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Vernacular Legacies and Modern Visions: Sadberk Koç's Collectorship

Abstract

This article examines the collecting practice of Sadberk Koç (1908–1973), whose systematic engagement with Ottoman textiles and domestic artefacts culminated in the posthumous establishment of the Sadberk Hanım Museum, Turkey's first officially recognised private museum. By foregrounding vernacular material culture – embroideries, garments, and household textiles embedded in everyday and ritual life – Koç's practice complemented the broader heritage landscape of the early Republic, which, in its pursuit of modernisation and secularisation, placed greater emphasis on monumental architecture, modern painting and sculpture, and Western-oriented music and performing arts, while forms of vernacular domestic material culture, received comparatively little institutional attention. Drawing on archival inventories, oral histories, and family recollections, the study situates her ethos within intersecting narratives of gender, modernisation, and cultural policy. It also highlights the intellectual affinities and networks of mid-twentieth-century women collectors, whose practices reframed private acquisition as cultural stewardship. The museum's subsequent development and its plans for expansion into a purpose-built complex illustrate the ongoing negotiation between domestic and institutional spheres, and between private initiative and public mission. By bridging vernacular and monumental, intimate and institutional, Koç's legacy demonstrates how individual agency recalibrated national heritage discourses, ensuring that the textures of everyday life became part of Turkey's cultural record.

Keywords: female collector, textile studies, museology, Ottoman Empire, Turkish culture

1. Introduction

Sadberk Koç holds a distinctive place within the cultural landscape of Turkey, most visibly through the institution that bears her name, housed in a historic Bosphorus mansion. As a founding partner of the Koç Group – the country's largest conglomerate – and spouse of industrialist Vehbi Koç, she was situated at the confluence of economic capital and cultural agency in the formative decades of the Turkish Republic. Yet her significance extends beyond these familial and corporate affiliations. Among a small cohort of mid-twentieth-century women collectors, Koç pursued an enduring engagement with Ottoman artefacts – particularly garments and domestic textiles – that not only embodied the material culture of the empire but also preserved the intangible practices that animated it. This pursuit ran counter to prevailing institutional tendencies, which largely privileged monumental, courtly, or European decorative arts. The cultural milieu of the early Republican era, shaped by modernisation and Westernisation policies, frequently

relegated vernacular[1] material heritage to the margins, favouring instead new forms of artistic production and state-sanctioned heritage narratives.[2] While she fully embraced the opportunities and sensibilities afforded by modernity in her personal life and education, her collecting practice constituted a deliberate countercurrent – one that *attested to the technical and aesthetic sophistication* of Ottoman craftsmanship and safeguarded embedded forms of domestic knowledge transmitted across generations.

Koç's aspiration to make her collection publicly accessible emerged at a time when the private acquisition of vernacular material culture in Turkey remained overwhelmingly confined to domestic or familial spheres, and when the very notion of a privately founded museum open to the public was effectively absent. Although institutional collecting had antecedents in the late Ottoman period,[3] most private holdings remained beyond public reach until well into the second half of the twentieth century. In this context, the inauguration of the Sadberk Hanım Museum (SHM) in 1980 constituted a pivotal moment: as Turkey's first officially recognised private museum, it not only established a model for subsequent cultural initiatives but also embodied a sustained commitment to heritage preservation at a historical juncture when such undertakings required careful negotiation of limited institutional receptivity and an evolving legislative framework for cultural property.

Building on this contextual foundation, the present study interrogates the specificities of Koç's collecting ethos and praxis. While the operational framework and curatorial trajectory of the Sadberk Hanım Museum have been the subject of prior documentation, the subtler contours of Koç's personal acquisition strategies – and the intellectual and affective dispositions underpinning them – have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This article seeks to address that lacuna by situating her practice within the intersecting narratives of Ottoman textile production, domestic material culture, and the shifting heritage paradigms of twentieth-century Turkey.

The research draws upon a multi-source evidentiary base. Foremost among these are the museum's systematically catalogued inventories and archival holdings, which together constitute a critical repository for reconstructing the scope and character of Koç's acquisitions. Oral histories form an equally integral component: testimonies from current and former curators and conservators – some with over three decades of continuous service – provide insight shaped by direct engagement with Koç's initial ambitions and by lived experience of the museum's evolving institutional ethos.[4] These

1 In this study, the term 'vernacular' is used inclusively to denote both objects of daily domestic use and those employed in rites of passages and life-cycle rituals – such as the hammam, circumcision, and henna night – which, while not quotidian in frequency, were integral to the fabric of Ottoman culture.

2 Berkes 2013, 521–55.

3 For a comprehensive analysis of Ottoman museological frameworks and collecting practices, see Wendy 2003.

4 The author wishes to thank Dr Lale Görünür, Hülya Bilgi, and Dr Şebnem Eryavuz for their insights drawn from decades of experience in textile collecting and its traditional contexts; archivist Mevlüde Kurt for her assistance in navigating the museum's archival hold-

accounts function as a form of 'living archive,' complementing and, at times, extending the extant secondary literature. Particularly valuable are the recollections of Koç's eldest daughter, Semahat Arsel, whose interviews illuminate the familial, biographical, and affective dimensions of her mother's engagement with art and heritage.

Among published sources, Ayşe Üçok's biographical monograph remains the principal reference point, interweaving personal recollections with historical contextualisation.[5] Family memoirs and autobiographies offer complementary perspectives, particularly those recounting diasporic and urban memories of accompanying Koç to flea markets and antique shops. Such narratives add granularity to the biographical record, underscoring both the intentionality that informed her acquisitions and the integration of collecting practices into the quotidian rhythms of domestic and social life.[6]

2. Sadberk Koç: Life, Social Milieu, and the Making of a Collecting Ethos

Sadberk Koç (née Aktar) was born in 1908 in Ottoman Ankara, the second of four children of Seraktar Sadullah Bey,[7] a prominent figure within the city's entrenched merchant elite, and Nadire Hanım, of the equally notable Kütükçüzade family. Both lineages were deeply embedded in the socio-economic networks of late Ottoman provincial commerce, their influence extending beyond Ankara into the imperial capital. Her early years unfolded in a city negotiating the tensions of political disintegration and gradual infrastructural modernisation during the empire's final decade – a formative environment in which traditional urban life intersected with the first signs of republican transformation.

In May 1918, the family relocated to Istanbul to join Sadullah Bey, who had moved earlier to expand the family's commercial portfolio. His business interests encompassed the supply of goods for a shop jointly operated in Ankara with his brothers, as well as the profitable Angora wool trade – an enterprise in which the extended family maintained long-standing stakes.[8] The household took residence in a traditional wooden mansion in the Yeldeğirmeni quarter of Kadıköy, an area that, by the late nineteenth century, had developed into one of the most socially heterogeneous and architecturally progressive districts on the Asian side of the city. Its early experiments in urban planning and the proliferation of multi-storey apartment buildings reflected a modernising

ings; and Dr Ozan Torun for his guidance in directing the author to relevant sources on the historical background of the transitional period.

