





**AZERBAIJAN'S  
OLDEST MUSEUM  
95 YEARS OLD**

Naila VALIKHANLI,  
*Academician*



**T**he National Museum of History of Azerbaijan is the oldest museum of the Azerbaijan Republic. For example, when Azerbaijan was part of the Russian Empire, a history museum was never created here. Only when Azerbaijan gained independence and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which was the first republic in the Muslim East, was established, was the issue of establishing a history museum settled: on 7 December 1918, the Istiglal (Independence) museum was opened. And although it lasted a short time, great work was done for the collection of archaeological, historical, ethnographic and numismatic materials and manuscripts both in the country and abroad.

After the independent Azerbaijan Republic fell under the strikes of the Bolshevik troops and Soviet power was established in Azerbaijan, the situation in the museum business changed. On 15 June 1920, on the basis of the Istiglal Museum, a museum-excursion subdivision (Muzekskurs) was created, and in September 1920, it was renamed the State Museum of the Azerbaijan SSR. Its main objectives were to collect, study, keep and display monuments of the material and spiritual culture of Azerbaijan.

Initially, the museum operated departments of history, ethnography, archeology, botany, zoology, applied and fine arts, and education, the Azerbaijani society to research the country and the commission for the protection of ancient monuments. In subsequent years, the museum underwent a number of structural changes. In March 1936, it was decided to reorganize the Azerbaijan state museum, create a museum with a historical profile and rename it the Museum of History of Azerbaijan. A number of museums such as the current Museum of Art (now the National Art Museum of Azerbaijan), the Museum of Literature (now the Nizami Museum of Azerbaijani Literature), the Theatre Museum (now the Jafar Jabbarli Azerbaijan State Museum of Theater), the Museum of Atheism (now the Azerbaijan State Museum of the History of Religion), the Museum of Agriculture and the Natural History Museum (now the Hasanbay Zardabi Natural History Museum) spun off from the museum.

The expansion of the Museum of History was hampered by the fact that it was partly in the mansion of oilman and philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev and partly in the Palace of the Shirvanshahs. The same buildings housed other institutions, which created additional

### *Museum lobby*

problems with the placement of funds, academic departments and the full exhibition. Nonetheless, being the most important political and cultural institution of the republic, the Museum functioned as one of the major historical research centers in Azerbaijan and a place that trained scientists on the history, archeology, ethnography and numismatics of Azerbaijan. The museum organized the country's first special archaeological, numismatic and ethnographic expeditions and traveling exhibitions.

The first full-fledged scientific exhibition of the museum covering the history of Azerbaijan from ancient times to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was opened in 1955 and operated until the restoration of independence in 1991 with periodic changes and supplements. Also, the museum operated a unique underwater archaeological team that conducted excavations in the Caspian Sea and on the coastal strip.

