

# Virtual museums in Turkey

Tomur Atagok and Oguzhan Ozcan

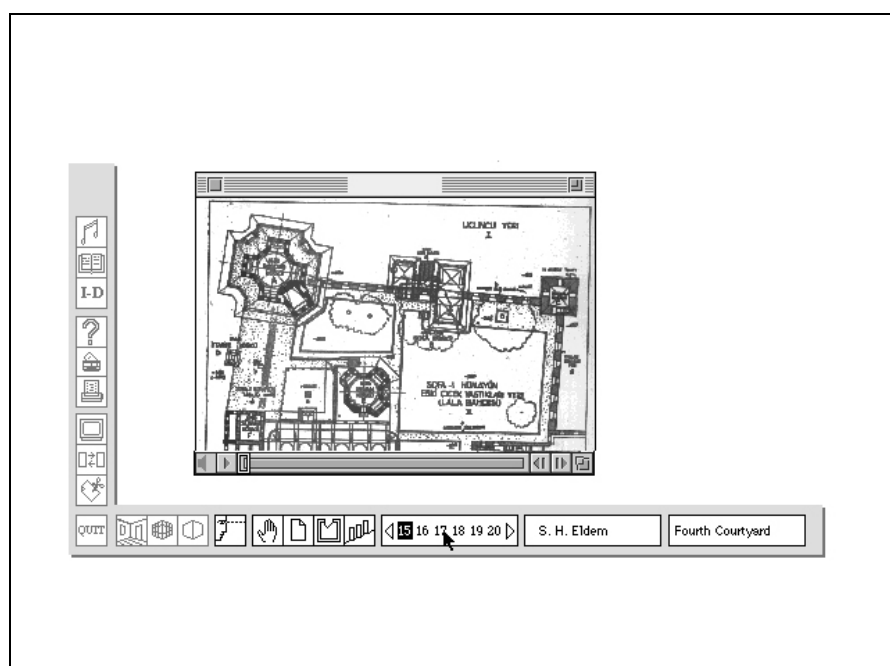
*Turkey's Internet network is rapidly expanding and the number of Internet operators, currently estimated at 150,000, is constantly rising. This has had considerable impact on the museum sector, as described by two pioneering figures. Professor Tomur Atagok is chairperson and founder of the first Department of Museum Studies in Turkey. A vice-director of the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture between 1980 and 1984 and the author of numerous articles on aspects of Turkish art and museums, she was also a Fulbright scholar working in a number of museums in the United States. Associate Professor Oguzhan Ozcan is vice-dean of the Faculty of Art and Design and chairman of the Department of Multimedia Design at Yildiz Technical University. He worked on various web museum projects for the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, the Topkapi Palace Museum, the Dolmabahce Palace, the Rahmi Koc Museum and the Interactive Museum of Turkey. He holds Turkey's first teaching professorship in multimedia design and has published a number of papers in this field.*

The first virtual museum efforts in Turkey began in 1990 when the Topkapi Palace made an initial attempt to feature some of its collections in cyberspace. Known as the Topkapi Palace Project, the aim was to provide easy access to such disparate materials as photographs, engravings, orthographic drawings, animations, and so on, by means of a sophisticated interface design. However, since sponsors were not found, this multimedia system was not finalized and remained only as a CD title of twenty photographs and ten technical drawings.<sup>1</sup>

In 1993 Internet use began in Turkey with the creation of the first art museum website for the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture (IMPS), which had been founded by Kemal Atatürk in 1937 ([mediaccess.msu.edu.tr/services/irhm-2.5/IRHM-2.5.html](http://mediaccess.msu.edu.tr/services/irhm-2.5/IRHM-2.5.html)). The site was one of the first in the world to use an interactive panorama format (QuickTime Virtual Reality<sup>2</sup>) to show sixteen sculptures on

