



Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi

ISSN: 2148-2292

12 (4) 2025

Academic Journal of History and Idea

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Geliş tarihi | Received: 02.07.2025

Kabul tarihi | Accepted: 24.08.2025

Yayın tarihi | Published: 25.08.2025

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Atıf Künyesi | Citation Info

Melikova, E. (2025). The History and Development of Museums in Azerbaijan: A National and Comparative Perspective. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 12 (4), 988-994.

The History and Development of Museums in Azerbaijan: a National and Comparative Perspective

Abstract

The museum tradition in Azerbaijan plays a central role in preserving national identity and collective memory. The establishment of the Istiglal Museum in 1919 marked a historic milestone, setting the stage for museum development throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This paper examines the historical trajectory and institutional evolution of Azerbaijani museums across political eras, particularly focusing on their transformation from ideological tools in the Soviet era to vibrant cultural and educational spaces in the post-independence period. In addition, the study situates Azerbaijani museology within a broader regional context by drawing on Turkish scholarly perspectives on museum studies and heritage preservation. Turkish researchers such as Zeynep Yasa Yaman and Ayşe Çakır İlcalı offer valuable insights into the role of museums in national identity construction, participatory museum practices, and modern curatorial strategies, many of which are increasingly relevant to Azerbaijan's cultural strategy. The inclusion of comparative literature helps underscore shared post-Ottoman and post-Soviet challenges in museum transformation, modernization, and public engagement. By drawing on Azerbaijani and Turkish sources, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of museum development in the region and the interdisciplinary academic field of museum studies.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Turkish Museology, Istiglal Museum, Cultural Identity, Post-Soviet Heritage, Comparative Museum Studies



Azerbaycan'da Müzelerin Tarihi ve Gelişimi: Ulusal ve Karşılaştırmalı Bir Perspektif

Öz

Azerbaycan'daki müze geleneği, ulusal kimliğin ve kolektif hafızanın korunmasında merkezi bir rol oynamaktadır. 1919'da İstiklal Müzesi'nin kurulması, 20. ve 21. yüzyıllar boyunca müzelerin gelişimi için bir başlangıç noktası oluşturan tarihi bir dönüm noktasıdır. Bu makale, Azerbaycan müzelerinin tarihsel sürecini ve kurumsal evrimini, özellikle Sovyet döneminde ideolojik bir araç olmaktan bağımsızlık sonrasında canlı kültürel ve eğitsel mekânlara dönüşümünü merkeze alarak incelemektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, Türk akademik yaklaşımlarından yararlanarak Azerbaycan müzeciliğini daha geniş bir bölgesel bağlam içinde ele almaktadır. Zeynep Yasa Yaman ve Ayşe Çakır İlcalı gibi Türk araştırmacılar, müzelerin ulusal kimlik inşasındaki rolü, katılımcı müzecilik uygulamaları ve modern küratöryel stratejiler konularında değerli görüşler sunmakta; bu görüşler Azerbaycan'ın kültürel stratejisi açısından giderek daha fazla önem kazanmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı literatürüne dâhil edilmesi, müze dönüşümü, modernleşme ve kamusal katılım konularında Osmanlı sonrası ve Sovyet sonrası dönemlerde paylaşılan zorlukları da öne çıkarmaktadır. Azerbaycan ve Türk kaynaklarından yararlanan bu makale, bölgedeki müze gelişimine ve müze çalışmaları disiplinine dair derinlikli bir anlayışa katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, Türk Müzeciliği, İstiklal Müzesi, Kültürel Kimlik, Sovyet Sonrası Miras, Karşılaştırmalı Müze Çalışmaları

Introduction

Museums in Azerbaijan have long functioned as institutions for collective memory, cultural transmission, and ideological narratives. Over the last century, the evolution of Azerbaijani museums has reflected the nation's shifting political landscape, from the brief independence of 1918–1920 to the Soviet Union's cultural policies and finally the resurgence of national identity after 1991. While scholars such as Elfira Melkiova have significantly contributed to documenting these developments, the incorporation of comparative insights from Turkish museum studies enhances our understanding of the region's shared heritage and transformation challenges. The study employs a qualitative approach, combining Azerbaijani and Turkish literature reviews, archival research, and comparative museology analysis. Key sources include academic monographs, museum records, and journal articles in both Azerbaijani and Turkish. The comparative framework provides a broader cultural perspective on Azerbaijan's museum evolution.

