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## The Journey of Elisavet Contaxaki's *Classical Bouquet* from Crete to Washington, D.C.: the historical and political context

### ABSTRACT

The article presents and discusses a unique and unpublished volume entitled the *Classical Bouquet* by the learned Cretan woman Elisavet Contaxaki to be presented on behalf of the Kingdom of Greece at France's First Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1855. This 114-page volume consists of painted illustrations of the principal monuments and places in the Kingdom of Greece, to which are added a few pages from her native isle of Crete. These illustrations are explained by quotations from Ancient Greek authors, historians, philosophers and poets in the original language and include translations into French as well as literary excerpts from English, French and Italian. Many of the pages are adorned with flowers from the sites depicted in the drawings. After the conclusion of the Universal Exhibition in Paris, Miss Contaxaki donated this piece of art to the United States.

The article is divided into three parts: the first examines the structure and the content of this volume, the second explores its travels from Crete to Washington DC, and the third suggests a more nuanced interpretation of Contaxaki's controversial personality. The goal of this article is to bring to light this important source unknown to scholarly literature, shedding light on the politics and diplomacy of 1860s Crete. The *Classical Bouquet* is a valuable primary source for a cross-disciplinary study in literature and the arts, socio-political history and diplomacy. It is also an important source for gender and cultural analysis by providing evidence on its exceptional author as well as on the formation of Modern Greek identity in the nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS: Elisavet Contaxaki, Classical Bouquet, diplomacy and politics in Ottoman Crete, gender studies, Modern Greek identity, Cretan history, reception of the Classical World

### INTRODUCTION

Miss Elisavet Contaxaki, the author of the *Classical Bouquet*, was a learned Cretan woman highly involved in the diplomacy and politics of the Cretan Question. She was a major figure of the counter-revolutionary movement on the island of Crete in the 1860s and very closely connected with the officials of the foreign powers in Crete and Constantinople, as well as with the Ottoman Governor General of Crete, Veley Pasha. Her sole work, the *Classical Bouquet*, and the archived unpublished correspondence between Miss Contaxaki and American officials provide new evidence on the role of this exceptional Cretan woman as well as on her work and her ideology pertaining to diplomacy and politics in Crete in the course of the nineteenth century.

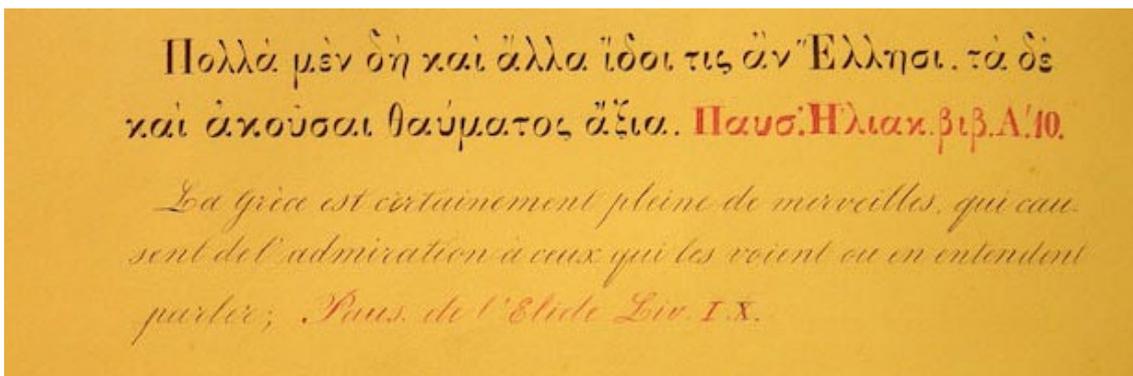


Fig. 1. The motto on the introductory second page of the volume underscores the value of the Greek cultural identity.

The primary goal of this article is to present her work, the newly discovered primary source entitled the *Classical Bouquet*, exceptional for interdisciplinary study in the fields of history, diplomacy, politics, art and literature, gender and cultural studies. The objectives of this article are: 1. to examine the structure of the volume and part of its contents in order to show its ideological orientation; 2. to discuss its travels to the United States and the related documentation, in order to propose an interpretation of Miss Contaxakis's choice to donate her work to the United States; and 3. to shed more light on the controversial personality of its author based on archived correspondence between her and American officials.

In addition to its importance for the study of the history of nineteenth-century Crete and related fields, the *Classical Bouquet* is also exceptional in inviting its universal audiences to adopt a Greek cultural identity by sharing the aesthetic and humanist values conveyed by the Greek World.

### 1. WHAT IS THE *CLASSICAL BOUQUET*?

The *Classical Bouquet* is an artistic volume prepared by Elisavet Contaxaki and her team of artists to be presented at France's First Universal Exhibition in Paris, in 1855. This 114-page volume consists of painted illustrations of the principal monuments and places in the Kingdom of Greece, to which are added a few pages from her native island of Crete. The cultural identity of these landscapes and monuments is explained by quotations from Ancient Greek authors, historians, philosophers and poets as well as literary excerpts from English, Italian and French poets. Many of the pages are adorned with flowers from the sites depicted in the drawings.

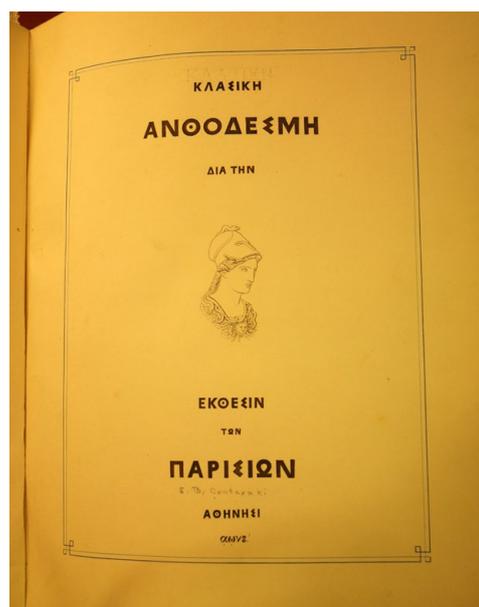


Fig. 2. The volume was composed for the First Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1855.



Fig. 3. The impressive wooden case of the volume announces its objective: to inspire the universal audiences with the timeless intellectual and aesthetic values of the Greek world.

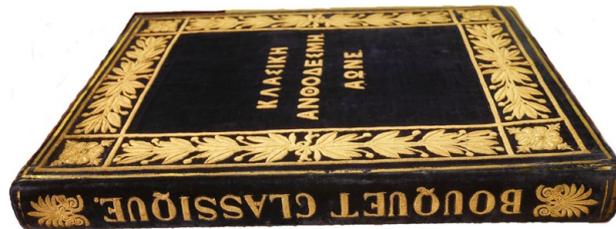


Fig. 4. The volume *BOUQUET CLASSIQUE* is bound in blue velvet embroidered with silver.

For its long journey from Athens to Paris, the delicate volume of the *Classical Bouquet* was kept in an artistically carved wooden case. The names of the famous Greek authors and artists inscribed on the wooden case highlight the contribution of Greek art and letters to world history.

The volume is bound in blue velvet embroidered with silver. The front cover is embroidered with the title in Greek capital letters, *ΚΛΑΣΙΚΗ ΑΝΘΟΔΕΣΜΗ*, together with the date *ΑΩΝΕ* (1855). A strip of embroidered leaves with four decorative symmetrical signs forms the border of the front cover. On the back cover is embroidered a crown in a laurel wreath, symbolizing the Kingdom of Greece, with an embroidered Greek key border.

Miss Contaxaki is the sole originator and author of this volume but she was assisted in its execution by a group of native Greek artists from various parts of the newly established Greek kingdom, as well as from areas beyond its borders such as, for instance, Ioannina in Epirus. The volume was produced in Athens and the artists are listed by profession and place of origin in the introductory pages. The contributors to this work are the decorator/sign painter Ioannis Constantinou from Volos, the calligrapher Xenophon Ioannides from Ioannina, the painter Petros Moraites from the island of Tenos, the gold-embroiderer Demetrios Syrmakeses from Ioannina, the bookbinder Athanasios Zosimas from Ioannina and the joiner Georgios Glenes, also from the island of Tenos.

