

Large print exhibition text



Feminine power
the divine
to the demonic

Please do not remove from the exhibition

Sponsor's statement

We believe that by understanding the past, we all have the opportunity to define the future. With the Citi exhibition **Feminine power**, the Museum uses its collection, along with some spectacular loans, to create a thought-provoking look at the diversity of representations and complex meanings of the divine female over time.

As a global bank, our mission is to serve as a trusted partner to our clients by responsibly providing financial services that enable growth and economic progress. Success in our mission is only possible if we can continue to foster a culture of equality and inclusion that enables and encourages diversity of thinking. We are incredibly proud to partner with the British Museum and to support its role as a museum of the world, for the world.

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Feminine power

large panel to the left:

Feminine power

From goddesses and spirits to demons and saints, feminine power appears in many guises in faiths around the world.

Many of these figures are seen as distinctly female – from the divine Shakti in Hinduism to the life-giving Oshun of the Yoruba in Nigeria. In some, the female blurs with the male. Others transcend gender entirely.

What these deities and other beings share is a profound influence on human lives, both past and present. They are central to how many cultures explain the world and their rich, often contradictory traits affect how we understand femininity today.

Feminine power

case to the left:

The female image

Represented in art from deep history until today, the female form has been used to express beliefs about femininity, female authority and gender identity. These beliefs – which may be widely held or deeply personal – are diverse, varying between cultural and spiritual traditions, as well as over time.

Mother Earth, 2010

Mona Saudi (1945–2022), Jordan

Saudi was inspired by natural forms, which she associated with the feminine and maternal. She created stone carvings, which ‘simultaneously suggest the ageless and the modern’. The abstract shape of this sculpture quietly evokes a female body – an organic form emerging from rigid marble.

Jordanian marble, Lebanon
Donated by Mona Saudi
British Museum 2014,6015.1

Feminine power

In conversation

Our spiritual beliefs influence how we understand ourselves and one another.

Five commentators – Bonnie Greer, Mary Beard, Elizabeth Day, Rabia Siddique and Deborah Frances-White – have been invited to share their responses to the objects and ideas in this exhibition.

To explore their perspectives scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/fp-resources



Commentators' quotes

Bonnie Greer – playwright, author and critic

'This exhibition is about transition. It's about the feminine as the power of transition. So, you better leave all your baggage behind for this one because you're going to be changed when you come out.'

Feminine power

Mary Beard – classicist

‘Look, don’t expect any simple answers here, but get ready to explore a problem that every culture in the history of the world has faced. How do you represent feminine power or desire in material form?’

Elizabeth Day – author and broadcaster

‘Question what you’re being presented with, question who society is heroising and who society is othering because often there’s a really far more interesting narrative behind the headlines.’

Rabia Siddique – humanitarian, barrister and author

‘What connects me and excites me about this exhibition is the opportunity to challenge and examine female and feminine power and leadership, and look at the roles that women have played both historically and today in the areas of justice, defence, peacekeeping and cultural change.’

Feminine power

Deborah Frances-White – comedian, podcaster and writer

'I'm a feminist, but some mornings I feel divine, other mornings I feel demonic. But I always try and stand in my feminine power, so this exhibition is very much for me. Come with me, let's find our divine, demonic feminine power together.'

case to the left:

Origins

Many enigmatic female figures were created between 10,000 and 4,000 years ago by different cultures living around the Mediterranean. Clay figures with distinctive eyes and prominent thighs were produced by the Yarmukian people of the north Jordan Valley. Marble figures with stylised breasts and pubic triangles were carved by people living on the Cycladic Islands in the Aegean Sea. Their meaning is unclear, but their abundance suggests that these early societies each attached a cultural or spiritual importance to women or femininity.