In Azerbaijan, Elfira Melkiova's contributions stand out for tracing the national history of museums and proposing reforms in museological education (Melkiova, 2021; 2023). Her work emphasizes the political context of museum development and the need for interdisciplinary integration.

From Turkey, Yaman (2012) offers a critical analysis of museum identity politics. İlcalı (2019) discusses education and community involvement in museum work. Ölçer (2005) presents the experience of transforming traditional museums into modern cultural hubs. Together, these works offer a theoretical and practical foundation for regional museology.

1. Relevance of the Topic

The creation of museums in Azerbaijan holds high contemporary relevance due to the country's efforts to preserve, reinterpret, and promote its rich historical and cultural legacy in a rapidly globalizing world. In the 21st century, museums are not only sites of preservation but also strategic tools for cultural policy, nation-building, and international visibility. One of the most pressing aspects of this actuality is Azerbaijan's post-conflict cultural restoration. Following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the liberation of formerly occupied territories, the Azerbaijani government has prioritized the reconstruction of historical and cultural institutions. This includes the creation of new museums in Shusha, Aghdam, and other regions to document the heritage, destruction, and revival of these lands. These museums are crucial for restoring cultural memory and asserting historical narratives rooted in Azerbaijani identity.

Furthermore, the diversification of museum types—ranging from traditional history museums to contemporary art, carpet, music, and technology museums—reflects Azerbaijan's evolving cultural ambitions. As Melkiova (2023) notes, the creation of specialized museums contributes to developing a multidimensional understanding of the nation's identity, especially in a multi-ethnic and post-Soviet context. This process also supports Azerbaijan's soft power and cultural diplomacy, especially in the Turkic and Islamic worlds.

In addition, the development of tourism and creative industries has increased the demand for modern, interactive, and accessible museum spaces. Museums are now viewed as educational hubs and community centers, which is consistent with international museological trends (Yaman, 2012; İlcalı, 2019). Their creation is part of a broader strategy to engage younger generations with their cultural heritage through digital media, participatory exhibitions, and museum education programs.

2. Relevance of the Topic (continued)

Finally, the actuality of creating museums is tied to academic and professional training. As museum studies become institutionalized in Azerbaijan, there is a growing need to apply theoretical knowledge to the actual founding, curating, and managing of museums. Each newly created museum becomes a living laboratory for innovation, education, and research. In summary, the creation of museums in Azerbaijan is a dynamic and timely topic, closely linked with national recovery, cultural identity formation, regional leadership, and the modernization of heritage institutions. The study of museum history and development in Azerbaijan is especially relevant in the current cultural, academic, and political context. As Azerbaijan continues to define and promote its national identity in the post-Soviet and post-conflict era, museums have emerged as crucial platforms for cultural diplomacy, education, and memory preservation.

First, the increasing investment in cultural infrastructure—such as the modernizations of the Carpet Museum, the creation of the Heydar Aliyev Center, and the digitization of museum collections—reflects Azerbaijan's broader cultural policy aimed at integrating heritage with innovation (Melkiova, 2023). These developments underscore the urgent need to examine how museums are evolving to meet contemporary demands, particularly in engaging youth, tourists, and international audiences. Second, the liberation of territories in the Karabakh region following the 2020 war has brought renewed attention to cultural restoration. Many historical museum buildings, monuments, and ethnographic collections in these areas were destroyed or looted. Their recovery and reintegration into the national museum system is not only a technical challenge but also a symbolic act of reclaiming historical continuity. Understanding the legacy and evolution of museums in Azerbaijan is therefore essential for guiding this restoration process with scholarly and ethical integrity.

Third, the increasing role of museum studies as an academic discipline adds another layer of importance. Universities in Azerbaijan, such as the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts (ASUCA), are now training future museum professionals, curators, and heritage managers. As Melkiova (2021) has argued, there is a growing need to develop specialized education programs, research centers, and policy frameworks to support museum development.