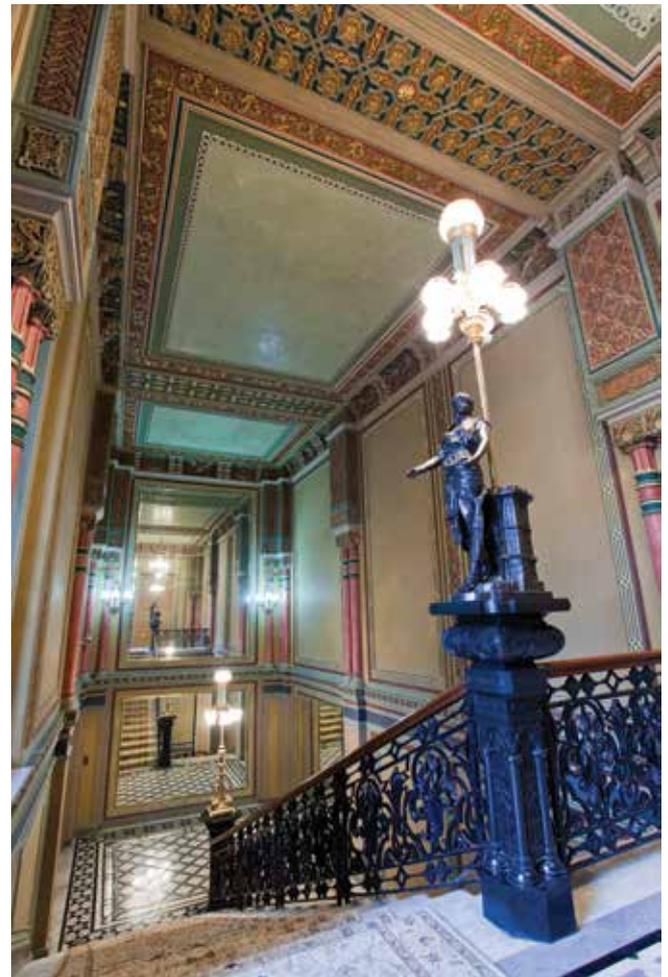
The accelerated development of the independent Azerbaijan Republic required the creation of a museum that meets the latest requirements. It should be noted that the very building of the Museum – Tagiyev's mansion is a unique architectural monument of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The building was built in 1895-1901 according to the plan of the Russian architect of Polish origin, I. Goslawski, using the most up-to-date technologies and materials of the time. The interior of the building was decorated with precious wood, while more than 40,000 gold rubles were spent on gilding by the prices of 1900. Each room had a unique decor, while the European Hall was decorated in the antique style and the Eastern Hall - in the style of the Alhambra Palace in Granada.

During the years of Soviet rule, a shelter for street children, the Council of People's Commissars of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and various archives were located in some parts of the house, which caused great damage to the internal structures and decoration of the museum. The luxurious ornaments of some walls were painted with a simple paint while a wooden cover was nailed over the unique mirror design of some ceilings.

In 2000, institutions not related to the museum were evicted from Tagiyev's mansion, and thorough restoration began in the building itself in 2005, which involved foreign companies and specialists. In November 2005, the museum received the status of a national museum.

On 28 December 2007, the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan was inaugurated with Azerbaijani



President Ilham Aliyev in attendance.

Today the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan is the main museum of the republic. It is located in one of the most beautiful buildings of Baku - in the former mansion of the residential and banking house of the oilman, well-known philanthropist and patron Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev.

The usable area of the building is 3,000 sq. m. Of these, 2,000 are allocated for the scientific exhibition, where the history of Azerbaijan is reflected on the basis of monuments of material and spiritual culture and authentic documents about the political history and socio-economic life of the country.

The total number of museum treasures is more than 300,000 items. 20,000 of them are on display in the exhibition, while the rest are kept in the scientific funds.

The exhibition of the first floor displays unique paleontological exhibits - rhino and wild horse skulls (180,000-170,000 years ago) from the famous Binagadi oil (kir) lake 8 - 10 km from Baku, petrified wood fragments (35-25 million years ago) and a fragment of a shin

*Archaeological artefacts hold a mayor place in the exhibition*

of the southern elephant (5-2 million years ago) found in the territory of Agstafa District. Azerbaijan is one of the oldest human habitats, as evidenced by the artifacts presented - hearths, bones of eaten animals related to the Guruchay archaeological culture (synchronous with the Oldowan culture of Africa - 2-1.5 million years ago), and the lower jaw of an 18-20-year-old man from the Stone Age - Azikhantrop (400,000-350,000 years ago) found at the world famous Azikh cave. Here, next to the flint and obsidian tools, Mesolithic materials (13,000-19,000 years ago) from the Gobustan Reserve 60 km from Baku, a world-famous gallery of rock paintings with over 6,000 household, hunting and sacred scenes, are demonstrated. Of great interest are the remains of Neolithic (8,000-6,000 years ago) and Chalcolithic (6,000-5,000 years ago) cereals; a painted ceramic vessel of the Khalaf culture, which testifies to links between the indigenous population of Azerbaijan and tribes of Mesopotamia, also deserves attention.

