

## THE INNOCENCE OF OBJECTS

Orhan Pamuk

translated by Ekin Oklap

Abrams (\$35)

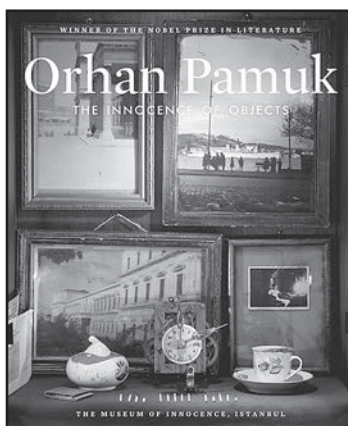
by Mark Gustafson

Visitors to Istanbul who break out of the rut connecting the bucket-list tourist sites tend to come to one conclusion: this, the only city in the world on two continents, is truly a cultural crossroads—a bridge between East and West, the Muslim and the Christian worlds, the developed and the developing worlds. Yet, at least among the intellectuals in Turkey, these are tiresome Western clichés, the construction of a fantasy. Globalization and other forces have rendered such superficial analyses untenable. Turkey's situation is much more complicated.

In Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's great novel *A Mind at Peace* (1949), one character says: "East is East and West is West. We wanted to merge the two in Turkey. And we even presume that we've discovered something new in this. Meanwhile, the attempt has always been made and it has always given rise to creatures with two faces. . . . This is our country's paramount issue, I suppose." Tanpınar was the first to formulate this particular problem—that literature in Turkey was torn between a kind of clumsy local pride and a snobbish arrogance, between hostility to and admiration for the West—as a dilemma. The eminent critic Orhan Koçak has more recently further exposed the "double bind" still vexing Turkish literature, so that it retains a kind of "marginalized status" as dislocated, isolated from international discourse.

Interestingly, Tanpınar is the writer to whom Orhan Pamuk feels the closest bond. Indeed, he has called *A Mind at Peace* "the greatest novel ever written about Istanbul." But Pamuk has surely surpassed Tanpınar, not only in the level and scope of his achievements, but also in his broader understanding of the increasingly complex realities of modern-day Istanbul and Turkey. Although Tanpınar showed Pamuk how to reconcile a love of Western literature with the culture of Istanbul, he was, of course, a product of his time. In 1923, with the demise of the Ottoman Empire, came the new Turkey under the bracing and comprehensive vision of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Tanpınar's views were consequently imbued with nationalistic ideals and the hope of "Turkification" for literature. Especially after the 1980 military coup, in light of the huge population explosion in Istanbul, under the current political regime, and given the geopolitical shifts in the region, such a perspective no longer jibes with the hybrid—multilingual, multireligious, multiethnic—nature of Turkey's cultural heritage and its rich, long, and knotty history.

In an essay on Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* collected in *Other Colors*, Pamuk sees in the main character "the jealousy, anger and pride of a man who cannot make himself into a European." Quite obviously, Pamuk has shared similar confusion and tension. Educated in the West and writing in a Western literary form, he has a great affinity for the West; yet



he is not of it. Without a doubt this Nobel Prize winner has done more than any literary figure to promote global awareness of Istanbul, to explain it in some depth to the rest of the world. But at times he may seem either over-Westernized or an "over-Westernizer" to his Turkish readers. The fact that they and the government have found some of his remarks, such as those on the Armenian genocide, out of line is one indicator of the difficulty of his situation.

Pamuk, describing himself as "a serious experimental writer," readily acknowledges both his emulation of the "classic" Western novel of Proust, Tolstoy, Mann, and Faulkner, and the liberating effect on him of Borges

and Calvino. Yet the influence of Eastern or Islamic literature is also plain; Nizami's *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, for example, can be detected in his most recent novel *The Museum of Innocence*. In this magnificent tragic story of obsessive (lost) love, the heart's afflictions, and Istanbul in the 1970s and '80s, the main character, Kemal, regularly refers to the museum he is setting up, containing various objects, often furtively obtained, which have been touched by or are otherwise connected to Fünun, the human object of his affection.