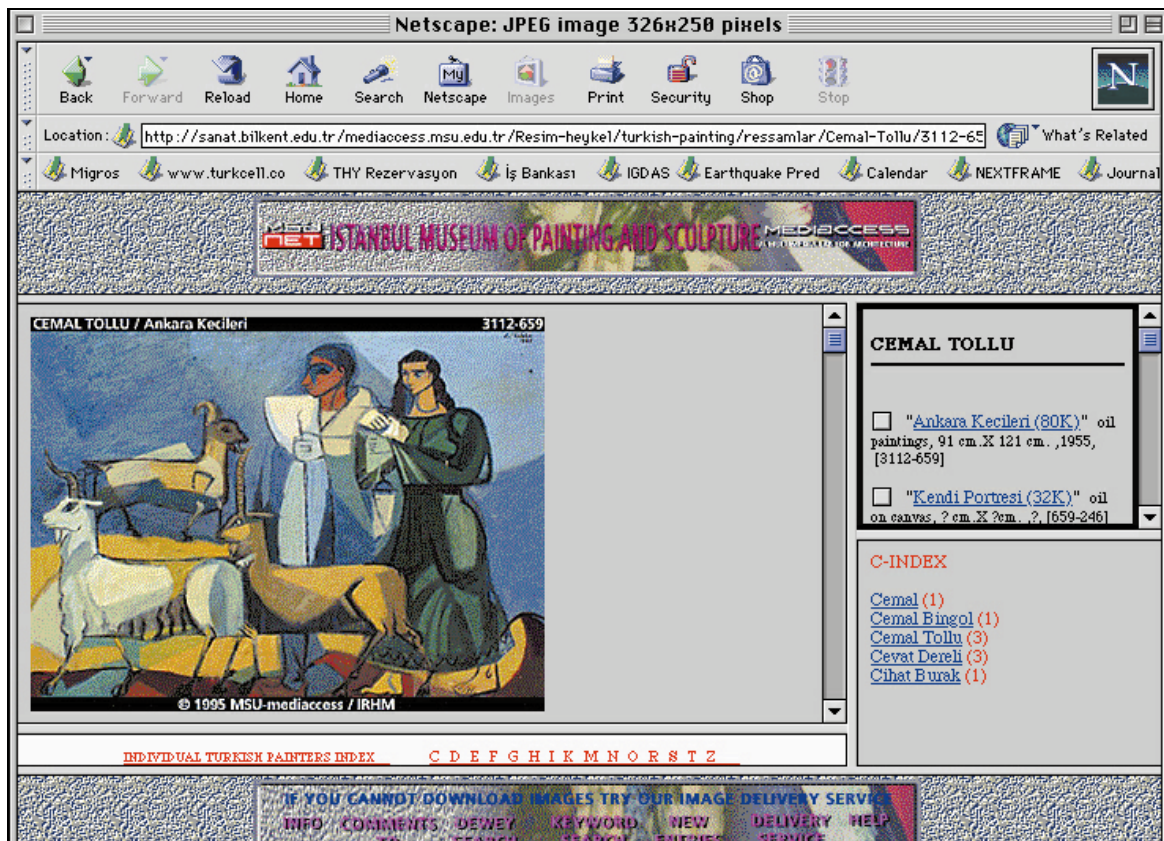
display and it also featured 269 paintings in picture format (JPEG). The launching of this site coincided with one of the first important virtual websites, the Web Museum Project created by the École Polytechnique in Paris ([metalab.unc.edu/wm/](http://metalab.unc.edu/wm/)).

In the IMPS project, research focused not only on how to present the museum to the world, but also on how to provide information in an Internet environment in the most effective way. Various documentation and data design models were studied. Finally, the Dewey Classification Standard was adopted as the most suitable system, particularly for academic use, though it proved to be less satisfactory for the general Internet user. The venture was a research project carried out at Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul, and was the first Turkish web museum and the first website created by Turkish professional graphic and multimedia designers. It captured the interest of both



*A page from the Topkapi Palace project website (1990).*

© Photo by courtesy of the author



© Photo by courtesy of the author

communication planners and the Turkish public, paving the way for art-targeted multimedia projects and professional website design in Turkey. During this period, a number of CDs became leading works in both interface design and content: *Habitat in Anatolia, from Past to Present* (in connection with the International Habitat II Conference); *100 Famous Turkish Films* (in celebration of the centenary of the cinema); *Turkish Painting*; and *Turkish Poetry*.