5 Üçok 2005.

6 Dündar 2006 and 2008; Gönül 2003; Kıraç 2006; Koç 1990 and 1991; Sümer 2022; Tüzün 2018.

7 The terms *Bey* (for men) and *Hanım* (for women) are honorifics traditionally used in Ottoman and modern Turkish society to denote respect. Often placed after a person's first or last name, these titles function similarly to 'Mr' and 'Ms' in English, though they carry additional cultural connotations.

8 Sümer 2022, 25.

Figure 1. Sadberk Koç in a studio portrait, wearing a cloche-style headpiece emblematic of early Republican urban fashion and Western-oriented modernity, c. 1920s. The SHM Archives

urban milieu inhabited by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities alike, mirroring the complex cultural stratigraphy of the late Ottoman capital.[9]

Although Nadire Hanım adhered to the conventions of an Ottoman domestic ethos, Sadullah Bey prioritised his children's integration into modern educational frameworks. Sadberk and her younger sister, Melahat, were enrolled at the Sainte-Euphémie French Middle School for Girls, while their elder brother, Emin, attended the prestigious Saint-Joseph French School in the neighbourhood. This pedagogical orientation, characteristic of the late Ottoman and early Republican urban elite's Francophone affinities, equipped the siblings with multilingual proficiency and fluency in both Ottoman Turkish and the Latin alphabet. Such linguistic and cultural capital would later underpin Sadberk's capacity to navigate with equal ease the traditionalist codes of her inherited milieu and the modernist sensibilities of the emergent Republic.

At the age of eighteen, Sadberk married her maternal cousin, Vehbi Koç, in early 1926 – an alliance that reflected both familial expectation and the consolidation of commercial and social capital within Ankara's mercantile elite. The wedding took place at a moment when the newly founded Republic, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was implementing far-reaching reforms in law, education, and public life.[10] The ceremony itself blended markers of modern sociability with elements of established custom: Western-style banquets were held, prominent figures of the nascent republic, including members of the Court of Independence, were in attendance, and the evening featured a performance by Münir Nurettin Selçuk,[11] then a leading figure in Turkish classical music and a member of the Presidential Orchestra. Such details not only signalled the family's integration into the emergent republican elite but also illustrated the hybrid cultural codes negotiated by urban upper-class households in this transitional era.

Following their marriage, the couple resided in the Ulus district of Ankara, within Vehbi Koç's parental household – a common arrangement that reinforced extended family cohesion while situating the young couple at the heart of the capital's evolving socio-political milieu. In the subsequent years, Sadberk embraced the role of household manager and mother, while actively shaping her children's education. Semahat was born in 1928, followed by Rahmi Mustafa in 1930, both in the family's orchard

9 The Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood, named after the windmills, built in the late eighteenth century to supply flour to the Ottoman army, underwent several waves of demographic and architectural transformation in the following century. Known for its early multicultural composition – initially inhabited by Greeks and Turks, later joined by Jewish communities after the 1872 fire – the area evolved from a village into one of the first modern apartment districts of Istanbul. The construction of Haydarpaşa Train Station in the early twentieth century further accelerated this urbanisation, attracting workers and Levantine families and contributing to the district's economic vitality and grid-pattern planning visible in contemporary maps. See Barkul 1994, 462–3; Demirhan-Kiriş and İnceoğlu 2023, 29; Duygun and Koçyiğit 2021, 24.

10 See Berkes 2013, 521–53.

11 Koç 1990, 36.

house in Keçiören.[12] Intent on raising multilingual children, she employed foreign nannies to cultivate early language acquisition, an approach consonant with the cosmopolitan aspirations of the republican bourgeoisie. Two more daughters, Sevgi and Suna, were born in 1938 and 1941, respectively.

By the late 1930s, the family had established a pattern of summering in Istanbul. In 1938, Vehbi Koç purchased the Frenkyan Yalısı in Büyükdere, a Bosphorus waterfront mansion furnished with ornate interiors and a substantial library of rare books.[13] In 1951, the couple relocated permanently to Istanbul, settling in the Çankaya Apartment in Şişli.[14] This move, motivated by the pursuit of superior educational opportunities for their children and the expansion of Vehbi Koç's business interests, also represented a symbolic embrace of Istanbul's urban modernity. By mid-century, Şişli had come to epitomise elite urban living – its luxury apartment culture,[15] satirised in *Lüküs Hayat*, encapsulating the aspirational lifestyle of the city's upper-middle classes.[16]

12 This orchard house has served as the residence for the Koç University Vehbi Koç Ankara Studies Research Center (VEKAM) since its establishment in 1994.

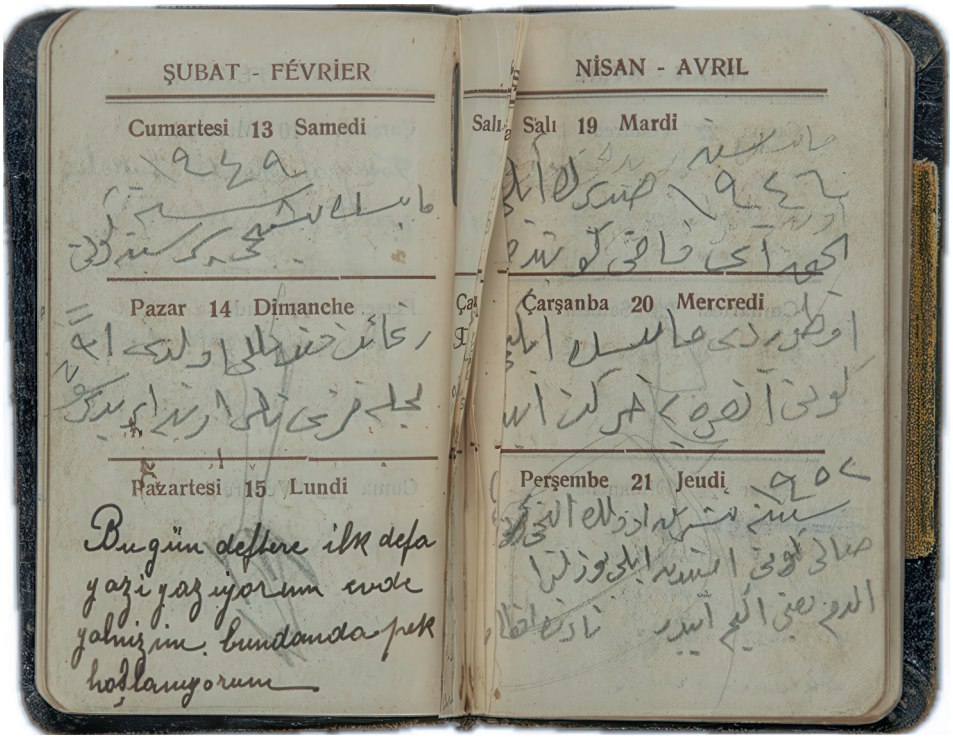
13 Sümer 2022, 110–1.