The volume is described as a “πόνημα”, a “written work”, not an album. The introductory pages provide important information on the work and Elisavet’s objectives. On the first introductory page there is an excerpt from the traveler Pausanias praising the marvels made by the Greeks: “One could see and hear many marvels worthy of admiration for the Greeks”.<sup>1</sup> This excerpt

<sup>1</sup> “Πολλά μὲν δὴ καὶ ἄλλα ἴδιοι τις ἂν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ καὶ ἀκοῦσαι θαύματος ἄξια”, Pausanias, *Elis* book A.10.

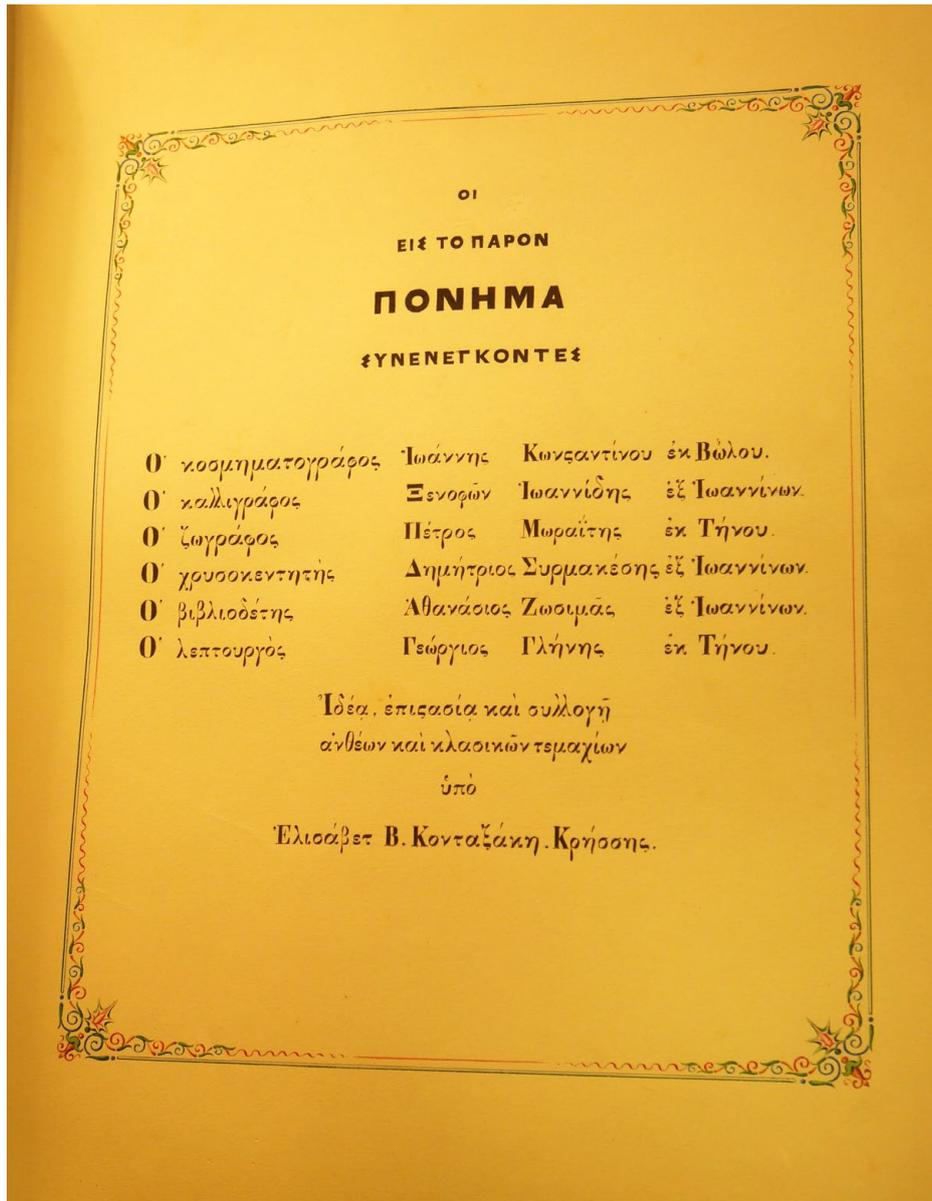


Fig. 5. Miss Contaxaki was assisted in its execution by a group of native Greek artists.

captures the very essence of this book, which is to exemplify the contribution of the Greek World to civilization and to invite its international audiences to identify with a universal Greek cultural identity.

Miss Contaxaki composed two parallel prefaces, one in French and one in *katharevousa*, or purist Greek. The prefaces imitate the rhetorical art of the ancient Greeks by expressing modesty and by admitting in advance the weaknesses in the execution of her work. More specifically, she explains that due to some misfortunes she was unable to fully implement her initial concept, and therefore circumstances did not permit her to present a work worthy of the Universal Exhibition in Paris and the Ancient Greek world, the cradle of civilization. Showing modesty and admitting weaknesses in advance is a typical strategy in ancient Greek rhetorical art in order to disarm the

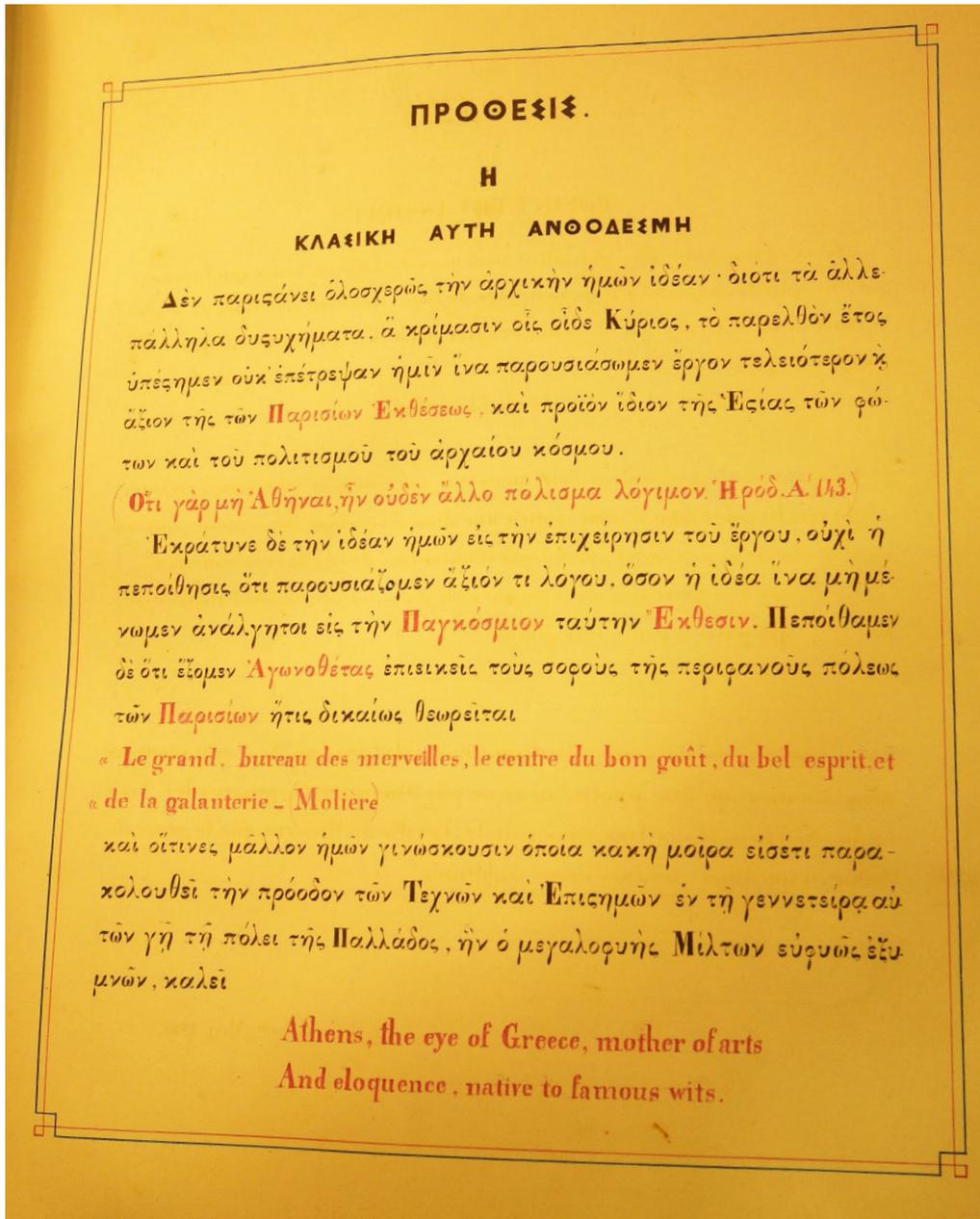


Fig. 6. The Πρόθεσις in Greek.

audience and pre-empt envy and/or criticism. She continues by quoting Herodotus in presenting Athens as an unparalleled city, worthy of praise: “Except for Athens there is no other remarkable city”. She adds that her motivation in creating this work is that the Greeks should not be seen to remain indifferent to this universal exhibition. At this point she quotes Molière’s praise of Paris as “The great city of marvels, the center of good taste, of fine intellect and gallantry”. She concludes that she expects the judges to be indulgent, since all are aware of the misfortune that continues to hinder the progress of the arts and sciences in their birthplace, the city of the goddess Pallas. At this point she quotes the poet Milton’s praise of Athens: “Athens the eye of Greece, mother of arts and eloquence, native to famous wits”.

