

Istanbul

The book that became a museum

How the Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk combines fiction and fact in the Museum of Innocence

By Andrew Finkel

The museum advertised as the first to be inspired by a novel opened its doors in the back streets of Istanbul in late April. It looks like a museum, feels like a museum and is open late on Fridays and closed on Mondays.

Yet the first question posed by the Museum of Innocence, created by the Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk, is whether it really is a museum at all, and not an infinitely elaborate installation—an extended conceit of art imitating art, albeit one with a gift shop that sells posters and fridge magnets.

The answer Pamuk would give is that it is not a national museum designed to project the wealth of nations, but a *small* museum that peeks into the jumbled complexity of the human psyche. It is a museum like Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* is a planet, converting personality into glass display cabinets. It is also an act of remembering—in this case, the discreet charm of Istanbul's bourgeoisie in the last quarter of the 20th century.

It is not like London's Sir John Soane's Museum (much referred to in Pamuk's novel), which is one man's eccentric collection jammed into a house full of architectural surprise. The Museum of Innocence is a carefully constructed whole. It's scattered over three floors with breathtaking attention to detail, yet there are several vantage points where you pause to take in the entire thing. It is both a museum and an ambitious piece of conceptual art. Pamuk describes its overall design as no less complex than building a submarine. With it, he makes an extraordinary leap from the printed page.

The novel *The Museum of Innocence* was first intended to take the form of a museum catalogue that would narrate, object by object, the story of a doomed, obsessive love (*The Art Newspaper*, September 2010, pp31-32). The museum inventory consisted of objects that the well-to-do Kemal filches from his shop-girl lover Fusun. The final book took on a very different form, but the museum is an inversion of the original notion. It consists of a series of display cases, each one a meticulously arranged still-life intended to recreate the feel of one of the novel's 83 chapters. Pamuk famously collected many of the items himself from the flea markets in the nearby streets, but others are sly manufactures: a yellowing newspaper ad for Turkey's first fruit-flavoured fizzy drink, a confection that exists only in imagination.

Pamuk insists that the novel and the museum

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operate on planes independently of one another and that you don't have to read the book to appreciate the museum. This may be an exaggeration. Could one understand display case No.1, a butterfly earring lit like a holy relic, unless one knew this was the first of Kemal's prizes? The cabinet bears the title of the first chapter, “The Happiest Moment of My Life”. Apart from these headings, there are no explanatory texts. The museum has a catalogue of its own (soon to be published in English, called *The Innocence of Things*), but the novel is on hand—in assorted languages, chained to stations around the museum—if further explanation is required.



Orhan Pamuk stands among the rows of display cases that make up the Museum of Innocence

“If you know the book, there is a pleasant excitement of recognition,” Pamuk said at a press conference for the opening at the end of April. “But then the enthusiasm vanishes and a deeper thing starts. It's not the text we remember but our reaction to text.” The idea was to develop a “similar aura” around the objects.

This is certainly the case for display until No.68, bearing the chapter heading “Cigarette Stubs”. *The Museum of Innocence* has been likened to a Lolita-like fable of compulsive love, and this cabinet is a Nabokov presentation not of butterflies but of

4,213 spent cigarette ends smoked by Fusun, which Kemal collected. From a distance it looks like a giant cuneiform tablet. They are all Samsun cigarettes, a Turkish brand once common but now impossible to find. Each one is pinned to a board and individually labelled by Pamuk. In fact, they are not normal cigarettes, but re-rolled with chemically preserved tobacco, which was then artificially smoked. Next to this is a series of video screens depicting cigarettes being stubbed in ashtrays to illustrate Fusun's “finger language” as she smoked. Such attention to detail is bewildering.

“Literature and art make the familiar look strange, the ordinary look beautiful,” Pamuk said.

The opening of the museum was originally due to coincide with the publication of the book, but the mid-2000s were troubled years for Pamuk, who had become the object of an obsessive hatred by the ultra-nationalist Turkish Right. The project lingered, unfinished. The author famously refused to accept public money offered when Istanbul was declared the European Capital of Culture for 2010, opting to organise the financing himself through a private trust. He described the price tag as equal to his Nobel Prize money (\$1.5m).

Pamuk tells *The Art Newspaper* that he is optimistic that the museum will pay its way. He says that running costs were not high in relation to the anticipated number of visitors. Beral Madra, one of Istanbul's most experienced curators, estimates the original costs at TL10,000 to TL15,000 a month (around \$5,400 to \$8,200) and that the museum could tick over on admission fees. Staff report that there can be as many as 200 visitors a day, with entrance charges varying between \$8.50 and \$13.50. However, not every visitor is a paying customer. Those who own a copy of the novel can gain free entry by having the ticket printed in the final chapter stamped at the entrance.

“I planned the museum almost as a place that will have very few visitors—I am not complaining that it is not the case now, but I am not worried too much about the future,” Pamuk says. With this, he echoes the words of his protagonist, Kemal. “When the true collector, on whose efforts these museums depend, gathers together his first objects, he almost never asks himself what will be the ultimate fate of his hoard.” ■