14 Akman and Tüzün, no date, online. The Çankaya Apartment appears on Jacques Pervititch's 1923 insurance map of Şişli under its original name, *Sebouhian Appartements*, suggesting Armenian ownership. Pervititch 1923, 231. By the early 1930s, it had become a prominent urban landmark, frequently used in newspaper advertisements as a reference point for directions. A newspaper notice (*Cumhuriyet*, 3 May 1934, 7) regarding an auction to be held in apartment no. 8 refers to the building as 'Çankaya Apartment (formerly Sebuhyan Apartment).' The adoption of the name 'Çankaya' – an overt reference to the presidential residence in Ankara – was likely not coincidental.

15 Located on the European side of Istanbul, north of Galata and Beşiktaş, the district of Şişli underwent a remarkable transformation from rural farmland to a prestigious residential and cultural hub over the course of the nineteenth century. Initially shaped by Tanzimat-era urban planning and migration policies, its development accelerated with the extension of transportation infrastructure – most notably the horse-drawn tram line reaching Şişli in 1881 – and the establishment of factories, hospitals, and state institutions. By the early twentieth century, Şişli had become a vibrant centre of intellectual and political life. Throughout the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, Şişli remained home to an affluent and cosmopolitan population, where upwardly mobile Muslim families lived alongside Levantine and non-Muslim communities. Although this multi-ethnic fabric persisted into the 1940s, a series of nationalist policies and political events – including the Wealth Tax (1942), the 6–7 September pogrom (1955), and the Cyprus crisis (1964) – profoundly altered its demographic composition. Şişli nevertheless retained its cultural and economic dynamism well into the late twentieth century. Duben and Behar 1998, 44, 47; Kaynar 2012, 51, 102–4, 134, 135, 279.

16 Premiered in 1933, *Lüküs Hayat* is a Turkish operetta composed by Cemal Reşit Rey with a libretto by Ekrem Reşit Rey. As one of the most iconic works of early Republican popular theatre, it satirises the newly emerging bourgeoisie's fascination with Western-style luxury and modernity. The operetta portrays living in an apartment in Şişli as a quintessential marker of upward mobility, urban sophistication, and social aspiration in interwar Istanbul. See Öztan and Korucu 2017, 387.

Figure 2. Notes taken in old and new scripts by Sadberk Koç in her 1932 agenda, recording the quiet contentment she found in spending solitary hours at home. The SHM Archives, A.504-5.



Throughout these formative decades, Sadberk Koç cultivated a sustained engagement with domestic arts, gardening, and the use of medicinal herbs – pursuits that reflected both inherited Ottoman domestic practices and the leisured self-fashioning of the republican bourgeois household. Her life was structured around the upbringing of her children, yet she remained attentive to the cultural and aesthetic life of her surroundings, finding in these years also a quiet contentment in solitary hours at home (Figure 2). She navigated, with notable adaptability, the cultural dualities of the imperial and republican worlds – a synthesis later characterised by her daughter, Suna Kıraç, as the capacity 'to wear a scarf for errands to the market and a hat for a wedding'[17] and by her elder daughter, Semahat Arsel, as 'one of the architects of the robust family structure that has endured since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.'[18] Together, these assessments capture the pragmatic versatility with which Koç integrated inherited customs and emergent modern codes into her daily life.

17 Kıraç 2006, 21. Translation by the author.
18 Arsel remarked during a private conversation dated 3 December 2023, Istanbul.

It was within this matrix of domestic stewardship as a locus of cultural agency that Koç's interest in Ottoman textiles, embroidery, and traditional garments began to acquire definition. Initially an extension of her appreciation for finely crafted household artefacts, this interest evolved into a purposeful and increasingly systematic collecting practice. Drawing on income derived from rental properties allocated to her from the Koçtaş estate – a wholesale construction materials company founded by her husband in 1955 – she assembled garments, embroideries, and decorative objects with discernment, storing them in trunks and chests on the upper floor of her home. These acquisitions were informed not only by her cultivated aesthetic sensibilities but also by a consciousness of their role as bearers of intangible knowledge embedded within domestic textile traditions.

Her extensive travels, encompassing destinations from Japan and Egypt to the United States and the United Kingdom, expanded the intellectual and aesthetic parameters of her heritage vision. Encounters with diverse museological models and approaches to the presentation of material culture reinforced her conviction that vernacular domestic artefacts – long marginalised in both public institutions and market hierarchies – deserved a place within a formal, public-facing framework. One visit proved especially formative: the Benaki Museum in Athens, founded in 1930 in a neoclassical mansion, was among the earliest private museums in Europe to integrate Greek and Ottoman material heritage under a single institutional roof. Its emphasis on domestic textiles, costumes, and everyday artefacts resonated deeply with Koç, providing a tangible precedent for the type of institution she envisaged for Turkey.

Although Koç long envisaged establishing a museum in her name to house her growing collection, several structural and personal constraints impeded its realisation during her lifetime. The legal framework in Turkey at the time did not permit the foundation of private museums, and while her personal resources might have allowed for the initial establishment of such an institution, sustaining it over the long term would have required a continuous allocation of funds and administrative attention. Moreover, Vehbi Koç expressed limited enthusiasm for the project – a reluctance that underscored the prevailing perception of private museology as institutionally unorthodox within the heritage landscape of the period.

In 1967, following a period of illness, Koç drafted a handwritten will dated 3 January, in which she articulated her wish for her collection – together with a cherished diamond bow brooch (Figure 3) – to be displayed in a pavilion within a museum in either Ankara or Istanbul, and to bear her name.[19] The language of the document conveyed both her enduring aspiration and an acknowledgement of the improbability of realisation of a museum in her name during her lifetime.

The final years of her life were marked by declining health. Diagnosed with cancer in 1971, she underwent two operations in London, where she had been receiving treatment. Despite these circumstances, she remained attentive to the fate of her collection. In a letter dated 19 September 1973 and addressed to her husband, she

19 The Sadberk Hanım Museum Archives, SHM A.502.

Figure 3. Encrusted diamond bow brooch, Sadberk Koç mentioned in her will. The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 16099 Z.610

made a last appeal: 'Establish my museum; let it be administered and financed by Koç Holding, with measures in place for its ongoing operation.'[20] This request, written only weeks before her death on 23 November 1973, effectively entrusted her family with the responsibility of fulfilling her most sustained cultural ambition. In the context of twentieth-century Turkey, where private initiatives in heritage preservation were rare, her testament represents a conscious effort to secure a place for vernacular material culture within the nation's public memory.

