

PENELOPE GANDHI

Penelope Gandhi

στησαμένη μέγαν ἰστὸν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὕφαινε (Homer, Odyssey, B 94)

The paths of the Thread-Study of centuries: a contemporary approach

Eastern Mediterranean Embroideries Workshop

Kavala, Imaret, May 20-22, 2022

(Ευχαριστώ θερμά για την πρόσκληση να μιλήσω στο πλαίσιο ενός τόσο σημαντικού συνεδρίου)

(Honoring this space that hosts us today and the Mohammed Ali Research Center, I would like to tell you that Mohamed Ali is directly connected to the special area of Crete, my homeland, where cotton was grown from Egypt (Egyptian rule 1830-1840), after the ban on its import, after the American Civil War)

(SLIDE 1) The University of the Mountains, a non-subsidized organization, member of the United Nations Mountain Partnership and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), was set up in Crete by academics of the University of Crete and major foreign universities, intellectuals, artisans, shepherds, farmers, and folk craftsmen of rural Crete. (SLIDE 2) Its aim is to preserve and study the life of mountain communities through the revival of natural sources of wealth, continuous medical support of the inhabitants, discouraging the abandonment of villages, and the non-exhaustion of natural riches.

(SLIDE 3) The most fruitful action of the UoM is the Penelope Gandhi Mission.

Our leader and guide is rector Eleni Glykatzi – Arveler.

The name of the mission is inspired by the Homeric Penelope, the greatest weaver of antiquity and a high female archetype, and the great pacifist Mahatma Gandhi, who engaged in spinning and weaving. (SLIDE 4)

The art of Weaving has always been a sacred artistic performance for the Greeks. Its tool, the loom, is the pre-eminent tool of culture. It is telling that, in the official procession of the Panathenaea festival, the Athenians offered their patron goddess a

robe woven by the maidens of their city. Similar rituals going back to Minoan and Mycenaean times.

The French poet Eluard wrote, "There are innocent words that make us live", and these words are mold, embroider, weave. Weaving above all is what reminds us with all its flaws and all its metaphorical meanings that we are all fellow human beings, meaning that we harmonize with each other, as is done on the loom. Simple and innocent words also remind us that Plato once said that weaving is politics, meaning that we must live in harmony with each other, just as is done on the loom.

In Crete the loom is the workshop of art, culture, and a virtuous life. The long-standing and indestructible heritage of the Weaving Art of Crete has been teaching us since early prehistoric times to experience the history of our home. (SLIDE4) Today Cretan women strive to remain unshakable with their arms raised and to continue this great tradition of worship, prayer and creation that has supported heroic memory and historical duration on our Island. For the last fifty years, the yarn of the Textile has been in danger of being lost. We have taken up the end of this thread with the Penelope Gandhi Mission.

(SLIDE5) Undoubtedly, the decoration of Minoan vessels, the pictorial compositions of frescoes as well as the representations of the sarcophagus of Hagia Triada, among other images, would have influenced the Cretan weavers who served the textile industry as an aesthetic cryptomnesia. (SLIDE7) In Crete it is very likely that only women wove, in contrast to Asia (including Asia Minor), where male weavers skillfully practiced this predominantly female craft.

(SLIDE8) Over the last 20 years, the volunteers of the Penelope Gandhi Mission have created a unique archive. They 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, and giving hope, strength, and joy to Cretan women, reviving the sacred art of weaving, which has remained alive since Minoan times.

The **UoM** and the **Penelope Gandhi Mission** cooperates with various academic institutions (SLIDE9) and has sent more than 150 undergraduate and postgraduate

students to study in Crete, in the belief that the work of this voluntary organization is a development of higher education and a vital opening to society. Moreover, five postgraduate theses have been prepared on topics related to the work of the Penelope Gandhi Mission.