Feminine power

Clay, Israel, about 6000 BC

Collection of Israel Antiquities Authority;
Display at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Marble, Greece, 2500–2300 BC

Donated by Percy Clinton Sydney Smythe,
6th Viscount Strangford
British Museum 1863,0213.2

Marble, Greece, about 2800 BC

British Museum 1889,0521.2

Proceed to the next room.

panels straight ahead:

Creation and nature

Female power is often associated with nature and the abundance of the land and sea. Many cultures see the earth as a maternal force that sustains life.

Like nature itself, these goddesses and other spirits can be both creative and destructive. Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes, destroys the land with her lava, but in doing so enables new growth and regeneration.

Creation stories explaining the origins of the world reveal a mix of gender roles. In some spiritual traditions the creator is female, in others male, while in many, it is the union of the two that gives rise to the earth and human life.

Commentator Bonnie Greer:

Across time we have needed to look at this state of being, this reality called the feminine.

To explore Bonnie Greer's response to the objects and ideas in this section scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/bonnie-greer



case behind to the left:

Pele

Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes

Hawaiian deities manifest their presence through specific plants, animals and places. Sometimes known as Eater of the Land, Pele is the goddess of volcanoes. Said to have flaming red hair and a fierce temper, one of her many forms is lava. Although it destroys everything in its path, lava also creates new life as areas regenerate after an eruption.

Creation and nature

Tiare Wahine, 2001

By Tom Pico (born 1950), Hawai'i, USA

In some traditions Pele originated from Tahiti, symbolised here by her tattoos and crown of gardenia (**tiare**). Pico named this sculpture **Tiare Wahine (The Flowered Woman)** in keeping with his belief that to avoid angering Pele her name should never be spoken aloud.

'Ohi'a wood

Donated by the American Friends of the Museum
British Museum 2014,2029.2

image caption:

Pele's home is said to be Mount Kilauea on Hawai'i Island. During eruptions people honour her through offerings and dances.

© AP Photo / Caleb Jones, 2018

Sedna

Inuit Mistress of the Sea

For the Inuit of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, the ocean offers up its bounty to those who take care of Sedna. Her goodwill is vital to success in hunting. As mother of all sea creatures she will entangle and hide them in her hair if they are disrespected, causing any hunt to fail.

Sedna, 1987

Attributed to Lucassie Kenuajuak
(born 1946), Nunavik, Canada

This Inuit soapstone sculpture shows Sedna as part-woman part-seal, holding a fish head and eating a mollusc. When angered, the goddess' rage can be soothed by shamans combing her hair. Here, her hair is perfectly groomed, reflecting a state of harmony with the Inuit community.

Soapstone
British Museum Am1987,08.4

image caption:

Sedna provides food from the Arctic Ocean and, according to some traditions, receives the souls of those who die of illness.

© blickwinkel / Alamy Stock Photo

Lakshmi

Hindu goddess of abundance

Lakshmi is one of the most widely worshipped goddesses within Hinduism today. Connected to wealth and good fortune, her ancient origins are linked to the fertilisation and enrichment of the earth. She is particularly worshipped in western India during Diwali, the Festival of Lights.

Prosperity to the earth

This painting depicts Lakshmi rising from the ocean and being showered by winged elephants. According to Sanskrit texts, this marks her return to earth after an absence, bringing renewed fertility and prosperity.

Gouache on paper, India, about 1780
British Museum 1956,0714,0.32

Lakshmi and Vishnu

Lakshmi's partner is the god Vishnu, the sustainer of the cosmos. In Nepalese art, the two deities are sometimes shown as a single being, symbolising their intrinsic unity, as on this copper figure.

Lakshmi is the left side and Vishnu the right, their differences subtly indicated by different earrings and a single female breast.

Copper and gilt, Nepal, 1500–1600
Donated by P.T. Brooke Sewell, Esq.
British Museum 1958,1215.2

Diwali lamp

This ornate lamp is supported by a figure of Lakshmi. During Diwali, the Festival of Lights, countless lamps are lit to celebrate the triumph of light over darkness. Traditionally marking the harvest, offerings are made to Lakshmi inviting her to bless devotees with good fortune and prosperity for the year to come. Diwali is celebrated by Hindus across the world, and also by Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists.