To appreciate the scope and intent of this ambition, it is essential to trace its origins to Koç's formative encounters with art and material culture. Nurtured by her familial milieu and domestic environment, her interest in the decorative and applied arts initially took shape through the careful acquisition of Ottoman women's garments and embroideries. Over time, this focus widened to include silverware bearing the impe-

20 Published in Dündar 2008, 228–9. Translation by the author.

rial tughra, Ottoman-era porcelains, and other artefacts emblematic of the empire's material legacy. Her collecting combined an attentive eye for craftsmanship with a persistent curiosity about provenance. Frequenting antique shops in Ankara and the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul – particularly in the Sandal Bedesteni, one of the few reliable sources for such textiles and related objects – she examined embroideries to determine their regional origins, typologies, and approximate dates.[21] Koç's relationships with shop proprietors, developed through regular visits and sustained conversation, facilitated access to objects and information that might otherwise have remained within closed commercial networks. On occasions, dealers brought items directly to her residences in Büyükdere or at the Çankaya Apartment,[22] a practice that spoke to her reputation as a discerning and significant buyer within these circles. These sustained interactions with specialised dealers not only broadened her access to rare vernacular textiles but also informed the systematic approach to acquisition and preservation that would later define her collecting ethos.

At times, these excursions into the antique markets were undertaken in the company of her children and nephews, serving as informal apprenticeships in connoisseurship and material culture. The experience left a lasting impression on her daughter, Sevgi Gönül, who decades later recalled in her column *Sevgi'nin Diviti* in the newspaper *Hürriyet* the sensory and intellectual dimensions of such visits:[23]

> For as long as I can remember, I wandered through flea markets and curiosity shops with my late mother, who was drawn to old knick-knacks. These places – one would need a thousand witnesses to even call them shops – were chaotic heaps where objects merely thought to be old and those that truly were old lay jumbled together, coated in dust and grime. To find something genuinely old among them required a keen eye and a considerable investment of time. On rare occasions, it was possible to unearth intriguing and authentic pieces at reasonable prices. In those days, the knowledgeable antique dealers one encounters in Istanbul today were scarce, and there were no scholars at the flea market. I greatly enjoyed such places; the challenge of spotting something overlooked by everyone else, however difficult, was a thrill my mother and I shared.

While evoking the atmosphere of Istanbul's mid-century flea markets, this account also sheds light on the pedagogical dimension of Koç's collecting practice. Beyond the acquisition of objects, these shared forays functioned as a means of transmitting aesthetic discernment, patience in research, and an appreciation for vernacular heritage – values that would later inform the museum's curatorial ethos.

21 Information obtained through oral communication with Dr Şebnem Eryavuz on 31 July 2025.

22 Üçok 2005, 218. Translation by the author.

23 Dated 16 December 2001, published in Gönül 2003, 84. Translation by the author.

An examination of the approximately 3,000 works transferred from Koç's private holdings to the museum reveals a deliberate breadth of scope, yet a pronounced hierarchy of categories.[24] Foremost among these are textiles – embroideries, silk weavings, and traditional garments – representing not merely an aesthetic predilection but a sustained engagement with one of the most emblematic mediums of Ottoman domestic culture. Metalwork, particularly silver tableware engraved with imperial *tuğras* and *tombak* vessels, forms the second largest category, followed by both European and Ottoman porcelains. Beykoz glassware, jewellery, and select pieces of furniture comprise smaller yet carefully curated subsets within the assemblage.

This distribution reflects more than an individual collector's inclinations; it offers a microcosmic survey of the material environments inhabited by the Ottoman elite and upper-middle classes. Textiles possess an unparalleled cultural density in the Anatolian and Ottoman context, owing in part to the enduring imprint of nomadic traditions on modes of living, furnishing, and social exchange. Cuts of garments such as the *üçetek entari* – an open-front robe with deep side slits – the *şalvar* (voluminous trousers), and various forms of *kaftan* embody patterns of mobility, posture, and gesture that predate urban modernity, accommodating both floor-seated interiors and equestrian movement (Figure 4). In this sense, these pieces reconstitute the ergonomics, tactility, and visual codes of a social world in transition.

The centrality of textiles, rooted in the mobile traditions of nomadic Turkish life, persisted into the Ottoman imperial milieu, where the relative absence of Western-style furniture until the late nineteenth century reinforced the primacy of fabric in articulating domestic space. Upholstery such as wall hangings, cushion covers, and ceremonial furnishings fashioned from sumptuous silk fabrics – particularly *çatma* (voided and embroidered silk velvet) and *kemha* (brocaded silk interwoven with silver or gold-wrapped threads) – represent the apex Ottoman textile ateliers reached, following a classical design repertoire regulated by the imperial court.[25] In Koç's collection, such courtly exemplars coexist with vernacular variants, revealing the interplay between metropolitan production and regional adaptation, and suggesting a more porous boundary between elite and everyday material cultures than is often assumed (Figure 5).

24 The breakdown is as follows: 892 pieces of textiles (666 embroideries, 98 silk weavings, 128 garments), 881 pieces of metalwork, 608 pieces of ceramics including porcelain, 191 pieces of jewellery, 160 glass objects, 145 wooden objects, 31 pieces of furniture (data retrieved from the museum's inventory database TMS).

25 These fabrics were meticulously recorded as treasury items in palace inventories, where they served not only as symbols of sultanic authority – reflected in the ceremonial garments of palace officials – but also held diplomatic importance as prestigious court gifts. Their production was subject to strict regulation. The *Ehl-i Hiref* (Guild of Artisans), under the supervision of the Imperial Household, ensured that textile manufacturers adhered to rigorous quality standards, thereby preserving aesthetic uniformity and technical excellence across the empire. See Atasoy et al. 2000, 16–25.

Figure 4: Üçetek entari, *made of silk satin embroidered with silk and metal thread. Ottoman, 19th century. The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 2593 K.11*

Figure 5. Cushion cover, Ottoman, 17th century, çatma (voided and embroidered silk velvet woven with metal-wrapped thread). The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 14069 D.194

Among the most culturally resonant works in Koç's holdings are embroidered textiles that emulate the decorative repertoire and visual richness of luxurious silk weavings, created as more affordable substitutes for those unable to obtain the costly originals (Figure 6). Their very existence reflects how aesthetic aspirations could be met through alternative, locally crafted means, a dynamic that underscores embroidery's enduring place within Ottoman and Turkish society, where it long occupied a position at the intersection of artistry, sociability, and symbolic communication. A chronological mapping of women's life-cycle rituals – the parade marking the first day of school (*amin alayı*), dowry preparation (*çeyiz sandığı*), engagement, henna night (*kına gecesi*), bath ceremonies (*hamam*), wedding celebrations, trotter day (*paça günü*), puerperium (*lohusa*), circumcision feasts (*sünnet*) – reveals the omnipresence of textiles as both functional objects and ceremonial signifiers.