The UoM cooperates with many institutions

SLIDE10-11

The University of Crete, the Foundation of Research and Technology (FORTH) and the Institute of Computer Science, with which we are implementing a project for the digitization of our valuable archive, the British School at Athens Knossos Research Centre, the Technical University of Crete - School of Architecture, the Mediterranean University - Department of Agriculture, the Hellenic Open University, the University of West Attica - Department of Industrial Design and Production Engineering, the University of the Aegean, Boston University at Boston College in the UK, the Hochschule Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences in Germany, Leiden University in the Netherlands, Tanta University in Egypt, the Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida, USA and many other major universities in Greece and abroad, are partners of the University of the Mountains and the Penelope Gandhi Mission.

The mission also **supports innovative teaching interventions** in collaboration with professors from almost all the Schools of the University of Crete, the Regional Directorate of Education of Crete, the Ministry of Education, the European School of Heraklion, all the school counsellors of Crete, and the Greek Folklore Research Centre of Athens. (**SLIDE12+13**) In these interventions, scientists of various disciplines teach primary school children the art of Weaving, which our Mission has succeeded in including as an elective course in the flexible study section, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. (**SLIDE14-15**) Since 2008, 270 educational interventions have been implemented in around 120 schools in Crete, with the primary goal of connecting knowledge with life and the acquisition by students of such skills.

Implements 570 actions, in all the villages and cities of Crete, the Aegean islands and many other parts of Greece, from Lefkada to Karpathos and from Thrace to Gavdos. Actions are also implemented in countries around the world, from Chile to Persia, Palestine, and India and from Morocco and Algeria to the UK and the Netherlands.

(SLIDE16) **Creates** weaving faculties across Greece, cooperating with young weavers and weavers of older generations who are living treasures of human craftsmanship.

(SLIDE17) **Visits** villages and cities in Greece and makes audio and video recordings of meetings with women master-weavers, weaving techniques, tools, materials, decorations, and motifs.

The team 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 four major methods of acquiring raw materials in order to produce handmade yarn – from flax, cotton, wool and silk – which had died out.

(SLIDE18-19) Flax and cotton are now sown and harvested each year in association with the School of Agriculture of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete.

(SLIDE20-21) Silkworms are also farmed. (SLIDE22-23) In 2022 cotton and flax were sowed at schools in all prefectures of Crete and at the Knossos Research Centre of the British School at Athens.

(SLIDE24) **Produces** natural plant and mineral dyes and studies porphyry, faithfully continuing the practices of Cretan women since prehistoric times.

(SLIDE25) **Creates** numbered, certified textiles and cloth and recreated textiles depicted in Minoan art, for private collections and museums.

Intervenes creatively in society, developing small-scale, high-value economies and new cottage-industry forms of creation and production.

Makes Greek and Cretan culture international again, connecting it to the world of culture, art, and science.

Designs, organizes, and implements extremely successful exhibitions and interactive events on the art of weaving and the value of yarn-making (SLIDE26). Events have been held at the Basilica of St. Mark in Heraklion in 2012, (SLIDE27) at the Benaki

Museum in Athens in 2013 and (SLIDE28+29) at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion in 2016. (SLIDE30+31) An upright warp-weighted loom was reconstructed and exhibited for the first time at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, where traces of two important arts are preserved: spinning yarn with a spindle, of which only the spindle-whorls remain, and weaving on the upright warp-weighted loom, evidenced by loomweights.

Other exhibitions and interactions include (SLIDE32) the “Yarn Festivals” held in 50 villages around Mt. Psiloritis in Crete in 2017, and (SLIDE33+34) the “Flax Reciprocity and Solidarity Ritual” held each year, every 21st of June, at the Summer Solstice, also on the high sacred mountain of Psiloritis in Rethymnon, Crete. This ritual celebrates the joy of harvesting the flax produced by the Mission in Crete, with an ancient ceremony and with the cooperation and advice of the Departments of Archaeology and Primary Education of the University of Crete.

(SLIDE35) Finally, the UoM and the Penelope Gandhi Mission have co-organized and been invited to participate in various scientific conferences, cultural events and exhibitions, such as Documenta 14 Athens, the World Congress of Smart Materials 2018 and AUTEX 2017.

(SLIDE36+37)

Many thanks for your attention