Creation and nature

Bronze, India, 1700–1800

Given by Mrs A.G. Moor

British Museum 1940,0716.128

screen to the right:

Oshun

Yoruba orisha of water and life

The Yoruba are one of the largest cultural groups within Africa and African diaspora communities.

Yoruba belief systems honour **orisha**, forces governing all aspects of the natural world and human experience. Both gentle and fierce Oshun (Source) is the **orisha** of fresh water, coolness, healing and fertility. In some traditions, her power was vital to the creation of life, succeeding where male **orisha** could not. Exceptionally beautiful, she wears yellow clothes decorated with brass ornaments.

© CC BY-SA 4.0, Muyiwa Osifuye, 2003

Annual Osun Osogbo festival, Nigeria

A major festival to Oshun occurs every August in her sacred grove on the banks of the Osun River at Osogbo, Nigeria. It attracts 1,000s of devotees and tourists, who leave offerings and prayers for health and good fortune. The sacred grove received UNESCO World Heritage status in 2005.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

Narrated by Dr Akin Ogundiran, Professor of Africana Studies, Anthropology & History at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, USA

© Eniola Afolayan; National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria; Adunni Olorisa Trust / Osun Foundation; Osun Devotees at the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove
© Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation

case to the right:

Mami Wata

spirit of water and wealth

Mami Wata is venerated across Africa, the Caribbean and South America. Residing in seas and rivers Mami Wata may be a single female spirit or a collective name for many spirits, either depicted as a mermaid-like being or in human form. Bringing wealth, good fortune or ruination, she is often viewed as self-assured and assertive. She communicates through visions, dreams and possession, usually through a priestess who invites the spirit to enter her body.

Riches from the sea

Manufactured in the UK, this dish was probably decorated by Efik women living in the Cross River area, southern Nigeria, renowned for their designs of hammered metal. Possibly showing Mami Wata, it depicts a female figure with a fishtail holding a purse, a comb and perfume bottles – objects related to wealth and beauty.

Creation and nature

Such dishes were used in the home or given as gifts, sometimes to missionaries and European traders.

Brass, UK and Nigeria, 1850–1900
Donated by the Menendez family
British Museum Af1952,20.1

Commentator Bonnie Greer:

Mami Wata is a city woman. She's a businesswoman. And I think that's one of the reasons she's really popular. She can be who she wants to be. You can be more than one thing and still be yourself.

image caption:

This popular image is often believed to show Mami Wata. Pythons are symbols of royalty and divinity in Nigeria and Benin.

© Public domain: Amcaja / WikiCommons

Honouring Mami Wata

Originally part of a mask, this headpiece was worn during masquerades by female initiates from the Annang Ibibio peoples of south-eastern Nigeria. It shows Mami Wata as a fashionable woman with two attendants. Her light skin may reflect an association between spirituality and the colour white or beliefs that Mami Wata is a spirit from overseas travelling to meet her global devotees.

Painted wood and metal, Nigeria, early 1900s
British Museum Af1993,10.7

image caption:

Altars and shrines are sometimes adorned with mirrors, through which Mami Wata can be contacted, and offerings of perfume, flowers, coins and food.

© Henning Christoph / SOA Museum

case to the right:

Yawkyawk

Aboriginal Ancestral Beings

For Kuninjku Aboriginal people of Western Arnhem Land, Australia, Yawkyawk are young female Ancestral Beings with mermaid-like bodies living in lakes and waterways. Sometimes said to control the weather and bring fresh rain, they are closely related to the Rainbow Serpent, another important Ancestral Being connected to life and creation.