Bath rituals, for instance, were elaborately staged social events – especially significant as occasions for women's social interaction – in which embroidered bath wraps (*peştemal*), towels (*peşkir*), kerchiefs (*çevre*), and decorative bundles (*bohça*) mediated between modesty and display, utility and ornament. Such items were not passive accessories but active participants in the performative construction of femininity, hospitality, and status. In this light, Koç's predilection for embroidered domestic textiles appears not only as a reflection of her personal aesthetic sensibility but as an act of cultural documentation – one that preserved the tactile and visual language through which social bonds, gender roles, and community identities were continually reinforced.

Figure 6. Quilt cover, Ottoman, 17th century, fine linen fabric embroidered with silk threads. The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 1773 I.929

Over time, what began as an intimate engagement with such objects matured into a collecting practice marked by deliberation and method. The textiles she assembled were not sequestered as static *objets d'art* but integrated into the rhythms of her domestic environment, at once part of her lived space and her curatorial imagination. Through this process, the collection transcended its material form, evolving into a mnemonic archive – an embodied record of craft knowledge, ritual practice, and the aesthetic codes of Ottoman and early Republican domestic life.

Within this tapestry of domestic textile traditions, circumcision ceremonies stand out for the density of their material symbolism and the degree to which they mobilised communal resources. The ceremonial bed and the decorated room in which the rite was performed were often adorned with richly embroidered fabrics, frequently borrowed from neighbours rather than newly commissioned. This practice, rooted in an ethic of mutual aid, bound households together through a reciprocal exchange of valued objects. Such items may carry subtle inscriptions – often the initials of the household's male head – stitched discreetly into the fabric to ensure their identification once returned. These marks, while functional, also anchored the textiles within a framework of familial identity and patriarchal lineage, linking domestic craft to the social architecture of the community.

Koç's collection preserves tangible traces of this practice. Several embroidered pieces bear the initials 'V.K.' in Latin script, clearly referencing Vehbi Koç, suggesting that they had either been lent by the Koç household for ceremonial use or were prepared in anticipation of such sharing (Figure 7).[26] In at least one instance, the Ottoman Turkish letter *vav* (و) is used instead, likely serving as an abbreviated emblem of Vehbi Koç's name (Figure 8). These marked works operate as micro-histories within the larger corpus, crystallising the layered narratives of production, circulation, and reuse that defined the social life of textiles in Ottoman and early Republican domestic settings.

Comparable communal and symbolic dimensions are evident in the use of *bindallı* gowns worn by young women in the period leading up to marriage. Traditionally fashioned from deep burgundy or midnight-blue velvet and embroidered in the so-called *dival* technique with gold thread in distinctive, densely branching motifs – features that give the garment its name –, these ceremonial gowns hold deep cultural resonance. During the henna night, a festive gathering held on the eve of the wedding, the bride and her attendants wear *bindallı* dresses, reinforcing both individual identity and collective belonging within the framework of ceremonial tradition (Figure 9). In this context, embroidery and attire function as markers of social cohesion, intergenerational continuity, and intangible cultural heritage.

The practice was not confined to a single community. Surviving examples in international collections indicate that *bindallı* gowns were also worn by Jewish women across Anatolia and the Balkans for weddings and other major life-cycle rituals. Oral accounts, passed down through generations within the Jewish community in Turkey, further suggest that, on occasion, such garments were subsequently donated to syna-

26 Items numbered SHM 2757, 2764, 2765, and 2767 exemplify this case.

Figure 7. Embroidered hand towel, Ottoman, 17th century, linen fabric, silk threads, and metal-wrapped silk thread. The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 2757 I.633

Figure 8. Embroidered hand towel, Ottoman, 17th century, linen fabric, silk threads, and metal-wrapped silk thread. The Sadberk Hanım Museum, Sadberk Koç Collection, SHM 1664 I.867

Figure 9. Sadberk Koç (on the right) with siblings and a sister-in-law dressed in bindallı *for the henna night, a pre-wedding ceremony, Yeldeğirmeni, Istanbul, 14 January 1931. The SHM Archives, SHM A.507*

gogues to be repurposed as ceremonial textiles. This shared sartorial idiom underscores the permeability of cultural boundaries within the Ottoman world and exemplifies intercommunal aesthetic affinities.

Within Koç's collection, *bindallı* gowns occupy a notable position as artefacts that encapsulate both skilled craftsmanship and the performative dimensions of ceremonial dress. Their material qualities – plush velvet surfaces, intricate compositional schemes, and codified contexts of use – situate them beyond the realm of everyday clothing, as tangible expressions of bridal identity, familial prestige, and collective festivity. Preserving these garments has ensured the survival of not only their material qualities but also the ritual practices and cross-communal traditions they embodied, many of which have been attenuated or transformed in the context of urban modernity.

The fragility of such ceremonial textiles – objects deeply embedded in the ceremonial aesthetics of Ottoman and early Republican domestic life, and reserved for occasional, highly codified use – rendered their preservation a matter of both cultural responsibility and practical foresight. Their survival into the present owes as much to the care and storage practices devised by their custodians as to the quality of their initial craftsmanship, linking the visual and performative splendour of social ritual to the quiet, sustained labour of safeguarding it.

Koç's approach to safeguarding her textiles synthesised inherited domestic customs with an emerging awareness of professional conservation principles. In the early stages of her collecting, she adopted methods akin to the traditional dowry chest system, in which garments and embroidered panels were meticulously wrapped in plain cotton cloths and stored in chests, suitcases, or wooden cabinets. To protect against insect damage, she favoured natural deterrents – dried herbs from her own garden – thus blending artisanal knowledge with the resourcefulness of domestic practice.[27]

As her holdings expanded, the seasonal inspection and airing of stored textiles, once accomplished within a few days, became an undertaking requiring weeks of sustained attention. This transformation reflected both the growing scale of her assemblage and her insistence on preventive care. Her methods underscore an important intersection between vernacular storage traditions and the incremental professionalisation of textile preservation in Turkey during the mid-twentieth century. In Koç's case, the act of storage was not a passive measure but an extension of her curatorial vision, one in which preservation was integral to the cultural afterlife of the object.

Three recurrent challenges frame the preservation of Ottoman-period textiles, and together they highlight the significance – and relative rarity – of Koç's holdings. First, textiles are inherently fragile, their organic fibres vulnerable to light, humidity, and mechanical stress. Second, within Ottoman domestic culture, valuable fabrics were rarely kept as untouched heirlooms; rather, they were frequently repurposed, altered, or cut down for new uses until no longer serviceable. Third, well into the twentieth century, collectors and institutions alike tended to prioritise court silks, monumental

27 Information derived from a conversation with Semahat Arsel, held at the Sadberk Hanım Museum on 3 December 2023.

embroideries, or European decorative arts, relegating vernacular textiles to the margins of both scholarly attention and market value.

