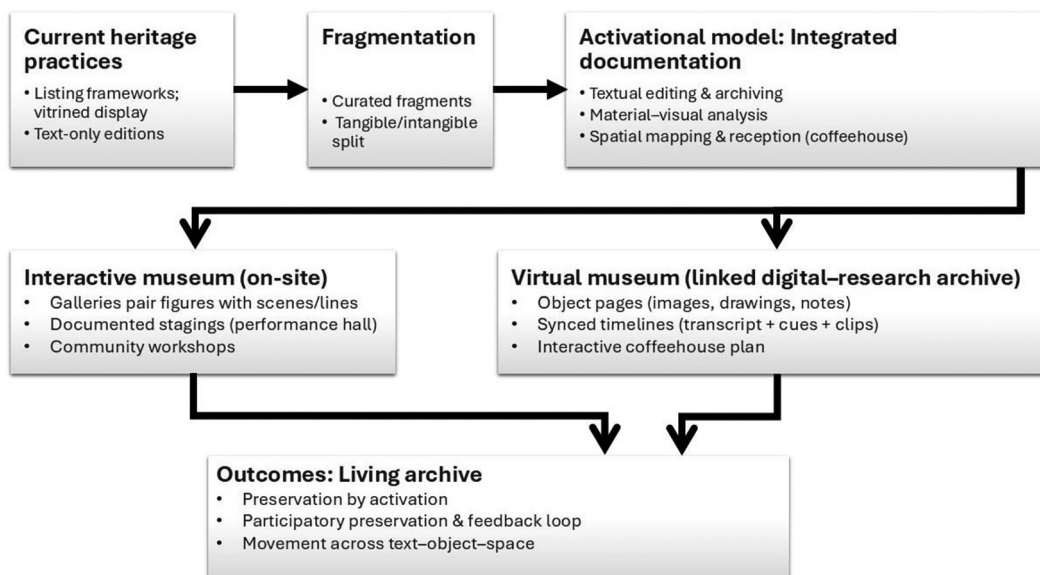


Figure 7: From fragmentation to activation: interactive (on-site) and virtual (online) museum pathways of the integrated-documentation model leading to a living archive. Diagram by the author, 2025.

An interactive museum dedicated to Syrian shadow theatre would shift heritage work from static accumulation to relational activation by reuniting script, figure, space, and public (Alivizatou 2012, pp. 15–26). Such a museum would depart from vitrined display and adopt a program that integrates exhibition, performance, education, and research, inspired by successful precedents at the Linden Museum (Stuttgart) and the Shadow Puppet Museum (Athens) (Exhibition, October 3, 2015 until April 10, 2016). Galleries present original and reconstructed puppets alongside the specific scenes and texts to which they belong, with interpretive media clarifying language, symbolism, and context so visitors encounter a working system. A performance hall hosts regular, documented stagings of plays such as *Faṣl al-khashabāt*, bringing the interplay of voice, gesture, light, and audience response into the institution. A linked digital research archive consolidates manuscripts, recordings, interviews, designs, and scholarship in partnership with academic institutions and provides open, citable access (Stuttgart). Adjacent community spaces sustain practice through workshops in puppet-making, voice work, and script interpretation, while a curatorial strand foregrounds regional diversity by juxtaposing materials from Damascus, Aleppo, and coastal cities. The aim is revival rather than freezing – so that shadow theatre is encountered as a living art of urban memory (Nikolić Đerić et al. 2020, pp. 72–75).

Integrated documentation reframes curatorial work as a multi-voiced practice that stages relationships among text, figure, space, and public, turning collections into sites of exchange for researchers, artists, and communities. In practice it couples editorial and cataloguing work with material study and spatial-performance reconstruction, and it embeds interpretation in collaborative programmes – co-produced exhibitions, rehearsal-based re-stagings, and workshop series – that test claims in public. This activational stance entails participatory preservation, in which scholars, artists, and local communities co-design ways to reactivate shadow theatre as living cultural memory, shifting the museum from repository to arena of shared practice and dialogue (UNESCO 2003). A virtual museum (linked digital research archive) and community workshops supply the infrastructure for this ongoing conversation, while regular stagings of documented plays return audience response to the interpretive loop. This curatorial turn aligns with interdisciplinary expansion – incorporating ethnographic parallels, lightweight digital reconstructions, and performance-based study – making preservation an open, iterative conversation that connects scholarly analysis with artistic craft and community memory (Nikolić Đerić et al. 2020, pp. 96–100).

8 Conclusion: Toward a Living Archive of Shadow Theatre

Faṣl al-khashabāt shows that the Damascene shadow theatre spoke in a composite voice – script, figure, light, and audience response forming a single expressive system. Read alongside the al-‘Azm Palace corpus, text and puppet emerge as interdependent media: language animates leather bodies; those bodies render language visible as movement and colour. Studied together, edited scripts and extant figures yield complementary evidence – narrative structures, character types, material choices, and symbolic motifs – sufficient to recover the social function of performance within the coffeehouse frame.

Integrated documentation makes the politics of everyday humour in this medium legible. Satire, code-switching, and episodic ruse operated as techniques of collective appraisal – what Scott terms a “hidden transcript” – licensed by carnivalesque exaggeration and travesty. The repertoire’s devices, from *girza* as recalibration to musical and percussive cues as collective signals, confirm that meaning arose through reciprocal adjustments between the stage and the spectators within a semi-public arena.

A living archive follows from these findings. Preservation must activate relations: editing and archiving texts, photographing and analysing figures, and re-presenting both within staged contexts that restore the interplay of speech, gesture, and light. In practice, this pairs an interactive museum with a virtual museum (a linked digital research archive). The former convenes exhibition, rehearsal, and performance; the latter offers a navigable, citable corpus that aligns pages with objects, synchronises transcripts with concise re-stagings and annotated sonic cues, and visualises spatial acoustics – so that research, teaching, and practice move across text, object, and scene without leaving the archive.

The approach is portable across regions where related traditions persist in distinct archival balances. Istanbul's Karagöz and Egypt's 'Aragoz retain stronger documentary and ethnographic traces than Damascus, yet all share the composite ontology of voice, figure, and audience. Integrated documentation supplies a common methodological grammar – pairing textual analysis with material and spatial study – adaptable to local ecologies without collapsing regional specificity.

The ethical horizon is reconnection. As performance spaces disappear and communal memory recedes, scholarship cannot stop at inventory and editorship; it must reactivate links among text, object, and city. To “return the shadow to its light” is to restore the conditions of legibility through which popular reasoning once appeared: a situated voice, a moving image, a gathered public. In that return, *Faṣl al-khashabāt* and its companions cease to be remnants and become a living archive – urban memory that can still think aloud with, and for, a public.

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