The Rahmi M. Koc Museum, Istanbul

Bix, Amy Sue.
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The past decade has witnessed the establishment, rapid growth, and gradual maturing of the Rahmi M. Koç Museum in Istanbul, Turkey’s only museum of science, technology, and the history of technology. Its focus on transportation, industrial, and communications technologies is familiar to European and American visitors, but new for Turkish citizens. While the Koç Museum displays objects from all over Europe and the United States, it seeks to highlight Turkish perspectives on history of technology. A small but dedicated staff has significantly expanded and improved the exhibits over just the last two years.

Museum funding comes entirely from the Rahmi M. Koç Museum and Cultural Foundation, whose head, Rahmi Koç, chairs the Koç Group, Turkey’s largest corporation. In 1928 Rahmi’s father Vehbi became Turkey’s representative for Ford Motor Company and Standard Oil. Over subsequent decades, Vehbi set up Turkish manufacturing arrangements with Siemens, Fiat, and General Electric. In the 1960s, Koç companies began manufacturing the Anadol, the first car completely built in Turkey; the Koç Group also produced the first locally manufactured examples of many domestic and industrial items, from light bulbs to tractors.

Describing the museum’s origin, Rahmi Koç explains that since childhood he has been fascinated by Istanbul’s steam locomotives and ferries as well as imported model trains and clockwork toys. Visiting England, Koç writes, he “saw how much importance they attached to heritage and to the machines and tools from the Industrial Revolution.” Entering the family Ford agency and preparing to begin Turkish auto manufacture, Koç trav-

Amy Sue Bix is associate professor in the Department of History at Iowa State University and assistant director of ISU’s Center for Historical Studies of Technology and Science. She is the author of Inventing Ourselves Out of Jobs: America’s Debate over Technological Unemployment, 1929–1981 (2000). Taner Edis is assistant professor in the Department of Physics at Truman State University in Missouri. He is the author of The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science (2002) and coeditor, with Matt Young, of Why Intelligent Design Fails: A Scientific Critique of the New Creationism (2004).

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eled to Detroit to purchase equipment. “The first thing I did when I got there was to visit the Henry Ford Museum. I was so strongly influenced that I prayed that one day I would be able to set up my own museum. Henry Ford had started off his museum by displaying the cars he manufactured. . . . I had first planned to display the industrial items produced by the Koç Group, but then I decided that this would not appeal to a wide audience and gradually started collecting other items. . . .” (The quote is from an exhibit on the Koç family and the museum. Koç’s memory is slightly inaccurate, as the Henry Ford Museum always included more than just automobiles.) Approximately 80 percent of the museum’s artifacts have been personally collected from antique dealers, auction houses, and the like by Koç himself, who still acquires objects on a regular basis.

The Koç Museum is situated in an excellent location on the Golden Horn, Istanbul’s historic shipbuilding and industrial area. Many polluted or ruined sites in this district are now being cleaned up. The museum buildings themselves are of great interest to industrial archaeologists. The Lengerhane (anchor casting building) has foundations dating from the Byzantine period (twelfth century) and was used by the navy as a foundry in the eighteenth century, during the Ottoman era (fig. 1). It served as a warehouse until it was damaged by fire and abandoned in the 1980s. In 1991 the foundation bought, restored, and expanded the Lengerhane; anchor parts and cannonballs found during renovation are on display.

The first version of the Koç Museum opened on the restored site in
1994, and in 1996 Rahmi Koç personally received a special award from the Council of Europe’s European Museum of the Year program. The Lengerhane contains model steam and internal combustion engines, some Turkish made—beautiful artifacts, the somewhat dim and crowded display notwithstanding. The second floor holds exhibits of scientific instruments and communications technology, including a nice range of orreries, astrolabes, abacuses (Japanese, Russian, and Chinese), calculating machines (German and American), telegraph equipment, gramophones (American and British), radios, typewriters, and more.