ΠΙΝΑΞ		
ΤΩΝ		
ΠΕΡΙΕΧΟΜΕΝΩΝ		
1	Αττική	Σελ. 1
2	Αθήναι	3
3	Ακρόπολις	5
4	Αθηναΐα Πολις	15
5	Αδριανού Πύλη	43
6	Άρειος Πάγος	31
7	Αγορά	37
8	Ανάκτορου Πύργος	35
9	Άγραι	51
10	Ακαδημία	57
11	Αιγάλεω όρος	69
12	Ακροκόρινθος	99
13	Αργος	103
14	Βήμα	29
15	Βουλευτήριον	41
16	Διονύσου ιερόν	19
17	Διονύσου θεατρον	21
18	Δελφοί	91
19	Ερεχθίδειον	13
20	Ελευσίς	61
21	Εύβοια	81
22	Επίδαυρος	101
23	Ευρώτας	109
24	Θησείον	39
25	Θημισονόλεους τάφος	67
26	Θερμοπύλαι	93
27	Θήβαι	87
28	Τισσός ποταμός	47
29	Ίσθμός	97
30	Κολωνός	55
31	Κεγχρεαί	101
32	Κορινθος	99
33	Κασαλία κρήνη	91
34	Κρήτη	111
35	Λυκικράτειον	47
36	Λύκειον	53
37	Λιμ. Πειραιεύς/Φάληρον Μονασχ.	73
38	Λεύκτρα	101
39	Μαντινεία	101
40	Μουσαίου λόφοι	23
41	Μητρώον	41
42	Μεγαρίς	63
43	Μαραθών	79
44	Μυκήναι	103
45	Μεσσηνία	107
46	Νίκης Απτέρου γαστήρ	9
47	Νεμεα	103
48	Ναύπλιον	103
49	Όλυμπειον	45
50	Όδος Ιερά	59
51	Όρη Αττικής	59
52	Όλυμπια	
53	Προπύλαια	7
54	Παρθενών	11
55	Πενύς	27
56	Πανός άντρον	33
57	Πανελλήνιον Αίγινης	75
58	Πλαταιαί	85
59	Παρνασσός	91
60	Πελοπόννησος	95
61	Σακράτους όσομωτήριον	25
62	Στάδιον	49
63	Σαλαμίς	71
64	Σούνιον	77
65	Σικυών	99
66	Σπάρτη	109
67	Τίρυνς	105
68	Φύλη	83
69	Χαιρώνεια	81
70	Ψυτταλεία	65
71	Ωδείον	5

Fig. 7. The table of contents: 71 Greek cultural landscapes in the Kingdom of Greece plus Crete.

The table of contents lists in alphabetical rather than sequential order 71 places and monuments in the Kingdom of Greece. Among them Miss Contaxaki includes Crete; a large proportion of these places, 30, refer to Athens; another 12 to Attica and the remaining 29 refer to other areas of Greece: Central Greece, Euboea, Peloponnese and Crete. The reason why Miss Contaxaki includes Crete in her *Classical Bouquet* is easily understood, as Crete was her native land. This is also why she dedicates four pages to Crete, whereas she allows no more than two pages each for all the other places.

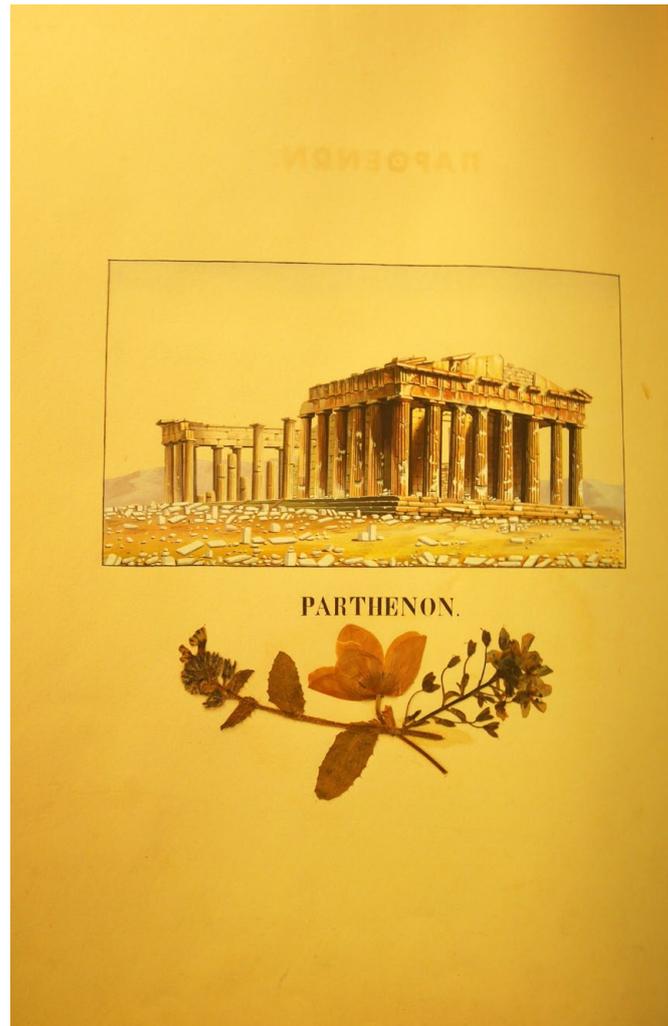


Fig. 8. The painting of the monument and the dried flower from the site.

The material that Miss Contaxaki employs to provide the audience with the cultural identity of these locations and monuments is a combination of the following: paintings of the location or monument; a characteristic painted emblem above the Greek name of the location or monument, a dried flower from the site, one or two pages with excerpts of ancient authors,<sup>2</sup> quotations from European and American literature pertaining to these locations or monuments. Besides basic geographic and archaeological information, since the passages refer to locations and monuments, the excerpts include information on myths, cults, ideals, historical events, heroic historical figures, stories about heroes or gods, and the reception of the classical ideals by renowned European and American authors and poets such as Racine, Dante, Falconer, Leake, Milton, Young, Lord Carlisle and Lord Byron.

<sup>2</sup> The authors that she lists are, in order of frequency: the geographer Strabo and the traveler Pausanias, the tragic poet Euripides, the historians Thucydides and Herodotus, the biographer Plutarch and quotations from Homer. Other famous ancient Greek authors and poets quoted in the book are Plato, Isocrates, Diodorus of Sicily, Polybius, Xenophon, Pindar, Theocritus, Lucian and Simonides, yet they are quoted in few cases. Miss Contaxaki also includes a few Greek inscriptions and epigrams as well as a few excerpts from the Acts of the Apostles.