Yawkyawk, 2011

By Owen Yalandja (born 1961), Kuninjku people, Australia

This sculpture of a Yawkyawk is carved from the kurrajong tree and intricately painted with natural earth pigments to recreate the spirit's slender and scaly appearance. Yalandja, a senior member of the Dangkolo clan of the Manigrida region in northern Australia, is a custodian of sacred waterholes where Yawkyawk live.

Creation and nature

He recalls his father telling him stories of how Yawkyawk would walk the land eating bush yams and calling out loudly.

Kurrajong wood, ochre, metal and paint
British Museum 2012,2013.1

wall to the left [back of panels]:

Izanami-no-mikoto

Shinto creator spirit

Shinto (The Way of the Spirits) is a Japanese religion based on the relationship between people and the natural world. **Izanami-no-mikoto** (She Who Beckons) and **Izanagi-no-mikoto** (He Who Beckons) are creator spirits who gave birth to the islands of Japan and many other Shinto spirits.

Dying in childbirth, Izanami descended to the underworld, where she became the spirit of death.

Izanami and Izanagi on the

Floating Bridge of Heaven, 1847–1851

By Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), Japan

Creation and nature

This woodblock print depicts Izanami and Izanagi on the Floating Bridge of Heaven having just stirred the primordial waters with a jewelled spear to create solid land. Watching the bobbing tail of a wagtail on the rocks before them they discover the act of sex, leading to the birth of other spirits.

Coloured woodblock print
British Museum 1921,1115,0.2

image caption:

Two natural boulders at the pilgrimage site of Meoto Iwa are said to represent Izanami and Izanagi joined in marriage.

© Public domain: Marubatsu / Wikimedia Commons

case to the left:

Sheela-na-gig

Sheela-na-gigs are stone carvings of female figures prominently displaying their vulvas. Adorning churches and secular buildings across Ireland, Britain, France and Spain from the 1100s, they have sometimes been seen as Christian warnings against lust, but their meaning is debated.

Creation and nature

They have also been interpreted as symbols of fertility and regeneration with their typically bald heads and emaciated bodies evoking death and their vulvas representing birth and life.

Stone, Ireland, 1100–1200
Donated by Dr George Witt
British Museum WITT.258

Commentator Bonnie Greer:

This tells you, as you come into this church, that we're mortal, we're human. And that's probably the most sacred thing that the church could say.

Papatūānuku

Māori mother earth

In Māori tradition of Aotearoa New Zealand, Papatūānuku is celebrated as the provider of material, spiritual and intellectual sustenance through the abundance of the natural world.

Creating the world and other deities with Ranginui, the sky father, she is the earth mother and embodies **mana wahine**, female power and potency.

Honouring Papatūānuku

Cloaks made from flax are among the most admired Māori art forms and can take over a year to create. Woven by women, their creation is an expression of a woman's skill and spiritual connection to the natural world. The first piece of work completed by a novice weaver is traditionally gifted to a family elder or buried as an offering to Papatūānuku.

Flax and wool, Aotearoa New Zealand, about 1900
Donated by Miss E.K.B. Lister
British Museum Oc1938,1001.79

image caption:

Since the 1960s a resurgence in Māori weaving has meant that many weavers study cloaks in museums to learn from the skills of their ancestors.

© Rafael Ben-Ari / Alamy Stock Photo, 2014

Creation and nature

wall to the left:

The Creation, 1985

By Judy Chicago (born 1939), USA

In the 1980s, Chicago embarked on **The Birth Project** to challenge a longstanding tradition in Christian art of depicting a male deity creating life. This vibrant print, which relates to a large-scale embroidery, reimagines the creation of the world from an overtly Western feminist perspective. It depicts a female deity in a birthing position. Her body erupts with life as primordial creatures flow and evolve from her vulva.

Colour screenprint on black paper

Donated by Judy Chicago

British Museum 1997,0928.69

Commentator Bonnie Greer:

The feminine has descended. Confront it, grow with it, be challenged with it, make it personal.