It quickly became apparent that the collection required additional space, especially for larger artifacts. Conveniently, in 1996 the foundation was able to purchase a disused site just across the street from the Lengerhane. The Hasköy Dockyard had been established in 1861 by the Ottoman Marine Company for vessel maintenance and repair; through the mid-twentieth century, many Turkish ferry and passenger boats were built there. Koç restored fourteen buildings at the new location, plus the ship cradle and winch, which are today integrated into the museum’s outside display area. The Hasköy exhibits opened in 2001, giving the museum 11,250 square meters of covered space.

Honoring the Koç Museum’s responsibilities as Istanbul’s sole science and technology museum, the Hasköy Dockyard building contains a “how does it work?” section, featuring cutaway models of common objects. Visitors can observe the operations of a dishwasher and refrigerator (Koç brands), the common Turkish liquified petroleum gas (LPG) heater, a moped, car motor, and computer. Labels (in Turkish and understandable if awkward English) offer schematic diagrams and trace the sequence of operations. The “hands-on” gallery provides equipment to illustrate pressure, optics, conductivity, and circuits. Turkish labels explain relevant physical principles well. Still, most casual visitors would have difficulty working and comprehending these experiments alone, and part-time docents occasionally present demonstrations for tourists and schoolchildren (roughly 65 percent of visitors).

The Hasköy building contains noteworthy maritime exhibits, including a sizable variety of ship models, compasses, signaling equipment, gunnery calculators, engine telegraphs, and figureheads, mostly from the nineteenth century. To help put those artifacts in context, the gallery contains full-scale re-creations of a boatbuilder’s shop (showing a partially built wooden hull), a fisherman’s shack, and a motor-repair workshop. Though nicely designed, the educational value of these reproductions is hampered by a lack of labels.

There is also a gallery set up to give visitors the feeling of walking underwater alongside mannequins wearing scuba gear and other diving equipment. It undoubtedly appeals to children but contains no technical details or explanations. Anyone interested in specifically Turkish maritime
technology will appreciate the excellent exhibit of caïques, long narrow skiffs once extensively used on the Bosporus. This section has good labels explaining variations in caïque design for cargo, passenger transport, or fishing. The impressive “sovereignty caïque” on display (fig. 2), used by sultans for ceremonies and travel to summer palaces, features rich ornamentation symbolizing the monarch’s power.

Another artifact connected to the sultanate appears in the indoor railway gallery. The Imperial Coach of Sultan Abdülaziz, manufactured in Birmingham, was a gift for the sultan’s trip to Paris for the 1867 Universal Exhibition. Excellent Turkish and English texts describe this trip, the sultanate’s first and last official and peaceful venture outside the empire. The museum’s 1998 restoration of the railcar highlights its gorgeous woodwork, with the sultan’s tughra (emblem) painted delicately on the sides. Visitors can peer at the sumptuous interior, reflecting the pinnacle of luxury rail coach construction. The museum’s railroad section also includes an electric tramcar used on Istanbul’s Kadiköy line from 1934 through the 1960s, accompanied by good labels describing the changes over time in the city’s public transportation. A number of other railcars and locomotives are parked in the museum’s outdoor area, but as of summer 2002 they lacked any labels.

The museum has a large section devoted to motor vehicles from many decades and around the world (fig. 3). From the early era, the collection contains a rare 1898 Malden steam car, several Ford Model Ts, a 1911 Delahaye fire engine, 1917 White carrier van, 1918 De Dion Bouton road sweeper, 1930 Ford Model A, and more. There is a 1917 Albion ambulance,
made in Britain and used in Turkey by the Red Crescent after the First World War, with its X-ray table nicely displayed alongside. A 1921 Fordson tractor from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s family farm is accompanied by good labels exploring Atatürk’s promotion of agricultural modernization in the early Turkish Republic. There are tailfin-era Chevrolets and Cadillacs, Rolls-Royces, a 1955 Alfa Romeo, a 1979 Daimler, a 1955 Messerschmitt, an East German Trabant, and two Turkish Anadols. Labels carefully detail each vehicle’s model name, date, country of manufacture, and technical specifications, and add appropriate background—on, say, the history of the Buick Motor Company. Overhead labels in both English and Turkish summarize key events in automotive history, such as the development of the assembly line.