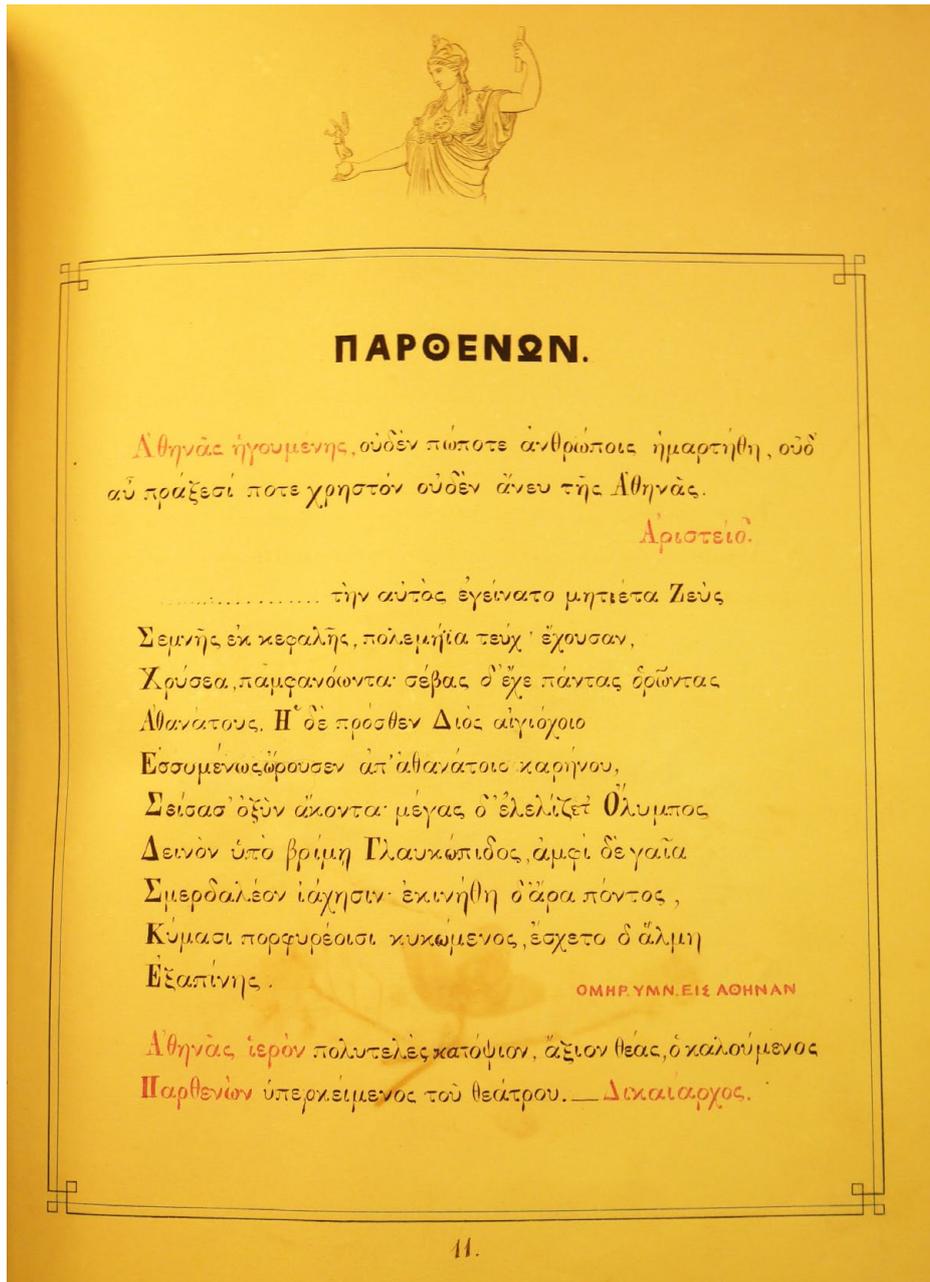


Fig. 9. Parthenon, excerpts from ancient authors referring to the monument and to the Goddess Athena.

It is very obvious that Miss Contaxaki was extremely knowledgeable about ancient Greek and European authors and well informed in her selection of these excerpts. The content of the excerpts, paired with the locations, reveals a very deliberate choice that pertains not only to the aesthetic value of the content but also to the ideological orientation of this volume. It seems that the ideological strand running through this volume is that the humanistic and aesthetic values of the Greek world can appeal to European audiences and may inspire liberal choices at the social and political level. Learned Europeans find in the classical past the artistic inspiration and the liberal ideas that they cannot find in the political realities that preceded modern Europe.

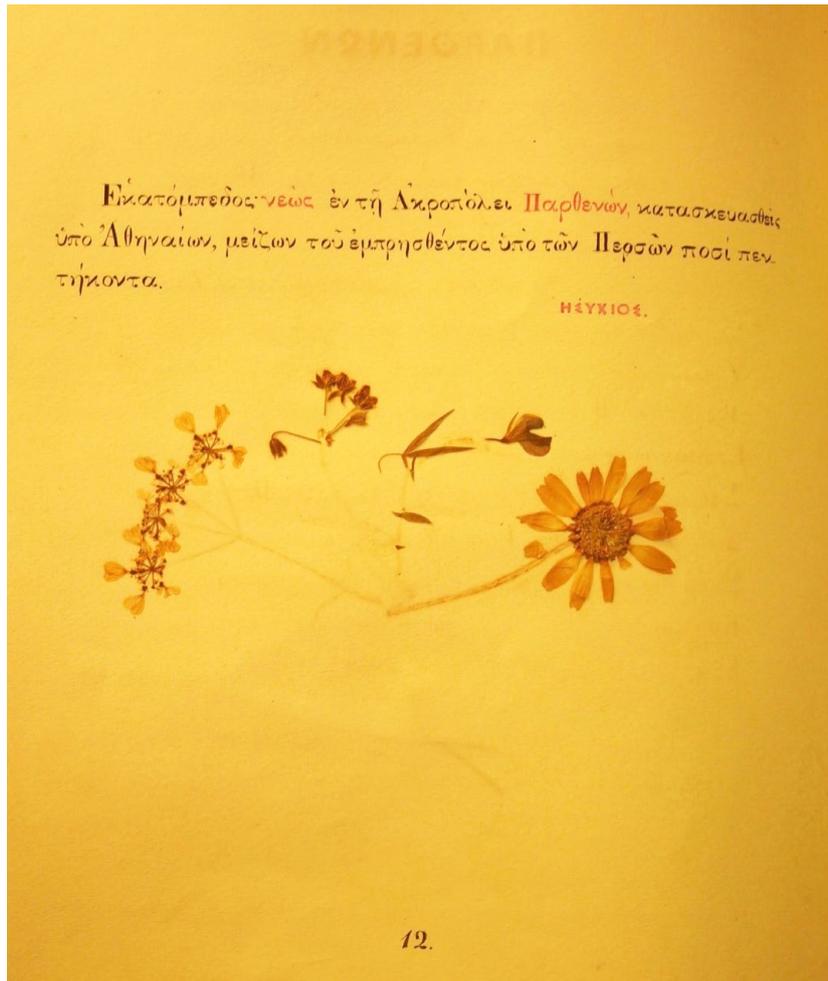


Fig. 10. Parthenon (continued) an excerpt describing the architecture of the monument.

Yet Miss Contaxaki refrains from speaking about democracy. For instance, in the pages dedicated to Attica, which cover almost half of the book, Miss Contaxaki does not use the word democracy even once. The monuments, the arts, the cults, the gods and heroes, material culture and intellectual life in general, are the focal point of her presentation. The Parthenon, the symbol of democratic Athens, is only described by excerpts referring to the goddess Athena, the cult, and the architectural plan of the temple.<sup>3</sup>

This absence of any explicit reference to democracy could be explained by the general political ambiance of European political life in the nineteenth century. Within the frame of the Second Empire in France and the reverberations of the Holy Alliance, democratic ideas were repellent and seen as a threat to monarchical or autocratic Europe. Certainly, Miss Contaxaki did not want to provoke the judges of the imperial court or, much worse, to get into trouble. But her references to the Pnyx<sup>4</sup> – one of the earliest and most important sites in the creation of democracy, being the hill where from 507 BC the Athenians gathered to host their popular assemblies – give an

<sup>3</sup> Elisavet Contaxaki, *Classical Bouquet*, 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, 27-28.