Proceed to the next room.

panels straight ahead:

Passion and desire

Desire is a powerful force in life. Many female spiritual beings embody passion in all of its manifestations, from ecstasy to rage.

Impassioned behaviour can be a source of private pleasure, but also a threat to social stability.

Female deities are sometimes seen as temptresses who encourage lust and lead people into danger.

Yet the worship of such figures shows the wide extent of their powers. Passion is creative and associated with knowledge of the divine. It is a driving force that can lead to conflict, but is also an asset, bringing wisdom, success and social harmony.

Passion and desire

Commentator Mary Beard:

Are sex and desire what underpin civilisation or what terribly disrupts it?

To explore Mary Beard's response to the objects and ideas in this section scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/mary-beard



large statue behind to the left:

Aphrodite / Venus

Greek goddess of passion

Embodying the ideals of ancient Greek female beauty, the goddess Aphrodite enflamed passion in all its forms from love and sexual ecstasy to rage and despair. She was petitioned in matters of pleasure and desire, as well as for political, social and military success. Known as Venus by the Romans, she had the power to bring about both reconciliation and conflict.

Seductive beauty

This Roman statue shows Venus stepping out of her bath. It is debated whether she is trying to hide or draw attention to her breasts and genitalia. Her pose and nudity were inspired by a sacred statue of Aphrodite from the fourth century BC, which was regarded as shockingly erotic and widely copied in Greek and Roman art. This full-sized version once stood in a Roman villa for private rather than public veneration.

Marble statue, Italy, AD 100–150
Donated by HRH King William IV
British Museum 1834,0301.1

Commentator Mary Beard:

It's very hard to recapture how shocking she was when first made. There are ancient stories of men ogling, desiring, even making love to sculptures like this.

case to the right:

Mortal sexuality

This relief may depict the celebrated poet Sappho playing a lyre. Born about 620 BC on the island of Lesbos, she often called on Aphrodite, her 'comrade in arms', to help woo her predominantly female lovers. Aphrodite was also important to brides, perhaps hoping to emulate her beauty and seductive power. Holding a bird – a token of love – the goddess appears on this marriage vase designed to hold water for a pre-wedding bath.

1. Terracotta, Greece, 480–460 BC
British Museum 1842,0728.1132

2. Painted pottery, Italy, 340–320 BC
British Museum 1867,0508.1284

Commentator Mary Beard:

It's Venus and the unswayable unstoppable power of desire that in a way brings Rome its military victories.

Victorious Venus

Ambitious Roman statesmen, generals and emperors claimed Venus as their patron deity, even ancestor, and source of virility. The dictators Sulla and Julius Caesar sometimes placed her image alongside trophies of war on their coins to advertise victories achieved through her divine favour (3, 4). Later, Roman emperors minted coins, equating their wives with Venus as an expression of marital harmony and stability (5–8).

3. Silver coin of Julius Caesar, Italy, 44 BC
Donated by Count John Francis William de Salis

4. Silver coin of Julius Caesar, Italy, 44 BC
Bequeathed by Charles A. Hersh

5. Gold coin of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Italy, 84–83 BC

6. Gold coin of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Italy, 84–83 BC
Donated by Edward Wigan

7. Gold coin of Marcus Aurelius, Italy, AD 161–176

8. Gold coin of Commodus, Italy, AD 180–183

British Museum 1860,0328.104; 2002,0102.4692; R.8359;
1864,1128.2; 1867,0101.729; 1856,1101.116

Passion and desire

image caption:

Coin (2) of Julius Caesar depicting the head of Venus on one side and trophies of war on the other.

© Trustees of the British Museum

wall to the right:

Lilith

the first woman

From about AD 700, Jewish mystical texts identify Lilith as the first wife of Adam, created by God at the same time from the same earth. Asserting equality with her husband, she refused to lie beneath him during sex and fled Eden rather than subordinate herself to him. Long vilified for such defiance, she has more recently been celebrated as an icon of female independence.

