

IN THE KNOW

Vuslat: Emanet/Troy runs until July 25, 2025 at the Troy Museum, 17100 Tefikiye, Canakkale, Turkey, a five-hour drive from Istanbul or a 20-minute drive from the city of Canakkale. Entry to the museum is 600 Turkish lira (\$23). Children under eight and adults over 65 are free. Rooms at the DoubleTree Hilton in Canakkale from 5225 Turkish lira a night. turkishmuseums.com hilton.com



Troy Museum, main; artefacts on display, right and below left; part of the Emanet/Troy by Vuslat exhibition, below right

WAR AND PEACE

Ancient and modern history meet in a legendary corner of Turkey

JANE CORNWELL

To be on the viewing terrace of the Troy Museum in Canakkale province, northwest Turkey, with the wind on your face, the sun glinting off the alluvial flats below, is to sense an energy born of ancient rage and canny mythological reinvention. Out on this vista of green and gold fields, with its faint coastline and rolling hills spiked with wind turbines, battles have been fought by everyone from shield-wielding, spear-carrying hoplites of ancient Greece to World War I soldiers sporting bayonets and grenades.

“Stand in the trench, Achilles, Flame-capped, and shout for me,” wrote English combatant and Oxford classics scholar Patrick Shaw-Stewart by way of the Iliad, the Trojan war epic written circa 750BC by Greek author Homer. Many Allied officers and soldiers cast themselves as latter-day warriors fighting in the shadow of Troy. Even now, atop a building with an elevation equal to the depth of the archaeological excavations at Troy, 750m away, imagining is inevitable.

A marker panel indicates sites with names plucked from history: Trojan Plains. Citadel of Troy. The Dardanelles, the strategic waterway connecting the Aegean to the Black Sea. Further back, Gallipoli Peninsula, where Allied troops including the Anzacs landed in 1915, fighting a brutal, ultimately unsuccessful eight-month campaign against the Turks that has since been transformed into a symbol of bravery, endurance, sacrifice and Australian national identity.

Tours to the battlefields of Gallipoli often take in the ruins of Troy and, since its opening in 2018, the Troy Museum, an award-winning cube-shaped building covered in rust-coloured weathering steel that rises abruptly from the earth, as if also excavated. Designed by Turkish architectural firm Yalin Mimarlik, the building’s impact is heightened by its solitary position in a red poppy-strewn wilderness, despite the adjacent car park dotted with cars and buses on day trips from Istanbul (five hours

each way) or the city of Canakkale (I’m at the five-star DoubleTree Hilton), 30km down the road.

The Troy Museum has increased visitor numbers to the Troy site, says Professor Rustem Aslan, director of the UNESCO-listed Troy excavations, where nine civilisations are built on top of one another (the city of Troy from Homer’s story is Troy VI, which dates to the Late Bronze Age of 1700BC-1800 BC), their provenance clearly signposted either side of a winding wooden boardwalk.

“Before the opening of the museum we’d get around 600,000 people annually,” Aslan tells me. “Some were disappointed because this prehistoric site has no reconstruction, and the story of Troy is so strong.” There is, however, a huge wooden replica of the fabled Trojan horse at the visitors gates, built in 1975, complete with a ladder for climbing inside. “But since 2018 we have upwards of 800,000 visitors each year. The museum is stimulating people’s imaginations.”

Entered via a wide ramp that slopes down to a subterranean gate and an exhibition hall with dioramas of the ancient cities in this Troad region of Asia Minor (including Assos, founded in 7th century BC, which has spectacular ruins overlooking the Aegean an hour’s drive away), the museum has tens of thousands of artefacts. About 2000 are currently on display over four concreted floors. Among them are a fragment of a red-painted jar considered the oldest painted vessel, terracotta tear-catchers used by funeral mourners, and the stunning 500BC Trojan Princess Polyxena sarcophagus, discovered in 1994 in a Canakkale valley, its reliefs arguably depicting the sacrifice of King Priam’s daughter.

In contrast to the museum’s war-related artefacts – arrowheads, breastplates, petite brass helmets (“People were smaller then,” says Aslan) – is the museum’s temporary visual art exhibition Emanet/Troy by Vuslat, an Istanbul-born, Los Angeles-based multi-disciplinary artist with roots in Anatolia/Asia Minor. Emanet can be translated as “trust”, “safekeeping” or “responsibility”, and the exhibition deftly weaves ancient nar-

ratives with contemporary artistic practice in ways that champion peace, revere nature and underscore the importance of legacy and stewardship.

In a small gallery on the ground level, large chalk drawings of birds seem to flow with energy, their wings spanning canvas and sky; furniture-sized ceramic sculptures that might be birds in flight invite sitting on; suspended mullein plants dipped in silver and gold suggest alchemical transformations; twin kinetic sculptures sprout pages from the Iliad, with some of the words and phrases redacted.

“It is important that we have our own stories,” says Vuslat, who also uses sound to weave oral history and mythology into the exhibition. Up in the main areas, a terracotta sculpture titled If to Forgive is a Virtue so is not to Forget is positioned alongside excavated earthen urns; “Emanet, emanet” comes her voiceover in a blackened room with a series of poles affixed with misshapen pieces of wood, each collected by Vuslat after the Los Angeles wildfires.

It is tempting to interpret the work of Vuslat, a former publisher, through the lens of recent events. In August 2023 she and her husband, Ali Sabanci, a prominent Turkish businessman, sustained serious injuries in a speedboat accident while holidaying in Greece. But there’s a universality to her examination of the balance between war and peace, to our role in the transmission of inherited histories.

Out in the museum’s landscaped garden, where lavender, rosemary and those blood-red poppies flourish in gaps between sarcophagi, columns and storage jars, sound installations mirror the calls of birds referenced by Homer and Vuslat’s recorded voice echoes from the branches of an oak tree as she narrates an emanet-themed folktale learned from her grandmother.

“Troy endures through cycles of war, peace and rebirth,” says Aslan, “and this exhibition reminds us we are all custodians of history and culture.”

Jane Cornwell was a guest of the Troy Museum.