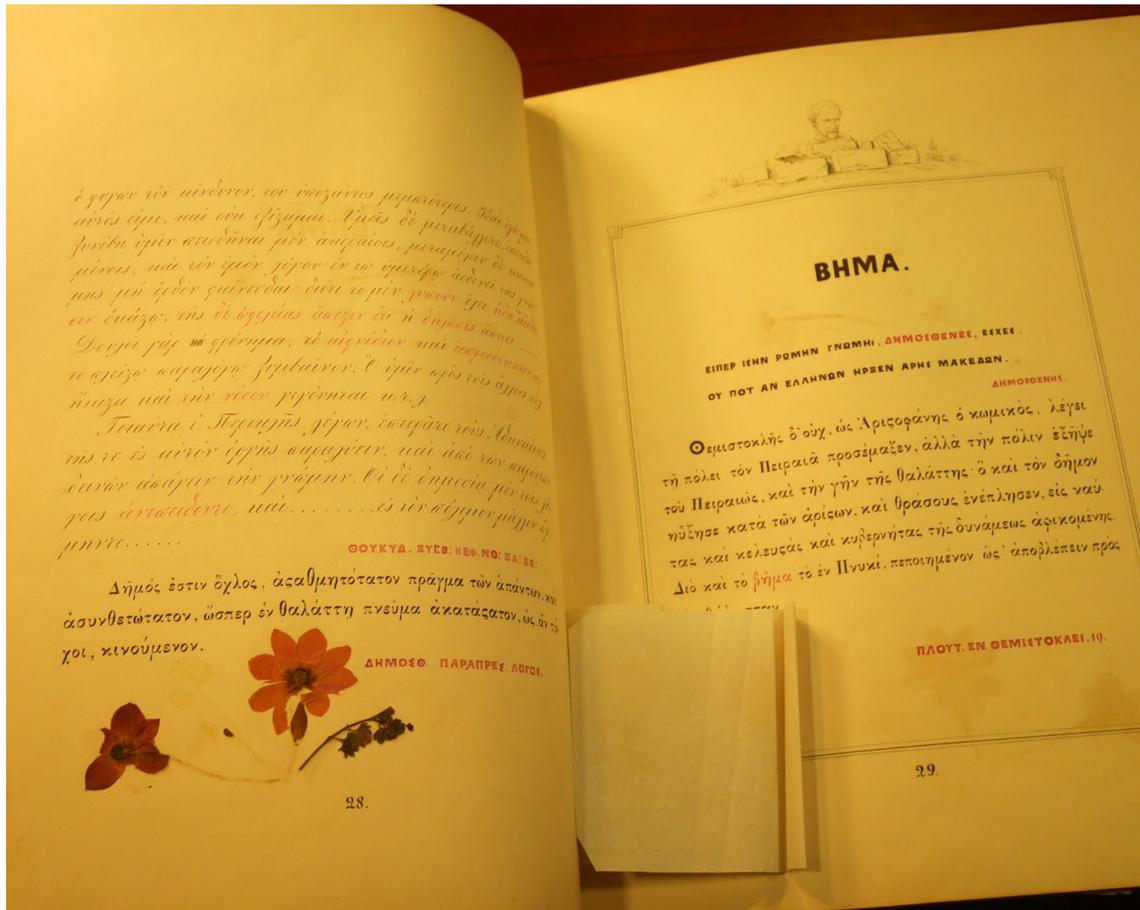


Fig. 11. The last page of quotations on the Pnyx.

explicit insight into her political beliefs. In the pages relating to the Pnyx, Miss Contaxaki chooses to quote a page from Demosthenes that includes derogatory terminology about the citizenry qualifying it as a “mob”: “ὡς ὁ μὲν δῆμος ἐστὶν ὄχλος, ἀσταθμητότατον, πραγμάτων ἀπάντων, και ἀσυνθετώτατον, ὡσπερ ἐν θαλάττῃ πνεῦμα ἀκατάστατον, ὡς ἂν τύχοι, κινούμενον” (The assembly of citizens is a mob, the opinion of which is of all things the most unstable and is as fickle and changeable as the haphazardly changing winds of the sea).<sup>5</sup> Taken out of context, this excerpt presents democratic assemblies as the most erratic and capricious things. It also highlights the weakness of the rule of the many when a deviant form of democracy may turn from the rule of the citizenry, the “demos”, into the rule of the mob. In the rest of the quotations on the Pnyx she underlines once more the weaknesses of the many as opposed to the virtues of their political leader Pericles. From these quotations we can draw the conclusion that Miss Contaxaki does not trust or like the rule of democratic assemblies, but does admire and appreciate gifted democratic leaders such as Pericles.

In addition to the previous conclusion about the ideological orientation of her work, it is clear that Miss Contaxaki’s objective is also to show the universal audiences of the exhibition the awareness Modern Greeks have of their glorious past. This is in the context of the Modern Greek

<sup>5</sup> Dêmostenês, *On the (False) Embassy*, 19.136.



Fig. 12. Detail of the passage on the Assembly of the People.

Enlightenment movement, which precedes her work. The most renowned philosophers of the Modern Greek Enlightenment are inspired by the ideals of the Greek world. Rhigas Ferraios in his work *New Political Administration* revives the values of ancient Greek democracies<sup>6</sup> and Adamantios Korais publishes the *Hellenic Library*, devoted to new editions of classical authors accompanied by lengthy prefaces entitled “Impromptu Reflections”, leading the way on political, educational and linguistic matters in Modern Greece.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the *Classical Bouquet* gathers all the values of the Greek World and shows their impact on the modern world. The cultural landscapes of the *Classical Bouquet* engage the audiences to reflect on values of the Greek world, including: moral prudence taught by high actions and high passions;<sup>8</sup> deep wisdom and tranquility before death;<sup>9</sup> reverent awe and piety towards the gods; reputation and posthumous fame;<sup>10</sup> vigilance in politics;<sup>11</sup> serenity found in nature;<sup>12</sup> hymn to chastity;<sup>13</sup> power of man’s intellect;<sup>14</sup> enlightened governance<sup>15</sup> gratitude for the homeland;<sup>16</sup> self-denial for the general good;<sup>17</sup> heroism and eternal glory.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Γιώργος Κοντογιώργης (2008), «Ταυτοτική πολυσημία του Ελληνικού έθνους», *Η Ελληνική δημοκρατία του Ρήγα Βελεστινλή*, Αθήνα, Παρουσία, 155-159.

<sup>7</sup> Αδαμάντιος Κοραής, *Προλεγόμενα στους αρχαίους Έλληνες συγγραφείς*, τ. 1-4, Αθήνα, Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1984-1995.

<sup>8</sup> “ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΥ ΘΕΑΤΡΟΝ”, 21: John Milton’s poem *Paradise Regained*.

<sup>9</sup> “ΔΕΣΜΩΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΣΩΚΡΑΤΟΥΣ”, 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> “ΛΕΥΚΤΡΑ ΚΑΙ ΜΑΝΤΙΝΕΙΑ”, 102.

<sup>11</sup> “ΑΓΟΡΑ”, 37.

<sup>12</sup> “ΙΛΙΣΣΟΣ”, 47-48.

<sup>13</sup> “ΑΓΡΑΙ”, 51.

<sup>14</sup> “ΘΗΒΑΙ”, 88.

<sup>15</sup> “ΛΥΚΕΙΟΝ”, 53.

<sup>16</sup> “ΠΛΑΤΑΙΑΙ”, 86.

<sup>17</sup> “ΘΕΡΜΟΠΥΛΑΙ”, 93-94.

<sup>18</sup> “ΤΑΦΟΣ ΛΕΩΝΙΔΑ”, 110.

## 2. THE JOURNEY OF THE CLASSICAL BOUQUET TO THE UNITED STATES

Miss Contaxaki seems to have succeeded in achieving one of her objectives, namely showing that the identity of Modern Greeks has been shaped by their classical heritage. One of the documents related to the donation of her *Classical Bouquet* to the Smithsonian Institution states: “the present sons and daughters of the renowned city of Minerva (Athens) are not insensible of the glory that was once attached to her name, not incapable of appreciating those monuments of arts, science, and literature which still survive”.<sup>19</sup>

The question arises why Miss Contaxaki chooses to donate her *Classical Bouquet* to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. The annual report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution in 1858 states “So ardent is Miss Contaxaki’s admiration that she wishes the *Classical Bouquet* to be permanently placed in the United States”.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Miss Contaxaki believes that her work deserves to be placed in the United States rather than in the Kingdom of Greece shows: 1. that she admires the American institutions, 2. that she seeks political friendships with United States officials and invests in them, or 3. that she has a low regard for the politics of the Kingdom of Greece, consisting of a Bavarian king and submissive senators governed by political clientelism and patronage. In her letter of 16th April 1856 to Mrs and Dr Hill, Miss Contaxaki explicitly expresses her disappointment and distrust in the politics of Athens.<sup>21</sup>

Going back to the donation of the *Classical Bouquet*, based on the related correspondence,<sup>22</sup> two years after the Paris Exhibition, Miss Contaxaki entrusts her original work to Mr Charles Spence, the US Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Sublime Porte. Miss Contaxaki requests that Mr Spence presents her original album through the US Secretary of State to the Smithsonian Institution. On November 25th 1857, the Secretary of State Mr Lewis Cass sends the “splendid album” to Professor Henry at the Smithsonian Institution, together with a letter explanatory of the circumstances of its execution and transmission to the United States. He adds that the *Classical Bouquet* is a specimen of taste and art, worthy of a prominent place in the institution’s collection.<sup>23</sup>

A few months later, on January 28th, 1858, the US Secretary of State laid the *Classical Bouquet* before the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, and by a motion of the Board the volume was referred to Professor Cornelius Felton to make a report on it and write a letter of acknowledgment to Miss Contaxaki.<sup>24</sup> On April 10th 1858, Professor Cornelius Felton presented his report on the *Classical Bouquet*, including two resolutions proposing that the volume be

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Regent of The Smithsonian Institution*, 1858, 77-78.