© Kiki Smith, courtesy Pace Gallery

Passion and desire

Lilith, 1994

By Kiki Smith (born 1954), USA

Smith describes Lilith as 'an early figure of defiance, a spirit that wreaks havoc and refuses to be subjugated. Here she is transcending gravity'. Cast from the body of a real woman, this unnerving sculpture depicts Lilith crouching from on high. She is naked, yet the positioning of her body prevents a voyeuristic view.

Bronze and glass

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, Roy R. and Marie S. Neuberger

Commentator Mary Beard:

This is an image about transgression, about a woman putting two fingers up to male power.

statue to the right:

Tlazolteotl

Huastec goddess of purification

Venerated by the Indigenous Huastecs of north-eastern Mexico, and later by the Mexica (Aztecs), Tlazolteotl's name has been translated by some as Eater of Filth. She inspired sexual desire, but also consumed and absolved the 'filth' of transgressions, such as adultery, transforming them into earth-enriching fertiliser. Much that is now known about her is filtered through Catholic missionary accounts from the 1500s. Associating the goddess with the biblical Eve, such accounts described her as 'the mistress of lust and debauchery'.

Transformative cleansing

This statue is believed to depict Tlazolteotl. Her parted lips perhaps reflect her power to consume the 'filth' of deeds viewed as transgressive by Huastec society. The headdress adorned with cotton blooms suggests her ability to fertilise the earth.

Passion and desire

Sandstone, Mexico, AD 900–1521

Donated by Capt. James Vetch

British Museum Am1842,0611.9

image caption:

Illustration from a manuscript of the mid-1500s showing a person dressed as Tlazolteotl with a dark stain around their mouth.

© Public domain: Bibliothèque nationale de France

case to the right:

China Supay

This Bolivian mask is part of a costume worn by female dancers during **La Diablada** (Dance of the Devils), a folk dance celebrating the Archangel Michael's triumph over Satan. Its origins lie in Indigenous Andean mythologies relating to Supay, the Inca god of death. The mask represents his wife China Supay, the demonic embodiment of lust, who attempts to seduce the Archangel into sin during the dance.

Painted plaster, hair and glass, Bolivia, 1985

British Museum Am1985,32.44

Passion and desire

image caption:

Dancers perform at **La Diablada (Dance of the Devils)** in Oruro, Bolivia.

© REUTERS / David Mercado / Alamy Stock Photo, 2017

wall to the left [back of panels]:

Eve

the first temptress?

In Christian belief Eve is the first woman. She was created by God from the body of Adam, the first man. In the Bible she disobeyed God by eating forbidden fruit, which she gave to Adam. They were then expelled from earthly paradise. This story, known as The Fall, was partly interpreted in later Christian thought as introducing sexual knowledge into the world. Although not mentioned in scripture, Christian commentators often blamed Eve's seductive powers for leading Adam into sin.

Passion and desire

The Fall of Man, about 1500–1515

By Lucas Cranach the Elder
(about 1472–1553), Germany

Historical commentaries on *The Fall* have often blamed Eve rather than Adam, linking female seduction with temptation and sin. Yet in the Bible, Eve herself is tempted by a serpent. In this print Cranach depicts the serpent as Eve's mirror-image. With female breasts and face, she whispers conspiratorially to Eve, who is handing the forbidden fruit to a seemingly reluctant Adam.

Woodcut print on paper
British Museum 1927,0518.12

case to the right:

The Fall

Carved sometime between AD 200 and 400, this Roman gemstone from a ring bears one of the earliest surviving images of *The Fall*. It depicts the critical moment when Eve (right) disobeyed God by picking the forbidden fruit.

Passion and desire

Both Eve and Adam have covered their genitals, newly ashamed of their nakedness.