Now Pamuk has set up an actual museum ("The Museum of Innocence") and has thereby entered strange territory. He says he "conceived of the novel and the museum simultaneously from the very beginning," deciding to collect and exhibit the "'real' objects of a fictional story." Influenced by his enjoyment of "small backstreet museums" in Europe, in 1999 he bought a derelict house in the Çukurcuma neighborhood of Istanbul to serve that purpose, but then wrote the novel first. Its eighty-three chapters govern the layout of both the museum and its spectacular catalogue, *The Innocence of Objects*. With lush color photographs, some helpful glimpses of the actual processes of trial and error behind the scenes, and no little verbal cunning, this book minds the gap between the physical objects and their descriptions. In all three of its aspects—novel, museum, catalogue—and by any measure, Pamuk's undertaking is extraordinary.

The project, in retrospect, is not a complete surprise. Careful, detailed descriptions of things, of items domestic and otherwise, has long been one of Pamuk's methods in his portrayals of the city; consider *The Black Book*, or *My Name is Red*, or *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (packed with photographs). While *The Innocence of Objects* may be seen as a next move, it is still huge, and daring. He has made a giant leap from the page into "reality" and real "thingness"—*Dinglichkeit*, as Heidegger has it—so that it is not the physical object so much as the negative space around it, filled with memory, that gives the thing its power, and that makes it worthy of placement in a museum.

Some background may be illuminating. The *Wunderkammer*, the "room of wonders" (or "cabinet of curiosities"), was a phenomenon of the Renaissance, as wealthy, cultured men would use a room in their house to exhibit artifacts, relics, or specimens such as narwhal tusks and exotic minerals, to enlighten and impress. The modern museum is an outgrowth of that. Later, an individual of modest means might have his own "case of curiosities," a single glass-covered box or curio cabinet displaying relatively commonplace objects. (Distinct from the more common *memento mori*, a reminder of mortality, this may be called a *memento hominem*, the reminder of a human life.)

An attentive viewer might soon, however, sense the objects' potency, and not only for their owner. Thus each box becomes invested with meaning, a small world in itself.

Also, the shadow boxes of the American artist Joseph Cornell (1903-72) are recalled by some of the displays in Pamuk's museum. Scavenging in junk shops and flea markets, Cornell collected objects that were usually inconsequential in themselves. But he assembled them, whimsically and seriously, adding his own touches, until he achieved a certain dream-like mystery. At their best, his boxes are "poetic theaters," or something like shrines; they contain secrets awaiting discovery.

*The Innocence of Objects* is a marvel, standing solidly on its own. It is also an invitation: through its pages the museum and the novel beckon. The displays consist primarily of found objects, all the miscellanea of domestic life from a certain time and place, beginning with a single earring. There are many anonymous photographs, augmented by others from Pamuk's youth, as well as the artful work of Ara Güler. The watercolors were painted by Pamuk himself. Just as he is inclined to blur the boundaries between fiction and fact in his novels, so here he ascribes some of the paintings to "Ahmet Işıkçı, who visited the museum and felt that 'something was missing' when he saw this cabinet . . ." Işıkçı appeared in Pamuk's first novel, an obvious stand-in for the author. Custom-made food and drink (especially tea and rakı) replicas abound. There are film loops—some contemporary with the story, some made to look so. Pamuk filmed the several scenes of Füsün's hand in the act of smoking a cigarette. There are various types of sound installation (including ferry horns and birds) as well.

The boxes or vitrines come in different shapes and sizes, all glassed in with dramatic lighting and careful arrangement. Each "had to have a special structure and aura; they each had to have a particular soul," a necessity which delayed the museum for years. The result, Pamuk adds, was "a touch of lyricism" that he hadn't foreseen. In some ways the most impressive installation of all, Box 68, entitled "4,213 Cigarette Stubs," takes up an entire wall on the ground floor. Pamuk spent the summer of 2011 writing descriptions under each butt, in chronological order, pinned like an insect. "I was going through a tough time, so it wasn't too difficult to put myself in Kemal's shoes and channel his voice."