In 1996, the first body of privately held art went on the Internet with a site devoted to the Sabanci Painting and Sculpture Collection belonging to Sakip Sabanci, the chairman of the board of Sabanci Holding, one of the largest companies in Turkey ([www.sabanci.com.tr/sergi/index\\_c.html](http://www.sabanci.com.tr/sergi/index_c.html)). Although it is a simple interface design, and may be considered a web brochure of the book with the same name, it has received many hits and favourable reviews. It was followed in 1997 by two other private museums, Rahmi Koc ([www.rmkmuseum.org.tr/english/index.htm](http://www.rmkmuseum.org.tr/english/index.htm)) and

Sadberk Hanim ([www.sadberkhanimmuzesi.org.tr/english/main/frame\\_corporate.html](http://www.sadberkhanimmuzesi.org.tr/english/main/frame_corporate.html)).

That same year, several Turkish art galleries began to show interest in the new medium. The Borusan Culture and Art Centre started to display and archive all its exhibitions on the Internet ([www.borusansanat.com/e\\_tanitim.htm](http://www.borusansanat.com/e_tanitim.htm)), thus enabling researchers to access the works of Turkish artists of the last decade. It was also a productive year for Turkish virtual museums, with in-depth studies on a database that could be accessed via the Internet. The most extensive one, called the TAY database, was begun in 1993 and was connected to the Internet in 1997 ([tayproject.org/enghome.html](http://tayproject.org/enghome.html)). It displays some 2,000 artefacts found in Turkish archaeological sites in both two- and three-dimensional formats and allows users to search according to title, type, period and place.

The transformation of a simple web brochure into virtual museums came

*A page from the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture website (1995).*



*A screen view of Kemal Atatürk's apartment on the Dolmabahçe Palace website (1998).*

about with the aid of tools that made it easy to produce interactive, three-dimensional displays, and Turkish museums were quick to adopt them. The Department of Multimedia Design and the Department of Museum Studies of Yildiz Technical University initiated the research that made it possible to see the Harem Rooms in the Topkapi Palace ([www.yildiz.edu.tr/Topkapi/](http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/Topkapi/)), Atatürk's Room in the Dolmabahçe Palace ([www.yildiz.edu.tr/dbahce/](http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/dbahce/)) and the Rahmi Koc Museum ([www.yildiz.edu.tr/RKM](http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/RKM)) in QuickTime Virtual Reality format. The design incorporated orthographic drawings and interactive presentations, thus allowing the user to 'walk' through the museum easily by clicking on plan, section or elevation as well as on the interactive panorama.

Towards the end of 1998, the same team, working with the hypothesis that the concept of a virtual museum does not need to be associated with actual physical space, created the Interactive Museum of Turkey ([interactive.m2.org](http://interactive.m2.org)). The project,

whose real purpose was to introduce Turkish art and culture within a historical process, set up virtual galleries and electronic libraries with original reference articles and published daily news about Turkish art. Exhibitions devoted to Anatolian civilization, contemporary Turkish artists and Turkish photography were displayed on the Internet along with fifty articles. The initiative received the support of many private corporations and the media and was warmly welcomed by the public and by specialists.

The Turkish virtual museum project has thus far completed a number of ventures in four main areas: Web brochures that encompass general information on actual museums; database, Web and CD versions of museums and galleries; virtual versions of museum spaces, and thematic virtual museums that do not exist in real life. Many of these undertakings, however, were experimental and individual attempts, conceived as university research projects or designed for the museums of private corporations and do not include

all of the state-run Turkish museums. The project named Kamu-Net, which is intended to cover all Turkish monuments and museums as well as public institutions, is still in its early stages and it is not yet possible to speak of an overall plan by the government to enable access to historical archives via the Internet.

Nevertheless, according to a 1998 report of the European Audiovisual Observatory, the public and private sectors in Turkey have shown a growing interest in multimedia projects, and the country is considered to have one of the fastest growing fields of media and communication technologies. For this reason, it is possible to believe that what has begun in the area of the Turkish virtual museum will continue

in the coming years. A plan to carry 50 million Ottoman documents to the electronic environment and the Internet early in the year 2000 was the strongest evidence of this development. ■

#### Notes

1. See A. Enis Cetin, Omer N. Gerek and Ahmed H. Tewfik, 'The Topkapi Palace Museum', *Museum International*, No. 205. – Ed.
2. QuickTime Virtual Reality is technology pioneered by Apple Computers that allows interaction with an image; the viewer can look up, down, right, left, even behind, and zoom in and out. – Ed.