Onyx, Italy, AD 200–400
British Museum 1872,0604.1381

image caption:

Enlargement of the gemstone engraving depicting The Fall.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Protection against Lilith

Between AD 500 and 800, ceramic bowls covered in magical incantations were made by people of many faiths living in what is now Iraq to guard against Lilith and other demons. The inscription on this bowl asks for protection from ‘the evil Lilith who leads astray the hearts of human beings’. Lilith is depicted in the centre, chained with wild hair and exposed breasts – a frenzied apparition contrasting with the sculpture on the wall to your right.

Passion and desire

Painted pottery, Iraq, AD 500–800

Donated by M. Mahboubian

British Museum 1974,1209.2

case behind to the left:

Shiva linga

Found within temples across South Asia the Shiva linga is one of the most sacred Hindu emblems.

It represents the god Shiva's erect phallus (linga) symbolising his sexual and creative potency.

It is set within the vulva (yoni) of his female counterpart, the goddess Shakti, who embodies the divine feminine power that animates the universe. The union of Shakti and Shiva represents the fusion of feminine and masculine forces within Hindu cosmology.

Sandstone, India, probably 1700–1900

British Museum M.653

wall to the right:

Radha

'love's living goddess'

Once a mortal cowherd, the Hindu goddess Radha is worshipped as the embodiment of beauty, love and devotion. Her turbulent love affair with the god Krishna is celebrated in the **Gitagovinda**, a highly erotic sacred poem from the 1100s. It charts the anguish and ecstasy of sexual desire, culminating in Radha's triumph over her wayward lover as she lies on top of him during sex. The poem has long been understood as symbolising the mortal soul's longing to be joined with the divine.

Radha and Krishna

Here a blue-skinned Krishna tenderly embraces Radha during their courtship. Unlike the **Gitagovinda's** rustic setting, here the divine couple are regally dressed in palatial surroundings, perhaps to appeal to a courtly patron who may have commissioned the painting.

Passion and desire

Gouache on paper, India, 1790–1810

British Museum 1880,0.2278

case to the right:

Inanna / Ishtar

Mesopotamian Lady of Heaven

Worship of the goddess Inanna stretches back 6,000 years to southern Iraq. The embodiment of sexual desire and an aggressive warrior, she was central to Sumerian civic life. Later honoured as Ishtar by the Babylonians and Assyrians, her worship spread across the Middle East and Mediterranean. In art she was portrayed in female form, but in hymns she was sometimes praised as both female and male.

‘Queen of the Night’

This 4,000-year-old relief is believed to depict Ishtar. She holds a rod and ring, symbols of justice, while the horned crown signals her divinity.

Passion and desire

Unusually she appears naked with taloned feet, possibly alluding to her temporary descent to the underworld during which time all sexual activity ceased on earth.

Painted clay, Iraq, about 1750 BC

Purchased with support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation), British Museum Friends, Sir Joseph Hotung and the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust
British Museum 2003,0718.1

image caption:

Reconstruction of the relief showing its original painted appearance.

© Trustees of the British Museum

case to the right:

Royal importance

The security of a king's reign was dependent on divine favour, but Inanna was volatile. This peg-figure was placed ceremoniously beneath Inanna's temple in Uruk, southern Iraq.

Passion and desire

It shows a king carrying construction materials to personally maintain her sacred space.

Copper alloy, Iraq, 2112–2095 BC
British Museum 1919,0712.645

‘Taboo woman’

Inscriptions tend to describe a king’s relationship with Inanna in sexual or marital terms. The hymn on this clay tablet records a king begging forgiveness from the goddess after she has rejected his bed. It likens her temper to a storm ‘quaking the heavens, shaking the earth’. Eventually reconciled, the goddess grants the king a wife and child.

Clay, Iraq, 1800 BC
British Museum 1898,0215.202

Sexual power

Offerings left at temples to Inanna included representations of couples having sex, as seen on this model bed. The couple may represent the goddess and a divine lover or the worshippers themselves, seeking Inanna’s help or thanking her for renewed sexual potency.