The catalogue's descriptions vary widely. At least a couple of boxes have none, only the photograph and the corresponding chapter title. Others have a sentence or two, sometimes more, often direct quotations from the novel. Yet others have something altogether new—an elaboration or a different slant, personal reminiscence or historical observation. In Box 25, for example, is Füsün's exam registration form, from which we learn that her foreign language was English. "But Kemal never mentioned this side of Füsün to me." Box 34 is dominated by a watercolor of a dog the Soviets sent into

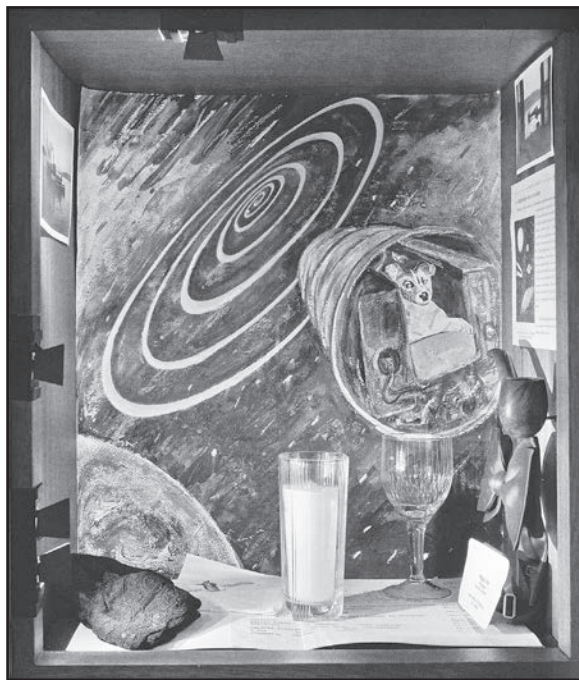
space (as mentioned in the novel). But this book adds the dog's own lengthy and droll statement, which includes: "I, Laika, am very much alive, shooting toward eternity as a symbol of the great victory of the Soviet revolution . . . I'm all right with Orhan Pamuk portraying the things I've just seen as I've experienced and recounted them. He has some talent for drawing and a great passion for writing."

Near the end of the novel, Kemal reveals that he has chosen his acquaintance, Orhan Pamuk, to transcribe his story. As already seen, this book both subverts and amplifies that fiction. Having worried about some of his choices, Pamuk says, "every time I told myself that what mattered were Kemal's and Füsün's feelings and the spirit of the museum." Furthermore, "Every now and then Kemal openly confessed to believing that man's sentimental attachment to objects is one of life's greatest consolations." The museum culminates in the lonely bedroom that Kemal occupied on the top floor. Pamuk writes how the two of them would wander back here after a night out drinking. "Once or twice, Kemal noticed that I was tired, and we switched places. . . . suddenly I was looking at the world through his eyes, unnerved. I could easily be Kemal. I could tell my story as if it were his, and his as if it were mine. And every time I realized this, I felt that it didn't

matter too much which voice was Kemal's and which was mine. Did the objects not remind us both of the very same things?"

During the long set-up process, Pamuk realized that, "as they gradually found their places in the museum, the objects began to talk among themselves, singing a different tune and moving beyond what was described in the novel." Furthermore, they "aroused in me the shamanic belief that objects too have spirits." Objects have a certain magic, they can evoke memories that run like a film in one's head. "We have been inspired by Kemal's belief in objects, yet unlike the passionate collector, we are not moved by the fetishist's desire to possess things, but rather by the wish to know the object's secrets. . . . As our soul focuses on objects, we can feel in our broken hearts that the whole world is one, and we come to accept our own sufferings. . . . We turn . . . to the other world, to a place outside of Time—to you."

While it is easy to see the universal appeal of the story and the objects, much of the focus, of course, is on the particulars of life in Istanbul of the 1970s. "Remembering the past always comes with an image or a view attached." Pamuk admits to "traces of nostalgia or notes from a requiem for a way of living in Istanbul that has all but disappeared now." As a backdrop to all of this, as he mentions here and there, he was under "political pressures" during the writing of the novel, which "sometimes did not allow me to remain in Istanbul." At the same time, much of the explanation in the catalogue seems geared to the non-Turkish reader. He goes on about various customs: "Both of us [Kemal and Pamuk] believed that tea, like nationalism, Islam, or Atatürk, was a cement that bound



Box 34. Like a Dog in Outer Space  
from *The Museum of Innocence*



people together." Later, with a photo of men in a teahouse, Pamuk elucidates an important male phenomenon which is only peripherally related to the chapter in the novel. There are similar digressions on playing Tombala, on the dogs in Istanbul, on classic Turkish music, etc. These are all things that no Istanbulu needs to be told.