The museum highlights the Bronze Age (5,000-2,000 years ago). The exhibits put on display here - Absheron petroglyphs and rock carvings of Gamigaya in Nakhchi-



van talk about the spiritual world of our ancestors. The clay figure of a bull, tripuses, boot-shaped vessels, clay models of tents, stone molds for bronze and bronze tools of the unique Kura-Araz archeological culture are of huge interest. Pitchers of the highest artistic level from Nakhchivan and Khojali-Gadabay archaeological cultures attract attention. The Iron Age is represented by weapons and tools, anthropomorphic figures, zoo-



*Ethnographic artefacts hold a major place in the exhibition*



morphic ceramics, clay bullas from mounds, pitchers and catacomb. Buckles of Scythian bronze belts of "animal style", bronze symbols of power - figures of a deer, mountain goat, silver vessels, Scythian arrowheads and imported cylinder seals show the sedentarization of Cimmerian-Scythian-Saka tribes in Azerbaijan and relations between Scythian kingdoms and the neighboring states of Manna and Media. Exhibits of the later period reveal the political and economic status of sovereign states of Azerbaijan - Atropatena and Albania. Gold, silver, glass, bronze ornaments, terracotta stamps, the stone pedestal of a temple and lamps with Albanian inscriptions, Sassanian coins minted in Azerbaijani cities show the state of the monetary economy and the foreign relations of Azerbaijan in ancient and early medieval periods.

The history of the era of the Azerbaijani feudal states of the Shirvanshahs, Sajids, Salarids, Shaddadis and Atabays is highlighted by details of architectural buildings and epigraphic and numismatic monuments. The exhi-

bition on the first floor displays remarkable examples of glazed ceramics from archaeological excavations in Baylagan, Ganja, Gabala and other medieval cities of Azerbaijan, Chinese celadon dishes and silk products and silk clothes brought by the Great Silk Road. Tombstones with pictures of everyday scenes, sports equipment,



*The smallest exhibit is a golden tea set the size of a pin*

astrological instruments and miniatures are also on display here. Exhibits from the period of the formation of the feudal states of Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu and Safavids are on display too. Materials extracted from the bottom of the Caspian Sea by members of the underwater archeology group of the museum cause a great interest among visitors.

The exhibition of the museum located on the second floor consists of original exhibits that reveal the economic, social, cultural, scientific and educational life of Azerbaijan in the 18<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This part of the exhibition opens with the demonstration of banners of Azerbaijani khanates formed in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is a banner of the Iravan Khanate depicting the ancient Turkic symbol of power "the lion and the sun", banners of the Ganja, Baku and Sheki khanates. Carpets and ethnographic materials of the time of khanates and tombstones of some prominent public figures are unique. The halls exhibit original documents and weapons of the period of the beginning and completion of the annexation of Northern Azerbaijan by the Russian Empire.

A separate section is devoted to samples of folklore - houseware, arts and crafts; the next room contains carpets, silk fabrics and articles of homespun production. The following halls display exhibits devoted to trade and the economy - items of export and import, as well as equipment and documents of rail transport, fisheries and shipbuilding. Of particular interest are the folk musical instruments and personal belongings of figures of science, education and culture. The halls dedicated to Azerbaijan's participation in the revolutionary movement reflect the difficult events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the halls of the First World War, personal belongings



and documents of Azerbaijani doctors, officers and generals - participants in the war - draw attention.

The events of the period of the collapse of Tsarist Russia and the March 1918 genocide perpetrated against the civilian population of Azerbaijan by the Bolshevik-Dashnak alliance are covered by original exhibits collected piece by piece. The last exhibition halls of the second floor are allocated for documents and authentic exhibits from the period of the formation and activities of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920). It exhibits personal belongings of the founders of the republic and attributes of statehood - the Declaration of Independence, the coat of arms, the text of the anthem, flag, banknotes, stamps, medals and badges.