<sup>20</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Regents of Smithsonian Institution*, April 10th, 1858, 77-8.

<sup>21</sup> Miss Contaxaki’s letter on the politics of the Kingdom of Greece: <http://www.hillarchive.gr/archive/details/2033/epistoles/sort//page/17.html>

<sup>22</sup> Letter dated November 23rd, 1857, Charles Spence to the Secretary of the State Department Mr Lewis Cass. *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1858, 77-8.

<sup>23</sup> Letter dated November 25th, 1857, The Secretary of the State Department Mr Lewis Cass sends the letter and the volume to Professor Henry, *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Smithsonian Institution, Board of Regents, Minutes 1858: [http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_sic\\_14342](http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_14342)

ACCESSION 61180

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM

ACCESSION  
MEMORANDUM & CERTIFICATE

Department of Anthropology      Division of Old World Archaeology.

January      1920/91

Please enter an accession from      Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.

(Address)

No. 10, 1922.  
Date of receipt  
Full name of collector  
By whom received by  
No. of the material

1. 64,400

2. NUMBER OF SPECIMENS

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bin

the following object (collected with or without the aid of a Museum staff):

"Classical Bouquet" (with carved wood cover), being a Greek album containing dried flowers from Hellas and verses from the ancient authors, prepared by Miss Elizabeth S. Contaxaki for the Paris Exposition of 1888 and presented by her through Dr. Charles S. Spence and Hon. Lewis Cass, Secretary of State, to the Smithsonian Institution.

Papers appended

*Author's name, Address, names of collector for the Museum, etc.*

~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~

W. H. Holmes  
Head Curator

11-28  
Assistant Curator

The Assistant Curator directs that ALL letters in the possession of the Curator or his Assistants, which relate to this Accession, be attached to this memorandum and forwarded with it to the **TOP OF**

**ENCLOSURE & DOCUMENTS**

unless otherwise stipulated.

In connection with material sent out for identification all types and labels must be returned. Extension of any other material is permitted only on definite arrangement.

Received the above in good order (date) Jan 16, 1932

William D. Jenkins  
Return this copy to the U. S. National Museum.

Fig. 13. The registration document of the *Classical Bouquet* in the United States National Museum, Department of Anthropology, Division of Old World Archaeology in 1920. Received for deposit in the rare volume collection in 1932.

accepted and that a copy of Mr Felton's resolution along with a letter of acknowledgment be sent to Miss Contaxaki.<sup>25</sup>

The report was accepted by the board and the two resolutions adopted.<sup>26</sup> Following this resolution in the year 1858, the *Classical Bouquet* was registered to the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>27</sup> Almost sixty years later, in a document dated December 26th, 1919, it was stated that the volume

<sup>25</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1858, 77-82 [http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_sic\\_14344](http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_14344)

<sup>26</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, April 10th, 1858, 136-137.

<sup>27</sup> [http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_sic\\_382](http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_382)

building for the Government collections, and also the decision of the Attorney General respecting the law.

The Secretary then presented the annual report of the operations, expenditures, and condition of the institution during the year 1857; which was read.

The Board then visited the rooms of the building, the collections, &c., and adjourned.

April 10, 1858.

The Board of Regents met this day at 11 o'clock, a. m.

Present, Hon. J. M. Mason, Hon. S. A. Douglas, Hon. George E. Badger, Hon. Benjamin Stanton, Hon. L. J. Gartrell.

Mr. Mason was called to the chair.

The minutes were read and approved.

The report of the Building Committee for the year 1857 was read and accepted.

The report of the Executive Committee was presented, together with the estimates for the year 1858.

Communications relative to the care of the Government collections, the Wynn estate, the publications, investigations, and other operations of the institution, were read.

On motion of Mr. Badger, the Secretary was directed to have the windows and other parts of the east wing of the building put in good order.

The following report from Professor Felton was presented.

*Report on the present of Miss Contaxaki.*

The Secretary laid before the Board a volume received from Greece, and sent as a gift to the Smithsonian Institution, together with the letter of the Hon. Mr. Spence, late United States Minister to Constantinople, to the Secretary of State, and the letter of the Hon. Lewis Cass, the Secretary of State, to Professor Henry, the Secretary of the Institution. The volume and the correspondence were referred to Professor Felton.

The volume was transmitted from Athens, Greece, through Mr. Spence. It was designed and executed by a Greek lady of rare literary accomplishments, Miss Elizabeth B. Contaxaki, assisted by six Greek gentlemen, resident in Athens. It contains sketches of the principal ruins in that city, and views of the most famous historical places there and in other parts of Greece, correctly drawn and delicately colored, together with the passage, from the classic authors, in which the objects and places are described or referred to, translations of the passages, and extracts from English and French writers on the same subjects. The book is adorned with exquisitely drawn vignettes, and emblematic devices, and with specimens of the wild flowers which grow in the places described, carefully preserved and pressed, and attached to the leaves. The volume is bound in blue velvet, and tastefully decorated with silver. It is put in an elegantly and richly carved case, made of olive wood from the olive groves near Athens, where stood, in ancient times, the academic groves of Plato's school. The body of the case is made of the trunk of the tree, and the ornamental portions, of the root, which is of darker and richer color. This beautiful gift, therefore, combines a great variety of objects, possessing, from their associations with the loftiest achievements of Hellenic genius, a deep and singular interest, and forming a

most appropriate memorial of the country from which European art, education, philosophy, and letters took their rise.

Miss Contaxaki, the tasteful designer of this memorial, is a native of the island of Crete. At the time of the outbreak of the Greek revolution her father was a landed proprietor there, and, in common with the great body of the Hellenic race, lost most of his property by the rapacity and tyranny of the Turks. His family was dispersed, and his daughter Elizabeth became an inmate in the family of the Rev. Dr. John H. Hill, the American missionary, who established himself in Athens at the close of the war for the benevolent and enlightened purpose of aiding the Greeks to reconstruct the shattered edifice of civilization by establishing the school, which still continues to dispense the blessings of education among the children of its first pupils in that illustrious capital. Residing with Dr. Hill for many years, and educated chiefly under his superintendence and care, Elizabeth became known to many American travellers in the East, by whom she has often been mentioned with a cordial appreciation of her accomplishments and merits. Their personal relations have naturally inspired her with a warm interest in the United States, heightened by the sympathies of the citizens of America in the regeneration of her country, and the substantial aid furnished by them to Greece in the hour of her utmost need. Recently Miss Contaxaki, after a visit to Constantinople, where she was received with distinction, has returned to her native island, which is under the government of the Pacha of Egypt, and, by her learning and ability, has succeeded in recovering, through the Moslem tribunal, a portion of her paternal estate.

The volume now presented to the Smithsonian Institution was sent to the great Paris Exhibition of 1855, where it excited much admiration, and gained a diploma for its accomplished author. She has now transmitted it for permanent deposit among the treasures of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States.

The Regents of the Institution accept the gift with great pleasure, not only on account of its rare beauty, its intrinsic value, and the many interesting associations it suggests with that famous city, called by Milton "the eye of Greece, mother of art and arms," but also as an expressive symbol of a nation which has so honorably vindicated its right to the glories of an illustrious descent by re-establishing the institutions of freedom and learning on the soil where, in ancient times, they earliest flourished, and with unexampled splendor.

The committee recommends the adoption of the following resolutions by the Board:

*Resolved*, That the Regents of the Smithsonian Institution accept, with gratitude, the splendid memorial volume presented by Miss Elizabeth B. Contaxaki, and that they recognize in the beauty, taste, and art displayed in its general execution and style of its embellishment, a pleasing indication that the genius which placed the ancient Greeks at the head of the civilization of the world still survives in their descendants.

*Resolved*, That a copy of the above report, and of these resolutions, be transmitted, with a letter of acknowledgement from the Smithsonian Institution, to Miss Contaxaki, the accomplished donor.

