



The Penelope Gandhi Mission

The Penelope Gandhi Mission emerged spontaneously from present-day Cretan life. It is based on objective data – the exceptional quality of Cretan textiles, the presence of experienced weaving-women, the work on rural life and folk art undertaken in the early 20th century – and, above all, on hopes and feelings.

Our immediate aims were to reverse the decline of the art, to save weaving from withering away and falling into oblivion, and to revive the various techniques used in traditional textile production across Crete.

The most important aspect of the creation and operation of the Penelope Gandhi Mission is the desire of modern people, detached from real life, to return to themselves, to the movements of the hands and to handicrafts, to taking pride in personal creation and personal connection with tradition. Recovering the weaver's art is accompanied by a sense of one's self in harmony with others, recovering the idea of community through personal yet joint creation.

It is these hopes and feelings that have given the endeavour its name.

Penelope was the greatest weaving-woman of antiquity, who lived her whole life next to a loom and used it to demonstrate her faithfulness, her love and her multifaceted and ingenious thoughts. The name Gandhi is a reference to Mahatma Gandhi, whose personal involvement in handicrafts indicates a social stance and resistance. He is a symbol of resistance to British rule, which, by means of industrialisation and the procurement of cotton, degraded, oppressed and humiliated India.

The Penelope Gandhi Mission is a project carried out by the University of the Mountains, an official member of the Mountain Partnership of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. The University of the Mountains is a voluntary and non-subsidised organisation set up in Crete in 2007 by Professor of Ophthalmology Ioannis Pallikaris, academics of the University of Crete and major foreign universities, intellectuals, artisans, shepherds, farmers and folk craftsmen of rural Cretan rural, with the aim of preserving and studying the way of life of mountain communities.

It is a way of life that as a whole, as social expression and daily life, obeys the age-old relationship between nature and people, social relationships and ways of gaining one's living, through the revival of natural sources of wealth, discouraging the abandonment of villages, non-exhaustion of natural riches, striking a balance between water, wildlife, forests, animals and birds, and developing a small-scale, high-value economy.

One part of this is the Penelope Gandhi Mission. Over the years, its volunteers have visited all the villages of Crete, collecting material on weaving, tools, textiles, techniques, ornamentation and motifs, taking photographs and videos, getting to know the people and their methods. A huge quantity of material has been collected and archived. Our members have also engaged in two further fields of activity. One was the organisation of thematic events and interactive exhibitions across Greece; in two cases, at St Mark's Basilica in Heraklion in 2012 and at the Benaki Museum, Athens in 2013, the weavers themselves sat at their looms to demonstrate their art, enchanting visitors. This is very different to simply displaying tools and images, no matter how well they are explained. Women who weave and speak with the movements of body and fingers, through their wishes and their mutual cooperation, provide a direct means of understanding their art.

The second and most important element is that weaving, slowly at first but ever increasingly, has been incorporated in Middle and Primary Education as an elective activity. This has allowed us to reach out to all children, reaching the heart of our goal.

Penelope Gandhi and the future

The members of the Penelope Gandhi Mission aim to create products for the modern world, using a combination of traditional techniques and up-to-date capabilities to make a range of original, quality textiles for the international market. Their greatest achievement is the revival of two major methods of acquiring raw materials – from flax and silk – which had died out. Flax is now sown and harvested each year in association with the School of Agriculture of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete. Silkworms are also farmed. These are among the least visible but most important projects implemented.

The general aim of resisting mass production and the corrosive influence of imitation and homogeneity incorporates more specific objectives, such as:

- having our skilled, experienced weaving-women teach their art to the new generation, and raising young people's awareness in general
- creating handmade, numbered textiles for sale on the international market, to museums and private collections
- creating Weaving Faculties/Homes and ensuring their dynamic incorporation into the modern way of life, using up-to-date methods
- creating cottage industries producing vegetable and mineral dyes

Ariadne's Thread and Penelope's Loom at Herakleion Archaeological Museum

The Heraklion Archaeological Museum, the largest museum of Minoan civilisation in Greece and, indeed, the world, not only showcases the various aspects of Minoan life and art but also holds a prominent position in the international history of weaving. Minoan textiles present amazingly complex decoration, with geometrical shapes and

motifs mainly drawn from the natural world. The equally complex and elegant Minoan garments are known to us from a range of sources. The most important of these are the human figures in the famous Knossos frescoes, which are largely dated to the Neopalatial period and depict processions and detailed cult scenes. There we see elaborate clothing of exceptional artistry, including kilts, skirts and robes. Special mention must be made of the Sacral Knot, a wide band tied in a knot and worn at the back of the neck. The colour palette exploits the contrast between the sewn-on bands and the multicoloured or plain body of the garment. Seals and sealings are another rich source of information on Minoan dress, portraying a wide variety of elaborate religious and other costumes. There is also evidence of rituals in which votive garments are ceremonially carried and hung on rods to be dedicated to the deity.

In the Heraklion Archaeological Museum are preserved the traces of two important arts: spinning yarn with a spindle, of which only the spindle-whorls remain, and weaving on the upright warp-weighted loom, evidenced by loom weights.

A reconstruction of the warp-weighted loom is exhibited here.

Building the loom was a major effort involving a carpenter, an archaeologist and a skilled weaver, over the course of many hours and a series of experimental tests, to ensure that the loom operated according to the ancient method. Minoan textiles with distinctive motifs were also woven for the exhibition, using yarns produced in the ancient way and displayed next to the loom. The loom weights on the ends of the warp threads are copies of ancient ones.

The Heraklion Archaeological Museum also contains another category of find connected with textile production. These are the Linear B tablets recording information on the production, types and trade of woven materials, which played an important part in the development of the Minoan civilisation.