A house-museum was opened at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan for the first time in 2007, and a permanent exhibition - apartment-museum of Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, which demonstrates the remaining relics of the Tagiyev family, is of constant interest to visitors. The ten rooms of the apartment-museum show the activity of Tagiyev as an industrialist and philanthropist and the style and way of life of Azerbaijani millionaires in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It should be noted that in the scientific exhibition, the demonstration of original exhibits is complemented by the use of modern information technologies - touch-screen computers, monitors and video projectors.

The scientific exhibition division for the history of Azerbaijan is engaged in expanding and developing the stationary exhibition of the museum using achievements of historical science in Azerbaijan and principles of modern museology. The Scientific and Educational Department of the Museum, which organizes work with visitors of all ages and tours in Azerbaijani, Russian and



### *One of the museum symbols*

English, is engaged in promoting the history and culture of Azerbaijan.

The museum is engaged in daily scientific laboratory work to certify, conserve and publish material and spiritual values of the Azerbaijani people.

The scientific department of archeology investigates the more than 80,000 exhibits kept at the fund. The scientific department for numismatics is the country's largest numismatic center, which keeps and studies more than 100,000 coins of different eras and countries. The scientific department for ethnography studies more than 9,000 ethnographic materials reflecting the life and material culture of the Azerbaijani people.

The fund of arms and flags has more than 2,200 items, including banners of different periods, protective, cold and defensive weapons. The fund of documentary sources has a huge collection of historical documents, photographs and postcards from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fund of gifts and memorabilia keeps materials (5,300 items) belonging to prominent state, public, political and military leaders, artists and scientists of Azerbaijan. It also keeps gifts to Azerbaijan from various state and public organizations of foreign countries. The fund of fine materials holds more than 800 paintings, as well as mosaics and inlaid works by artists of Azerbaijan, Russia and Europe. The fund of auxiliary historical materials has more than 30,000 exhibits, including orders, medals, stamps, securities, chest and table signs and stamps. The special fund has about 300 gold and 600 silver items, as well as more than 700 numismatic materials of particular value. The negative fund has 20,000 items, including more than 8,000 unique glass negatives.

Currently, the electronic certification of all the exhibits of the museum is under way.

The museum has a restoration laboratory, whose members specialize in restoration work on metal, ceramics, wood, carpets, textiles, painting and graphics. The results of the hard work of the restorers were reflected in the exhibition "Second life of museum exhibits" (2010).

The library of the museum has more than 84,000 books, including 4,570 books kept in the fund of rare books.

The museum also has an archive (reflects the history of the museum) and an expert commission on the acceptance and acquisition of museum treasures. The museum has a scientific council.

The separate exhibition hall makes it possible to hold



thematic exhibitions organized by the division of external relations and exhibitions. The conference hall of the museum regularly hosts international and national conferences and presentations, celebrates anniversaries and memorable dates.

As an institution that is part of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, the museum deals with the study and publication of monuments of the material and spiritual culture of Azerbaijan.

The museum publishes an annual special collection of articles. The articles published in the collection reflect the materials of the museum's collections, topical questions of museology and the scientific activities of employees. Beginning from 2002, systematic and consistent work has been carried out to publish catalogs on separate collections of the museum. Travel guides, booklets, albums devoted to rare and unique exhibits of the museum and multimedia CDs (with the support of UNESCO) are also published.

Thus, the structure of the Museum makes it possible to carry out the entire cycle to study and promote Azerbaijani history in the following stages: collection, registration, storage, treatment, research, publication and display of historical materials found in Azerbaijan.

The 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan marked in 2010 was an event in the cultural and scientific life of the republic. The ceremony was attended by officials of the republic and heads of the largest museums of the world.

Today the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan is not just a place where exhibits are kept, but part of the historical memory of the people and a platform for discussing, studying and promoting history. ✨