On motion the report was accepted and the resolutions adopted.  
The Board then adjourned.

May 19, 1858.

The Board met this day in the Vice-President's room, United States Capitol, at 9½ o'clock.

Present, the Chancellor, Hon. Roger B. Taney, Hon. John C. Breckinridge, Vice-President of the United States, Hon. James M. Mason, Hon. J. A. Pearce, Hon. S. A. Douglas, Hon. W. H. English, Hon. Benjamin Stanton, Professor A. D. Bache, and the Secretary.

The minutes were read and approved.

Mr. Pearce explained the report of the Executive Committee and

Figs 14 & 15. Prof. Felton's report on the present of Miss Contaxaki to the Board of Regents at Smithsonian Institution, April 10th, 1858.

with its carved wooden case had been for many years in the Secretary's reception room and the Secretary directed that it be placed in the United States National Museum. On December 2nd, 1932, the Curator of the Division of Archaeology of the Smithsonian Institution reported that the volume finds no place in the archaeological program of reinstallation of the Old World collections and proposed the volume be returned for preservation and included in the collection of rare volumes. The volume was finally deposited in this collection of rare volumes at the Smithsonian Institution on December 15th, 1932 and has remained there ever since, for another 84 years, until the current research brought it to light.



Fig. 16. The fragile volume and its wooden case at the National Museum of Natural History.

### 3. ELISAVET CONTAXAKI: THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Miss Elisavet Contaxaki has been discussed in the scholarly literature as a teacher,<sup>28</sup> as an agent of British policy in Crete,<sup>29</sup> and as the leader of counter-revolutionary movements in Crete.<sup>30</sup> By bringing to light her work *Classical Bouquet* and unpublished archived correspondence with American officials, I will suggest the newly discovered material points to a more complex interpretation of her personality, motivation and political role.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the versatile personality of Elisavet Contaxaki makes her a rare if not unique case of a woman who is highly educated and involved in letters and the arts, diplomacy, and politics, as well as in counter-revolutionary action in Crete. Despite her

<sup>28</sup> Maria Delaki, “La Contribution de l’enseignante crétoise (chrétienne et musulmane) au cours de l’Etat crétois (1899-1913)”, *Comptes Rendus 31ème Session de la Conférence Internationale de l’Histoire de l’Education (ISCHE31): L’Histoire de l’éducation populaire*. Université d’Utrecht, Pays Bas, Utrecht 26-29 Août 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ευστράτιος Παπαμανουσάκης (1979), «Ελισάβετ Κονταξάκη: η ταραγμένη ζωή μιας Χανιώτισσας του περασμένου αιώνα», *Από την Κρητική Ιστορία*, Χανιά, 24-27.

<sup>30</sup> *Α΄ Ιστορικό Αρχείο της Επανάστασης 1866-1868*. Πίναξ των εν τω αρχείω αναφερομένων προσώπων, των υπέρ και κατά του αγώνος δρασάντων, 36, 68. Κονταξάκη (ή Βασιλακοπούλα) Ελισάβετ, *Όργανον Αντεπαναστατικών*, 1867, *Ιστορικό Αρχείο Κρήτης, Επίσημη Αλληλογραφία των Κρητικών Επανάστασεων 1866-1869*, τ. Ε΄, 836-1026: Επιστολές 706, 867, 888, 914, 929, Θεοχάρης Δετοράκης (1986), *Ιστορία της Κρήτης*, Αθήνα, 392, Eustratios Papamanousakis, (1979), 24-27; *Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center* (Box 1 folder 23). Elisavet’s counter-revolutionary actions troubled her European and American friends, such as her benefactor and teacher Mrs Francis Hill; in her memoirs, Marie Esperance von Schwartz refers to the feelings of disappointment Miss Contaxaki’s actions caused to the Hill family: *Περιηγήσεις στην Κρήτη 1866-1870*, University Press of Crete, Herakleion, 2008, 116.

intricate role in Cretan politics and her gifted personality, little has been written and published in the scholarly literature about Elisavet Contaxaki and nothing as yet about her unique volume *Classical Bouquet*.

Elisavet was the second child and only daughter of a well-off family from Chania. In 1824, during the War of Independence, she moved with her family from Crete to Syros. There is no information on her childhood. What we know is that she was sent to Athens to study at the newly founded Hill School. The school was founded in 1831 by the missionary Reverend John Henry Hill, an American theologian and classicist. Residing with Dr Hill for many years and educated under his supervision, Elisavet acquired a very rich education in the classics and foreign languages and literature. Within a few years, from being Dr Hill's student, Elisavet became a valuable assistant to him; she worked as a teacher and nurse in Hill's school, becoming irreplaceable.<sup>31</sup>

In the course of her education and work, Miss Contaxaki became well known to the cosmopolitan social circle of the Hills's friends, which included politicians, philhellenes, authors and poets, who would speak about her with cordial appreciation of her accomplishments and merits.<sup>32</sup> She soon became the focal point of the social acquaintances of her American benefactor. Charmed by her gifted personality, the British ambassador in Athens, Admiral Lord Lyons, offered Miss Contaxaki a position in his service at the British Embassy, where the young Cretan was initiated into the secrets and the arts of diplomacy.

Elisavet went back to Chania in the 1840s and played an active political role. Miss Contaxaki became acquainted with the authorities in Crete and with the counselors of the Great Powers, soon acquiring both power and influence. Elisavet's house next to the bishop's residence became a political center. In 1856, Elisavet was very closely acquainted with the Turkish Governor General of Crete, Veley Pasha.<sup>33</sup> Along with the British Consul Ogle and Bishop Ioannikios, Elisavet was one of the key members of the Christian circle supporting Veley Pasha.<sup>34</sup> In her letters dated July 28th and October 2nd, 1857 and addressed in a very friendly tone to the plenipotentiary Minister of the United States to the Sublime Porte, Mr Charles Spence, Miss Contaxaki describes Veley Pasha as an excellent and refined leader able to implement reforms to better the life of the Christians in Crete; she seems to see him as an enlightened governor who would create a socially and economically progressive multicultural Crete that could appeal to all Ottoman citizens regardless of their religion.<sup>35</sup>

These views are shared by Mr Charles Spence, who in his correspondence with Veley Pasha addresses him as a philanthropist and liberal statesman interested in the promulgation of the *Hatt-i-Şerif* (Noble Edict) and the *Hatt-i Hümayun* (Imperial Edict).<sup>36</sup> However, in this same letter

<sup>31</sup> Marie Esperance von Schwartz (2008), 114; Eustratios Papamanousakês (1979), 23-24.

<sup>32</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution*, April 10th, 1858, 136-137.

<sup>33</sup> During the Veley Pasha administration, Elisavet was able to exercise significant influence on the Turkish authorities and also helped her fellow Cretans who asked for her mediation: Konstantinos Fournarakês (1930), 42.

<sup>34</sup> Eustratios Papamanousakês (1979), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Miss Contaxaki's letters to Mr Charles Spence dated July 28th, 1857 and October 2nd, 1957, *Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center, Box 1 folder 23*.

<sup>36</sup> Influenced by European ideas, the *Hatt-i-Şerif* (Noble Edict) in 1839 and the *Hatt-i Hümayun* (Imperial Edict) in 1856