Finally, Pamuk is ever conscious of time and reliant on an ancient notion: "In *Physics* Aristotle makes a distinction between Time and the single moments he describes as the 'present.' Single moments are—like Aristotle's atoms—indivisible, unbreakable things. But Time is the line that links them." This understanding is fundamental to Pamuk's project. He enumerates "1,593 happy nights by Füsün's side." "Each object in the museum . . . helps us remember the moments, converting time into space." On the other hand: "Time emerges when individual moments shrink into themselves, so when objects do the same, they lose their stories. It is at this point that the innocence of objects becomes apparent. Our museum has been built on the contradictory desires to tell the stories of objects and to demonstrate their timeless innocence."

Upon this reviewer's first visit, the only disappointment was that the museum had completely lost the character of a real house. But at the top that disappointment vanished. As one turns away from Kemal's bed and peers down the vertiginous open stairwell to the ground floor, there is (as photographed on pp. 252-3) the large spiral of Aristotelian time. This culminating image links moments and objects together, creating a story: "This, according to Kemal, is the greatest happiness a museum can bring: to see Time turning into Space." Thus Pamuk proves himself an architect of time. He has continued the explorations of Greek, Islamic, and analytic philosophers, and has augmented the written word with three-dimensional reality.

The novel and the museum, both products of Pamuk's fertile imagination, can, he insists in this book, be enjoyed independently. He certainly is a serious curator. His "Modest Manifesto for Museums" includes these thoughts: "to tell . . . the stories of the individual human beings" rather than the historical narratives of countries or other large groups; "to reveal the humanity of individuals"; "to re-create the world of single human beings." Nevertheless, this reviewer went to the museum almost two years after reading the novel, but found even a relatively dim memory useful. In fact, copies of the novel are available for consultation throughout the museum. Their relatedness is what is most interesting and unusual.

In his book *Collections of Nothing*, William Davies King describes how he collects things that aren't "collectible." And yet, "at the end of the day, having myself wanted all these unwanted things, having procured them and organized them—filed, boxed, arranged, and fussed over them—I have a collection." He observes further that "collecting is not all pathology. Indeed, collecting can come very close to what is involved in the making of art. The assemblage of disparate elements into a totality evokes the satisfying metaphors of wholeness and unity, and the containment or display of what is valuable involves the very same questions of form and function that any artist must ask." Finally, "A collection is inevitably expressive of its collector . . . the entity cannot stand alone. Pathos adheres." Indeed, pathos is adherent to Pamuk's novel, to the museum, and to the museum catalogue. But rather than evoking pity or compassion, Pamuk finds "happiness."

Pamuk's art has always been one of harmonious assemblage. "Putting these things together in a box, measuring every centimeter, and making the slightest change in search of a particu-

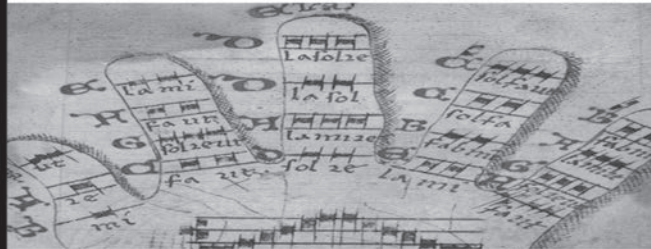
lar harmony made me feel as if I were building a world—just as I do when I write a novel." In response to the question, "Why are you building this museum?" he says: "the best answer is an explanation like the one from the *Arabian Nights*. Some spirit possessed me and almost forced me to make this museum. Aladdin had been scared of the genie that came out of the lamp, but what I was doing was making me happy, so I should consider myself lucky."

The centrality of happiness to the novel *The Museum of Innocence* is plain. According to its English translator, Maureen Freely, the abstract noun and its adjectival form appear 515 times. Kemal uses it in the first sentence and the last. But this happiness is laden with sadness, misery, closer to melancholy, and brings to mind the last three lines of the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali's "Warning": "Trust me: / my happiness bears / no relation to happiness." The relationship between Kemal's obsessive love and Pamuk's drive to collect and to write is made almost painfully obvious.


The question of such a museum's durability and longevity is largely irrelevant; its answer will come. For the time being, Pamuk has managed to elaborate on the Flaubertian principle of always seeking *le mot juste* with his quest for *l'image juste*. Together with this catalogue, the museum is successful as a conceptual piece become concrete, a work of site-specific installation art, inextricably intertwined with an important work of twentieth century literature. There are a thousand reasons you should go to Istanbul at your earliest opportunity; this museum is another one. Until then, you have, among other enticements, *The Innocence of Objects*. ♦

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