3. Azerbaijan's Museum Beginnings and the Istiglal Museum

The Istiglal Museum, established in 1919 during the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), was a foundational institution aimed at documenting the young republic's achievements and independence (Melkiova, 2021, p. 114). Although it was short-lived due to the Soviet takeover, its symbolic role persists in Azerbaijani cultural memory.

4. Soviet Control and Institutional Expansion

Under Soviet rule, museum development was marked by ideological alignment and state control. Institutions such as the Azerbaijan State Museum (1920) and regional ethnographic museums were structured to promote Soviet values, often at the expense of local narratives (Aliyev, 1985). As Ismayilov (2000) observes, Azerbaijani museums in the immediate post-Soviet period faced profound structural and ideological challenges, having to redefine their missions beyond the framework of Soviet cultural policy. He emphasizes that this transition required not only institutional reforms but also a reorientation of museum narratives toward national identity, cultural diversity, and global engagement.

5. Post-Independence Revival

Following independence in 1991, Azerbaijan reoriented its museum policies to reflect national heritage, multiculturalism, and modernization. Institutions like the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum and the Heydar Aliyev Center reflect this shift. Melkiova (2023) notes the growing attention to digitalization and community engagement in museum practices.

6. Comparative Perspectives from Turkish Museum Studies

Turkish researchers have contributed significantly to the field of museology, especially in areas relevant to Azerbaijan's contemporary challenges.

*Zeynep Yasa Yaman emphasizes museums' roles in shaping national consciousness and adapting to modern expectations. Her work *Müzeler ve Kimlik: Türkiye'de Müze Politikaları* provides a comparative framework for analyzing museum narratives in post-imperial contexts (Yaman, 2012).

*Ayşe Çakır İlcalı focuses on participatory museology and museum education, which are increasingly important in Azerbaijan's new museological approach (İlcalı, 2019).

*Nazan Ölçer, former director of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum, has written on how museums can balance historical authenticity with innovative presentation (Ölçer, 2005), offering insights that resonate with the recent transformations of Azerbaijani museums.

These Turkish scholars' perspectives are particularly valuable as both countries share historical experiences shaped by imperial legacies, nationalism, and modernization efforts. Their models of curatorial practice and institutional reform provide useful guidance for Azerbaijan's own trajectory.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's museum sector has experienced profound shifts over the past century, closely reflecting the nation's political and cultural transformations. From the symbolic establishment of the İstiglal Museum in 1919 to today's innovative cultural centers, museums have functioned not merely as spaces of preservation but as active instruments of identity formation and narrative construction. This long arc of development underscores the role of museums as agents of cultural diplomacy and historical memory, shaping how Azerbaijani society interprets its past and projects its future. The integration of Turkish museological thought provides an additional and valuable analytical framework. Comparative perspectives from Turkish scholars such as Yaman (2012), İlıcaklı (2019), and Ölçer (2005) highlight themes of museum education, participatory curation, and the balance between authenticity and innovation. Incorporating these insights allows Azerbaijani museums to strengthen community engagement, foster inclusive narratives, and align with contemporary global standards. This transnational dialogue between Azerbaijani and Turkish museum studies therefore serves not only academic exchange but also the strategic modernization of cultural institutions in the South Caucasus. From a global perspective, the relevance of this topic extends beyond regional concerns. As many countries are now seeking to decolonize their museums and critically reframe historical narratives, Azerbaijan's unique context—shaped by multi-ethnic heritage, Islamic and Turkic identity, and a Soviet/post-Soviet legacy—offers particularly rich ground for contribution. By examining Azerbaijan's museum trajectory through these intertwined historical and cultural lenses, scholars can better understand how cultural institutions function in transitional societies, where questions of memory, nation-building, and global cultural dialogue converge. In conclusion, the study of Azerbaijan's museum evolution demonstrates that museums in transitional contexts are not static repositories of artifacts, but

dynamic arenas where heritage, politics, and education intersect. The country's ability to combine national identity-building with international museological innovation places it in a strong position to participate in—and shape—the emerging global discourse on postcolonial and post-imperial museum practices. This analysis confirms the global significance of Azerbaijan's museum experience as both a case study and a contributor to the future of museology.

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