While a few private collectors in Turkey took an interest in ethnographically oriented textiles, their holdings often remained sequestered within family circles or discreet intellectual networks, seldom made accessible to the public. Sadberk Koç's collection, by contrast – albeit posthumously institutionalised – ensured that such materials would enter the public domain, securing both their visibility and their scholarly relevance. The corpus encompasses court-associated pieces of considerable quality; however, its particular strength lies in garments and household textiles used by women from the upper and middle strata of Ottoman and early Republican society. These works preserve not only the material evidence of craftsmanship but also the social narratives encoded in their patterns, forms, and functions. In this respect, Koç's assemblage expands the parameters of Ottoman textile history, demonstrating that the cultural memory of a society resides as much in the vernacular and domestic as in the monumental and imperial.

3. Shared Tastes, Kindred Pursuits

The formation of Sadberk Koç's textile collection was anchored in her cultivated aesthetic discernment and the familial milieu that had shaped her sensibilities; yet these pursuits unfolded not in isolation, but within a loosely structured, intellectually vibrant network of women linked by ties of kinship, shared education, and ideological affinity. This more intimate dimension of her collecting practice developed in parallel with the broader trajectories already outlined, offering a closer view of the personal relationships and shared sensibilities that informed her acquisitions. This cohort – comprising writers, educators, and fellow collectors – was united by a resolve to preserve vernacular material culture at a historical juncture when such artefacts – fragments of Ottoman domestic life, including embroideries, lacework, traditional garments, and household implements – were increasingly dismissed as obsolete or devoid of cultural value. What distinguished this circle was not merely the refinement of their taste, but their ability to reframe private collecting as a form of cultural stewardship.

The emergence of this shared ethos among women collectors unfolded against the backdrop of the cultural reforms of the early Turkish Republic. In its determined pursuit of a modern, secular national identity, the Republican regime often sought symbolic distance from the Ottoman imperial legacy. Monumental architecture, Islamic calligraphy, and select courtly arts were preserved as embodiments of a curated past, yet the artefacts of everyday life – particularly women's craft traditions rooted in domestic practice – were largely excluded from institutional narratives.[28] The modernisation programme of the early Republic, closely intertwined with a project of secularisation, not only fostered new cultural forms and introduced profound transformations in ways of life, but also frequently marginalised inherited traditions, many of which were

28 Shaw 2003, 172–5.

interwoven with religious or communal life.[29] This selective approach to preservation, paradoxically, created a space for private collectors such as Sadberk Koç to intervene, sustaining those strands of material culture that official heritage frameworks had left unattended.

The legal landscape governing cultural heritage during her collecting years has its roots in Ottoman antiquities legislation – the 1906 Asar-ı Atika Regulation – nominally provided protection for historical artefacts. Its scope was strikingly broad, purporting to encompass a vast range of potential antiquities, yet textiles were not explicitly mentioned. The catalogue of protected categories, while ostensibly comprehensive, was drafted in a 'haphazard' manner that betrayed a degree of arbitrariness, as if designed to be 'all-inclusive' without a coherent or consistently applicable set of criteria.[30] This elasticity allowed for subjective interpretation and, despite its late Ottoman origins, ensured the regulation's continued enforcement without substantive revision for the first five decades of the Turkish Republic – remaining in effect until legislative changes introduced by the 1973 Law on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets.[31] In practice, vernacular objects such as household textiles, accessories, and other domestic artefacts – particularly those preserved in dowry chests or inherited within families – rarely entered public inventories. Many of the items Koç acquired circulated freely in Istanbul's antique markets or passed directly from private owners into her care, unimpeded by significant bureaucratic restrictions.

A 1954 letter written by Sâmiha Ayverdi (1905–1993), one of the foremost women writers in Turkish literature, to Belkıs Dengiz, a young schoolteacher stationed in Anatolia, casts further light on this shared cultural disposition. In this richly evocative text, Ayverdi laments the general disregard for traditional women's handicrafts, which she describes as 'orphaned' and 'neglected,' and urges her correspondent to collect examples of embroidery, lace, and other handcrafted items encountered during her travels.[32] Ayverdi's instructions are specific and remarkably practical: she advises Dengiz on where to look, what to purchase, and at what price. Yet behind this utilitarian tone lies a deeper moral and emotional charge – an appeal to preserve the memory of Ottoman domestic life not through abstraction, but through the tactile, fragile remnants of women's labour. Ayverdi lamented the inability of contemporary society to truly appreciate the refined aesthetic and spiritual value of artworks created by Ottoman women of the past:[33]

> In Istanbul, there are so few people who can appreciate the true value of these old works of art... I feel ashamed before the spiritual presence of those women of the past who produced such delicate, refined, and tasteful objects.

29 Berkes 2019, 521.
30 Shaw 2003, 127.
31 *ibid.*, 129–30.
32 For context on the Ayverdi–Dengiz correspondence, see Ayverdi and Dengiz 2015, 81–3.
33 *ibid.* Translated by the author.

And, 'worst of all,' she wrote:

> … taking advantage of our inability to appreciate them, foreigners have carried away our old works by the suitcase and the trunkful. Just recently, two acquaintances of mine bought such a quantity of Turkish embroideries and fabrics from antique dealers in Paris and London that they had to pay customs duties to bring them back into their own homeland.

These remarks are more than a critique – they also reflect the efforts of a few discerning individuals to reclaim what had been lost. Of note is her mention of her daughters Nezihe and Nadide (Uluant) as active collectors of laceworks, spoons, and purses – women who, even before institutional frameworks emerged to valorise such materials, had already recognised their cultural and artistic worth. A dedicated collector in her own right, Nadide Uluant (1925–2019), daughter of Sâmiha Ayverdi and a classmate of Semahat Arsel at the American College for Girls[34] and who would later donate her extensive holdings of Turkish embroidery to the Kubbealtı Foundation, fondly recalled Koç as a kindred spirit in the world of collecting. She noted, with a touch of amusement, that whenever she hesitated before acquiring a particularly fine or expensive textile, it would almost certainly end up in Koç's collection.[35] These recollections not only document the transmission of taste and collecting ethos between generations of women but also situate these acts within a broader ethical framework, one that views preservation as a civic responsibility.

Koç occupied a distinctive position within this milieu – both as a discerning collector and as a cultural interlocutor whose sensibility could quietly set the tone for others. She maintained a close friendship with the writer and journalist Nezihe Araz (1920–2009), a prominent figure in mid-twentieth-century Turkish intellectual life whose literary and cultural pursuits reflected a sustained engagement with both Ottoman and Republican heritage. Their interactions often revolved around newly discovered textiles or intriguing antiquarian finds, functioning as informal salons of aesthetic exchange in which objects became catalysts for conversation and mutual discernment. In one recollection, Koç is said to have visited Araz's residence in Bebek, where Araz brought out a piece of lace that Koç had admired days earlier but refrained from purchasing due to its cost.[36] Seeing it again, Koç reportedly measured a section with her hands and requested a small portion to keep – a gesture that encapsulates her cultivated discernment and the understated reciprocity that defined their relationship. Beyond its anecdotal charm, the episode illustrates how material culture circulated within networks of shared sensibility,

34 The American College for Girls was a leading American-founded women's college in Istanbul, established in 1871 and later merged with Robert College in 1971 to form a co-educational institution.