Other galleries contain nice collections of motorcycles and bicycles, with good labeling describing their history in Europe generally and in Turkey in particular. Another section contains carriages (several loaned from Topkapi Palace) and traditional Turkish horse carts decorated with folk paintings. Reflecting Koç’s personal collecting interests, there is also an exhibit of baby carriages, invalid carts, and Bath chairs.

A full-scale model of an Aegean-coast olive oil factory (fig. 4) does the best job of displaying machinery in a characteristically Turkish setting. Visitors enter a brick-walled room to find an olive press, steam engine, and other necessary equipment in a setup enlivened by life-size mannequins and sound effects. Wall labels with lighted schematic diagrams explain the production process.
The outdoor “bazaar” contains similar walk-in exhibits, re-creating shops of various kinds complete with costumed mannequins: a pharmacy, cobbler, blacksmith, watchmaker, ship’s chandler, toy store, and scientific-instrument dealer. It is engrossing, but without labels, and so lacking any clear educational purpose. Moreover, chronological confusion reigns: the watchmaker’s store mixes timepieces from many decades, while a plastic robot sits next to tin cars in the toy store.

The museum’s new director, British architect Tony Phillipson, has already made important improvements in labeling and displays. For instance, in 2001 the museum’s German-built 1961 Amphicar stood in a spot seemingly selected at random amid other automobiles; visitors who didn’t read the label or notice the propellers underneath had no way to appreciate the vehicle’s purpose. By 2002 Phillipson had moved the Amphicar into the maritime gallery and suspended it overhead, giving visitors an excellent look at its design. Phillipson is in the process of adding more social context to exhibits—for example, placing old film cameras and lighting equipment in a replica Turkish film set (with a video of the production playing alongside). He plans to develop an exhibit on the dolmus, Turkey’s characteristic old-style taxis, featuring both drivers and passengers. Although most exhibits still betray a Whiggish view of technological progress and tend to emphasize the inherent beauty of artifacts, Phillipson reports that new teachers’ guides raise issues of technical cost and controversy, such as the global problem of pollution, of which Turkey has its fair share.

Remarkably, considering that it has just one curator, the museum
opened two major new exhibits during 2001–2002. Visitors can walk through a 1942 Douglas DC-3 (brought to Turkey in 1986 for charter use), hear recordings of the preflight checklist and the sounds of takeoff inside the cockpit, inspect a Turkish Air Force pilot’s handbook, or watch a video on the history of the DC-3 playing in the plane’s cabin.

The second recent exhibit is the decommissioned Turkish navy submarine TCG *Uluçalireis* (originally the World War II–era USS *Thornback*), now anchored right at the museum, which visitors can walk through accompanied by an ex-submariner guide. The submarine, the only one on display in the region, is the museum’s largest and most popular exhibit. Visitors are able to hear authentic World War II propeller, torpedo, sonar, and depth charge sounds in a two-minute presentation in the control room, along with the sound of diesel engines starting and running. An adjacent building contains excellent labels (Turkish and English) detailing the general history of submarining and the Turkish military’s particular fascination with submarines and their manufacture. Photographs and videos show Turkish submarines in action and on parade. The museum is actively purchasing books, CDs, old models, technical data, and archives, with the aim of becoming the primary public source of information on submarines in Turkey.

Recently the museum has focused on improving its educational outreach. In 2003 it debuted what is probably Turkey’s first proper museum education pack, which can be downloaded free of charge from its website. The museum has also secured sponsorship from the Danish firm Grundfos Pumps for a “MüzeBüs” program to bring a traveling collection of museum objects to remote and poor schools all over Turkey.

The museum anticipated hosting two hundred thousand visitors in 2002. Unlike many Istanbul museums, the Koç is visitor friendly, with decent bathrooms, nice restaurants, handicapped accommodations, an auditorium, and a technical library. It has begun featuring temporary exhibits and has a good website (Turkish and English) at http://www.rmk-museum.org.tr. Given the speed with which Phillipson and his small staff have improved display quality and mounted ambitious new exhibits, it will be exciting to watch this museum’s continued growth. It is already an invaluable contribution to the history of technology in Turkey.