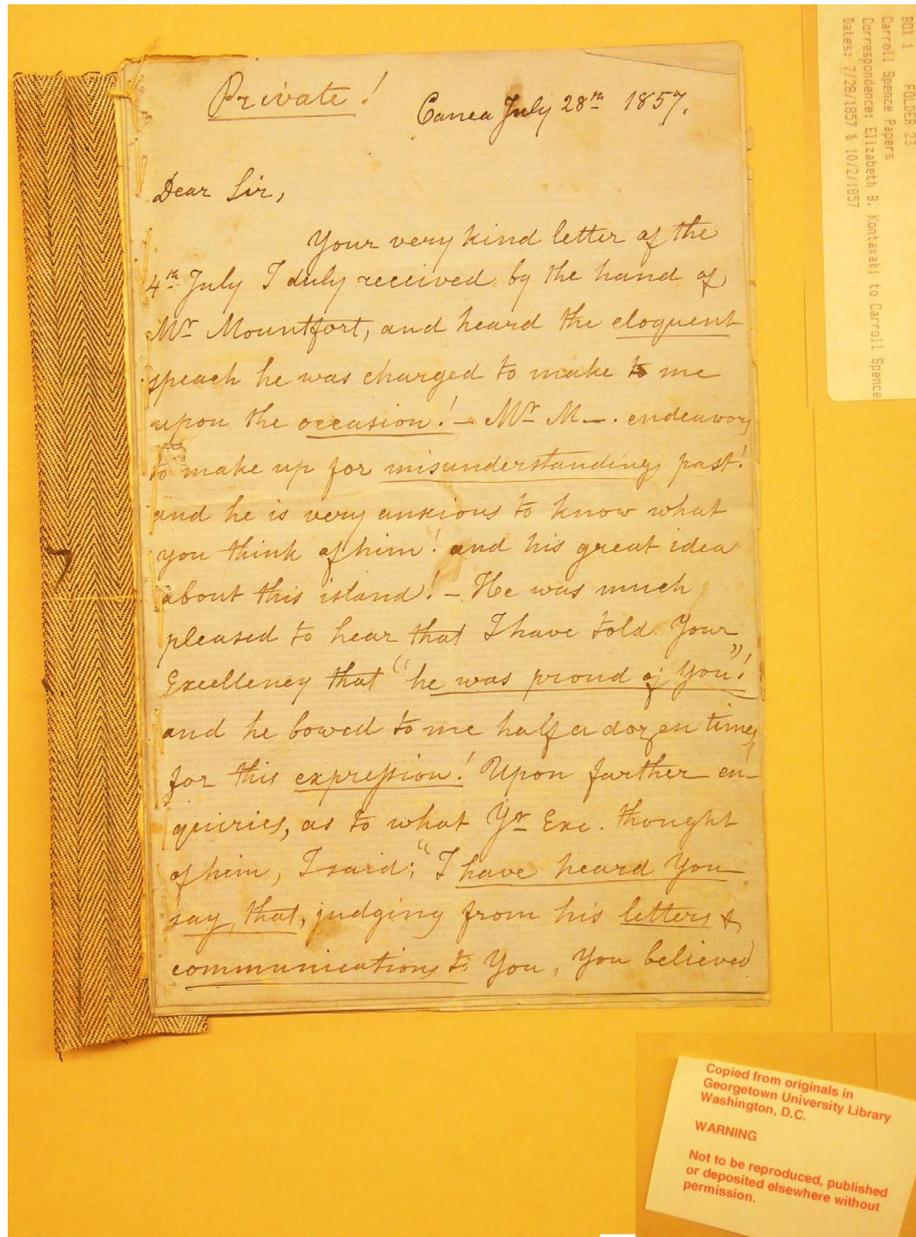


Fig. 17. Miss Contaxaki's letter to Charles Spence, July 28th 1857, *Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center.*

Mr Spence acknowledges the distinction between the intentions of Veley Pasha as Governor and the execution of the decrees by the Ottoman functionaries who were unwilling to carry out the reforms. Furthermore, Charles Spence goes on to criticize the ordinary people who, according to him, do not have the sense to appreciate Veley's liberal policy.<sup>37</sup> In his letters of response to

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announce the new era of Tanzimat (Reorganization) in granting civil and religious equality to the Christian population of Crete from 1839 to 1876.

<sup>37</sup> Letter of May 1st, 1857, to His Excellency Veley Pasha Governor of Candia by the United States Legation in Constantinople signed by Mr Carroll (Charles) Spence. Legation. *Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center* (Box 1 Folder 22).



Figs 18 & 19. The embroidered front and back cover of the *Classical Bouquet*.

Charles Spence, dated from March 26th to August 3rd, 1857, Veley Pasha expresses appreciation of Spence's support and approval of his implementation of new laws regarding civil and religious rights for Christians, and the hope that he can implement further liberalization of his domain. He adds that by complying with their request and the promulgation of the *Hatt-i-Serif*, the Sultan has given the Christian World proof of his desire to promote the happiness and welfare of his subjects.<sup>38</sup>

This correspondence of Elisavet Contaxaki with Charles Spence and that of the latter with Veley Pasha clearly shows that Miss Contaxaki's objectives align with those of her American friends as well as those of the Ottoman Governor General of the island in considering her revolutionary fellow Cretans who claim "enosis" with the Greek Kingdom as "a nonsensical opposition".<sup>39</sup> Miss Contaxaki also underscores in her letters to Mr Charles Spence the influence she claims to exercise on the Governor General of Crete, explicitly stating that Veley Pasha does nothing without asking her opinion.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center*, document number 47657.

<sup>39</sup> During the great Rising of 1866-1869, Elisavet took a clear position against the rising. She wrote letters to the leaders of the rising in which she explicitly urges the Cretan fighters to give up the struggle and comply with the Ottoman authorities. She also mentions that they will be rewarded for so doing. The Cretan fighters proudly, but respectfully, reject her proposals.

<sup>40</sup> Miss Contaxaki's letters to Charles Spence, July 28th 1857, *Carroll Spence Papers, Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center*, Box 1, folder 23.

Finally, the American official himself in an autograph note to himself <sup>41</sup> about Elisavet's letters states: "These letters were written to me by Miss Kontaxaki, one of the most remarkable and best informed women with whom I have ever been acquainted ... She spoke several languages with fluency and devoted herself to advancing the political and educational interest of the Greeks in Candia. For that purpose she came to Constantinople and by her eloquent advocacy of the cause of its inhabitants elicited the sympathies of officials and myself on behalf of her people. At her request, I opened correspondence with Veley Pasha ... Veley Pasha was one of the most enlightened Turks of the empire. He filled the post of minister to England and France and on the appointment of his father as the Grand Vizier, he was sent to Candia as a Governor General".

Although Miss Contaxaki had strong friendships at the Sublime Porte, in the years 1857-1858 the departure of Veley Pasha and the British Consul Ogley as well as that of Mr Charles Spence was a setback for her in Chania. But this did not prevent her from continuing to promote western policies in Crete as well as her counter-revolutionary activity. Ten years later, she is mentioned in a satirical poem composed by revolutionary Cretans in Chania. The poem is against Ali Pasha and refers to his departure from Crete. It also refers to Miss Contaxaki as "a disgusting (dirty) woman" "βρωμερή Λισάβετ Κονταξάκη", clearly labeling her a traitor to her people. In the late 1870s her star started to fade. After many misadventures and misfortunes she fell ill, and died in a wretched room in Constantinople, where she was buried at the expense of the British Consulate charitable fund.

## CONCLUSION

The research on Miss Contaxaki's *Classical Bouquet* and related correspondence pertaining to the historical and political context of Ottoman Crete in 1860s has so far shown the following:

1. The *Classical Bouquet* is an unparalleled piece of work. It is an original volume composed to convey the idea of a universal aesthetic and cultural identity inspired by the Greek world and its impact on the nations who interacted with this world. By adopting the aesthetic and liberal values of the Greek World, Miss Contaxaki invites modern universal audiences to adopt the cultural identity of the Greek World.
2. Having been exceptionally educated for her time and gender, Miss Contaxaki is extremely knowledgeable about Ancient Greek authors and history as well as the learned production in Europe and the United States. She admires letters and the arts as well as gifted leaders. She never uses the word "democracy" in her entire volume, on the one hand from caution due to the conservative political ambiance in Europe and on the other hand because she distrusts the judgment of the multitude.
3. Based on her education, diplomatic skills and social charms, Miss Contaxaki gains the trust and high esteem of senior foreign officials and, as they admit, plays an important role in the diplomacy and politics of 1860s Crete. Miss Contaxaki shows little regard for the politics of the Greek Kingdom and no trust for the politicians in Athens. This could explain both the

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<sup>41</sup> Carroll Spence Papers Georgetown University Manuscripts, Georgetown University Special Collections Research Center, document number 47660.

donation of her volume to the United States, whose newly founded institutions she admires, and her positive attitude towards the Ottoman General Governor of Crete, Veley Pasha, a reformer with a European attitude. Yet this question needs further examination, to follow in an upcoming article.

The scholarly literature has so far discussed Miss Contaxakias an agent of the policy of Great Britain in Crete, as the leader of the counter-revolutionary movement, and finally as a “traitor” to her own people, a “philotourkos”. Her newly discovered work the *Classical Bouquet*, as well as newly discovered archived correspondence with foreign officials, suggests that she was very proud of her Greek heritage, that she loved Crete and her people and that she envisioned a reformed Ottoman Crete, a socially and economically progressive multicultural Crete that could appeal to all Ottoman citizens regardless of their religion. This more nuanced interpretation of her controversial personality requires further research.

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