35 Personal conversation with Dr Şebnem Eryavuz, 31 July 2025. Dr Eryavuz has served as a collection consultant for the Kubbealtı Foundation since 2010 and previously worked as an art historian at the Sadberk Hanım Museum from 1989 to 2001. The anecdote was recounted to her directly by Nadide Uluant.

36 Üçok 2005, 219–20.

where objects were not merely commodities but touchstones of dialogue, recognition, and aesthetic kinship.

Koç's collecting appears not merely as an elite pastime or private pursuit, but as part of a gendered and intersubjective culture of care – a constellation of relationships, conversations, and silent acknowledgements that made women both the custodians and the transmitters of aesthetic memory. This orientation is evident in her desire to share her acquisitions with others, particularly with younger generations. In one recollection dated to June 1970, she is said to have shown Nezihe Araz a newly acquired traditional Albanian dress – purchased for 7000 lira from an antiquarian – lamenting that, aside from her friend, there was no one to whom she could show such beauty.[37] Saddened by her husband Vehbi Koç's initial reluctance toward the idea of founding a museum, she asked Araz for her support in broaching the subject again.[38] The museum, it seems, was born not only of vision and means, but also of the quiet encouragement and aesthetic companionship of women who shared her concerns – foreshadowing the eventual institutional form her vision would take.

Situated between official heritage frameworks and the intimate sphere of domestic culture, this circle fostered an alternative mode of cultural exchange, in which connoisseurship was shaped through personal relationships, shared discoveries, and mutual encouragement. Unlike the dominant tendencies of their time – which favoured court silks, monumental artworks, or European decorative arts – they gravitated toward anonymous objects of domestic labour produced and used by women in everyday life. Koç's methodical acquisition and eventual institutionalisation of her collection thus set her apart, positioning her not only as a private connoisseur but as an intermediary figure whose practice responded to institutional and market indifference toward vernacular Ottoman objects.

4. The Museum: Foundation, Growth, and Relocation

Sadberk Koç was 'the first person to introduce beauty, history, and art to the Koç family,' her daughter Suna Kıraç later observed – a remark that encapsulates both the cultivated aesthetic discernment and the formative cultural influence she exercised within her family and beyond.[39] Over several decades, Koç developed a connoisseurial sensibility grounded in the attentive appraisal of craftsmanship, historical resonance, and cultural meaning. This refined vision found its most enduring and public expression in the establishment of the Sadberk Hanım Museum – an institution realised posthumously through the combined initiative of her family and the Vehbi Koç Foundation. Its foundation not only honoured her personal legacy but also coincided with, and indeed precipitated, a decisive legislative change that, for the first time in the Repub-

37 *ibid.*, 237.
38 *ibid.*, 237–8.
39 Kıraç 2006, 20. Translated by the author.

lic's history, enabled private individuals to establish museums in Turkey.[40] Inaugurated in 1980 as the nation's first officially recognised private museum, it marked a formative moment in Turkish museology, setting a precedent for more than four hundred private museums that would emerge in subsequent decades.[41]

The choice of location carried both symbolic and practical significance. The Azaryan Mansion, an early twentieth-century registered property in Büyükdere, had served as the Koç family's summer residence for nearly three decades following its acquisition by Vehbi Koç in 1950. In 1977, Vehbi Koç donated the property to the Foundation, commissioning celebrated architect Sedat Hakkı Eldem to oversee its careful restoration. This process preserved the building's architectural integrity while adapting the interiors for exhibition purposes, establishing a balance between heritage conservation and the functional demands of a museum space.[42]

The decision to name the institution the *Sadberk Hanım Museum*, rather than the *Sadberk Koç Museum*, reflected an astute sensitivity to social nuance. The honorific *hanım* ('madam') conveyed a combination of courtesy and esteem, while also evoking the grace, refinement, and generosity for which she was remembered. As her daughter recalled, Koç's domestic order was meticulous, her preference for sewing her own linens emblematic of her attention to detail, and her habit of purchasing in large quantities for the purpose of gifting indicative of her generosity of spirit.[43]

The museum's foundational holdings, derived from Sadberk Koç's private collection, were soon augmented by major acquisitions, most notably the Hüseyin Kocabaş

40 In her petition to the Ministry of Culture on 14 April 1978, Suna Kıraç stated that, with the donations made in 1974 and 1977, the foundation provided the necessary resources for the establishment and maintenance of the location where the museum would be opened. She requested that the appropriate arrangements be made in accordance with the antiquities law published in the Official Gazette dated 6 May 1973 and numbered 14527. (The SHM Archives, report 2/470). During the ongoing bureaucratic process, the private museum regulation came into force in the Official Gazette dated 8 October 1980 and numbered 17126. (The SHM Archives, report 21/460).

41 The establishment of private museums in Turkey gained momentum in the early 1980s, following the 24 January 1980 economic reforms and the 1982 Tourism Encouragement Law (Law No. 2634). Earlier development plans had highlighted tourism and cultural heritage as priorities, but infrastructural shortcomings hindered progress. Economic liberalisation and new incentives for private and foreign investment marked a turning point, as cultural institutions – including private museums – were promoted within broader strategies of tourism development and national branding. In this context, heritage investments by individuals and foundations came to be regarded as both culturally valuable and economically strategic (Kozak et al. 2001, 111–9).

42 The museum's establishment was a milestone in Turkish private museology and filled a notable gap in cultural tourism at a time of increasing state-led investment in the sector. Situated in Büyükdere, a district relatively distant from the city's central art and museum circuits, it nonetheless became a pioneering destination for local and international visitors interested in cultural heritage. In doing so, it offered an alternative to state museums and helped to consolidate the role of private patronage in Turkey's cultural landscape.

43 Kıraç 2006, 20–1. Translated by the author.

Collection in 1983.[44] A discerning collector and personal friend of Koç, Kocabaş was known for opening his home weekly to scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs. His collection – integrated into the newly inaugurated Sevgi Gönül Wing in 1988 – provided a comprehensive survey of Anatolian material cultures from the Neolithic to the Byzantine periods, complementing the Azaryan Mansion's focus on Islamic and Ottoman art (Figure 10).

