

Elisabeth of Austria née Elisabeth Amalie Eugenie von Wittelsbach was born on the 24th of December 1837 in Munich, Bayern, and experienced philhellenism in a vivid manner, as the movement's heart was beating in her native town, called hence "Athens of Isar".

Elisabeth grew up in a country and an era when the travelers and the European intellectuals visualized Greece into pictures of a sometimes idealized, classicistic, picturesque and sometimes romantic country.

Within this evolutionary process of reception of her childhood pictures, Elisabeth familiarized with Greece and its past.

In 1854, at the age of 16, she married the Emperor of France, Franz Joseph, and had four children, namely the princesses Sophia, Gizela, Maria-Valeria and the heir to the throne prince Rudolph.

In 1857 her eldest daughter, Sophia, dies and Sisi delves into mourning. Unhappy due to her personal tragedy, Elisabeth travels in the Mediterranean, where she would find the place her heart longed for as well as her future retreat, Corfu.

The pictures she saw when her yacht, "Victoria & Albert", anchored in the bay of Benitses of Corfu on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1861, undermined all others during her previous travels.

Elisabeth was so impressed, that she wanted to prolong her stay on the island, but the Emperor pressed her to go back.

«Oh you, cute Corfu,  
Who makes a decade unfold like a lightning,  
Since the moment that you offered,  
Affectionately, to the sick soul repose  
In the shade of the olive trees,  
On mattresses made of rosemary.»

She returns soon, however, and she stays until October of the same year, this time as a guest of the British High Commissioner Sir Henry Strokes at the Palace of Mon Repos. During her stay in Corfu she lived like an ordinary person, strolling on the island, while watching some plays at San Giacomo theatre, sitting incognito somewhere incognito in the sitting floor of the theatre. Life in Corfu will excite her and it will remind her of her carefree childhood in Bavaria. As a person, she detests pompous ceremonies and loathes the rigid structure of the Viennese court. She always sought for her personal freedom and she writes about her life in Vienna:

“I woke up in a dungeon,  
With chains on my hands.  
Freedom, you fled far away from me.”

The people in Corfu manifested in every possible way their love and admiration for her. Nikolaos Dileos dedicated to her a lengthy poem to which the Corfiot composer Spyridon Xyndas added music.

Among her many wanderings on the island, she was excited with the deserted villa Vraila in Gastouri, the location and the surrounding countryside, where she would build her Achilleion many years later. It will take her over twenty years to return to Corfu.

She writes in 1887 at her retreat in Bad Ischl:

*«I'm longing for the warm light of Phoebus,  
For the silver light of the moon  
For the deep blue of the sea  
For the palm trees, rocking to the Zephyr.*

*I'm longing for the cypresses  
On the ash grey rock  
From where stern and forgotten by the world  
They gaze dreamily towards Albania.»*

During all these years Elisabeth lived her passion for Greece by learning Ancient and Modern Greek. The historian Ioannis Romanos, the young Ioannis Kephalas, the lawyer Nikolaos Thermoyiannis, Constantinos Manos and Rousso Roussopoulos were some of her teachers, the most renowned of them being Constantinos Christomanos, who introduced her to Classical Antiquity.

«She has the gift, he writes in his diary, to bring to the surface whatever is eternal in all the beings, just by her presence, to wake them up as if through a charm and it seems as if all the things, alone within their dark existence, awaited Her; it is for the first time, indeed, that was revealed to me the real, deep existence of all those that surround us».

After his service by the Empress, Christomanos became a theatrical writer and the founder of New Scene, the first modern theatrical organization in Greece.

The final blow in her life came in 1889 with the tragic death of her son, Rudolph. Her mental health shaken and always dressed in black, she found refuge in her beloved island, Corfu.

In 1891 Achilleion and its gardens, reaching down to the seashore, were accomplished. She contemplated the sea and she used to say "Only here my soul is deeply pleased. Here I could abdicate from my authority and stay forever attached to this rock like a lichen".

Around the mansion Sisi created an oasis within which ancient gods and goddesses coexist with heroes from the Homeric works. The gardens were filled with sculptures and statues of heroes of the Greek mythology and history. But all of them had the expression of her pain and reflected her identification with the loss of her son. In this place she could belong entirely to herself, even for the next eight years that she would still be alive.

The bronze dolphin which in antiquity accompanied people to death, symbol and attribute of Poseidon, became the emblem of her palace. The depiction of a boy mounting a dolphin originated from a mythical event which had taken place in the Carian city of Iasos in Asia Minor. A special friendship had been created between a little boy from Iasos and a dolphin. The child played with the dolphin and mounted it. In the course of a tempest, the child lost its balance, fell in the sea and drowned. The dolphin transported the dead boy to the seashore and did not leave its side until it died.

The statue of "dying Achilles" which she had set up in her garden, created by Ernst Gustav Herder, reminded her of the mortality of beauty. The Homeric hero Achilles incarnates strength and beauty but dies of an arrow which his only vulnerable part, the heel. This is the common point between Achilles and her son. Like Achilles, her son, Rudolph, was invincible in his mother's eyes, but fate hit him with her arrow in his own Achilles' heel, due to love.

Shortly after the completion of Achilleion, Elisabeth was thinking of selling it. Four years later, in 1897, it was put up on sale. In 1898, at the age of 60, she will lose her life in Geneva, by the Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni. This was the tragic epilogue in a life of apparent happiness but in reality of immense unhappiness. She wrote:

«The beginning of my misfortunes was my marriage with Franz»

The exhibition does not aspire at praising her life. It functions, rather, in an insinuating manner, turning the torch to illuminate specific moments of her life in Corfu, open to several interpretations and readings.

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