Today, the Sadberk Koç Collection, together with subsequent acquisitions and donations, occupies multiple galleries over two floors: the ground level displays Ottoman metalwork, Iznik, Kütahya, and Çanakkale ceramics, and Chinese and European porcelains, while the upper level houses the textile collection, including Ottoman garments, silk panels, and embroidered household objects, some of which are presented in domestic *mise-en-scène* reconstructions of historical rituals such as the hammam, circumcision bed, and henna night (figs. 12–14). The creation of these displays reflected a collaborative effort by Koç family members, most visibly in the painstaking arrangement of the circumcision bed, for which a woman from Ankara versed in regional customs was invited to lend her expertise.[45] These installations function not merely as nostalgic tableaux, but as interpretive environments that convey the embodied practices, sensory dimensions, and social meanings of Ottoman and Republican domestic life. Their cultural accuracy underscores both the family's commitment to Sadberk Koç's vision and the museum's role in transmitting nearly vanishing traditions, while visitor engagement affirms their enduring resonance.

Since its inception, the museum's holdings have expanded considerably, with textiles emerging as the most dynamic field. While about nine hundred pieces were initially transferred from Koç's private collection, the department now numbers over 4,600 within a total corpus of some twenty-one thousand works,[46] enlarged through notable acquisitions and individual donations, the latter often accompanied by photographs and oral histories that enhance their scholarly and interpretive value. Among these, donations of the Josephine Powell Collection (2006)[47] and the Murat Megalli Collection[48] (2017) significantly broadened the scope of the textile holdings beyond

44 The majority of this collection consisted of archaeological artefacts; accordingly, the Ministry authorised its conditional transfer to the Sadberk Hanım Museum on the stipulation that it remain intact as of 5 October 1983. The transfer was subsequently executed, as documented in the handover report dated 14 November 1983 (The SHM Archives, Report no. 279/410).

45 This information was obtained during a personal conversation with Semahat Arsel. 3 December 2023.

46 The breakdown of textiles is as follows: 2084 pieces of embroidery, 1906 pieces of garments, 577 pieces of heavy weaving, and 42 pieces of miscellanies from the Hüseyin Kocabaş collection. This figure excludes the Josephine Powell Collection. The SHM Archives, *Annual Inventory Report*, dated 31 December 2024.

47 Protocol signed between the Vehbi Koç Foundation and Josephine Evelyn Powell, 7 November 2006. The Vehbi Koç Foundation Archive.

48 Protocol signed between the Vehbi Koç Foundation and Murad Megalli Estate, dated 26 July 2017. The Vehbi Koç Foundation Archive.

Figure 10. View of the Sadberk Hanım Museum complex, including the Azaryan Mansion and the Sevgi Gönül Wing. The SHM Archives

urban elites to encompass rural and nomadic traditions, the Powell Collection being especially valuable for its associated documentary materials, which provide insight into production techniques, usage patterns, and the symbolic lexicon of Anatolian village and tribal weaving.

This sustained expansion, however, has accentuated the limitations of the museum's adapted residential premises. In 2000, an adjacent property was renovated to serve as storage, conservation facilities, and offices for the textile department, yet spatial constraints continued to limit the acceptance of new donations and the proportion of the collection on permanent display. In response, the museum adopted a strategy of rotating thematic exhibitions – recent examples have focused on late Ottoman and early Republican costume – accompanied by scholarly catalogues that have made enduring contributions to textile studies in Turkey and beyond.[49]

49 Bilgi 2007; Bilgi and Zanbak 2012; Bilgi 2022; Bilgi et al. 2023; Görünür 2010 and 2014; Görünür et al. 2023.

Figure 11. Interior view of first-floor distribution hall of the Azaryan Mansion, reflecting the building's domestic origins. The SHM Archives

Recognising the structural nature of these constraints, the museum's executive committee initiated a relocation project in 2007.[50] The historic Taşkızak Shipyard on the Golden Horn was selected as the new site, a choice that combines proximity to major cultural districts with a symbolic link to Istanbul's industrial–maritime heritage. Plans envisage the adaptive reuse of a nineteenth-century industrial building for permanent displays and conservation facilities, complemented by new spaces for temporary exhibitions, a research library, and public programmes.

In continuity with Sadberk Koç's founding ethos, the new institution is conceived as a place where the sensorial appeal of material culture is brought into dialogue with critical scholarship. Its evolution – from a posthumous act of familial commemoration to an institution preparing for relocation – illustrates the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, private initiative and public mission. The museum's future presence on the Golden Horn thus represents not a break with its origins, but a

50 This information is based on the author's participation in the Vehbi Koç Foundation's monthly Steering Committee meetings for the relocation project (since June 2020). See also *Koç Cultural Center Final Report* by Lord Cultural Resources, dated June 2008, for the initial project principles.

Figure 12. Hammam mise-en-scène. The SHM Archives. Photo: Aydın Berk Bilgin

rearticulation of them for the cultural challenges of the twenty-first century. In carrying forward the ethos of its founder, the institution not only preserves a material legacy but also extends Sadberk Koç's cultural agency into new spatial, intellectual, and civic domains.

5. Conclusion

The trajectory traced in this study – from the biographical formation of Sadberk Koç's sensibilities, through the cultivation of her collection, to its posthumous institutionalisation – illuminates a distinctive model of cultural agency in modern Turkey. Anchored in the preservation of Ottoman vernacular material culture, her practice emerged at a moment when such artefacts were largely absent from institutional narratives and undervalued within the heritage economy. By focusing on garments, embroideries, and domestic implements – objects deeply embedded in the tactile and symbolic registers of social life – Koç's collecting safeguarded craftsmanship while also sustaining intangible traditions of gendered knowledge, communal exchange, and ritual practice.

Figure 13. Circumcision bed. The SHM Archives. Photo: Aydın Berk Bilgin

This dual commitment – to the object and to the cultural world that produced it – distinguished her from many contemporaries, situating her within a small but significant network of women whose collecting operated at the intersection of connoisseurship, domestic agency, and historical consciousness. The eventual establishment of the Sadberk Hanım Museum, enabled by a decisive legislative shift, transformed a private endeavour into a public institution, inscribing these domestic and gendered histories into the national cultural record.

Over the subsequent decades, the museum expanded and diversified its holdings, refining its curatorial strategies and contributing to the study of Ottoman textiles and decorative arts. Its impending relocation to the Taşkızak Shipyard embodies both continuity and renewal: continuity in fidelity to Koç's founding ethos, renewal in its enhanced capacity to interpret, conserve, and disseminate collections within broader museological and heritage frameworks.

Figure 14. Henna night mise-en-scène with brides and relatives in bindallı *dresses. The SHM Archives. Photo: Aydın Berk Bilgin*

In bridging the domestic and the institutional, the vernacular and the monumental, Sadberk Koç's legacy demonstrates how private initiative can recalibrate national heritage narratives. Her work underscores that cultural memory is sustained as much by the preservation of everyday objects and the practices they embody as by the safeguarding of monumental artefacts. As such, her collecting offers a case study for continued scholarly engagement with gender, material culture, and the shifting boundaries between private connoisseurship and public cultural responsibility in Turkey and beyond.

Figure 15. The concept behind the new museum's space program with the collection at the centre. Grimshaw Architects' Steering Committee Presentation dated 01 April 2021. The SHM Archives

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