Passion and desire

Also found in households, these offerings may have provided magical protection. Today they offer a glimpse into Mesopotamian domestic life.

Clay, Iraq, about 1800 BC
Donated by Scott Bell & Co.
British Museum 1923,0106.1

Astarte

Like Inanna / Ishtar, the Phoenician goddess Astarte was connected to war, as well as passion and sex. She was widely worshipped across the Levant (now Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Israel and Jordan) from about 3,000 years ago. Like Aphrodite / Venus, in art her sexual power came to be expressed through her nudity. This statuette is believed to show Astarte. Her Egyptian-style feathered headdress is supported by a dove, a bird commonly associated with Aphrodite. She is holding a garland and a piece of fruit.

Copper alloy, Lebanon, AD 100–200
British Museum 1966,1010.1

Proceed to the next room.

panels straight ahead:

Magic and malice

Diabolical goddesses, female monsters, demons and witches are powerful figures in many cultures from around the world.

Their stories are often linked to suffering. They are widows bent on vengeance, women who died in childbirth, survivors of violence. Experience transforms them and they begin to rebel against traditional expectations of female behaviour. Figures like Medusa or Circe in Greek mythology represent women who live on the fringes of society.

This independence is a source of their power. They are associated with aggression and danger, but also freedom and knowledge. For all that they are feared, they are sought after for protection and guidance.

Commentator Elizabeth Day:

It's almost as if women aren't allowed big emotions, big, complicated, messy emotions.

To explore Elizabeth Day's response to the objects and ideas in this section scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/elizabeth-day



case behind to the left:

Hekate

Greek goddess of witchcraft

To the ancient Greeks and Romans the goddess Hekate stood between life and death at the entrance to the underworld. Her approach was said to be signalled by howling dogs. An ambiguous being, she was invoked for guidance at times of transition and during magical rituals. Since the late 1800s, Hekate's relevance has been revived and her spiritual importance has been incorporated into religions, such as Wicca and Modern Paganism.

Guiding the way

This Roman sculpture is thought to show Hekate in her distinctive triple form. As a goddess of transition, her different faces look towards different paths. She holds the handles of torches (now lost), symbolising light in darkness. The inscription around the base records that the statue was dedicated to the goddess by 'Aelius Barbarus, freedman of the Emperors'.

Marble, Italy, AD 161–200

British Museum 1805,0703.14

Commentator Elizabeth Day:

A woman can be multifaceted – Hekate literally has three faces. She represents transition, the idea that through suffering we gain access to strength and wisdom, that getting through the dark stuff and into the light is what life is all about.

Magic and malice

wall to the right:

Circe

divine Greek sorceress

In Homer's **Odyssey**, an epic poem from the eighth century BC, the goddess Circe is portrayed as a seductive and dangerous sorceress. Endowed with a vast knowledge of potions and herbs, she used magic to transform men into animals. An independent and morally ambiguous figure she first tries to poison the hero Odysseus, but later helps him on his journey home.

Circe offering the cup to Ulysses, 1891

By John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), UK

In this painting, as in Homer's **Odyssey**, Circe is presented as both alluring and threatening. Waterhouse depicts her at the height of her authority offering up a cup of poisoned wine. Reflected in the mirror behind her, Ulysses (Odysseus), appears apprehensive. At her feet are two of his crew, whom she has transformed into pigs.

Magic and malice

Oil on canvas
Gallery Oldham

To find out what this representation of magic means to a practising witch, scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/circe



case to the right:

Fear of witchcraft

Throughout history millions of people worldwide have been persecuted or killed due to a suspicion that they were practising harmful magic – an abuse that continues to this day. In Europe fear of witches reached its height from the late 1500s to about 1800. While men were tried and executed as witches, historical records suggest that about 80% of victims were women.

Magic and malice

The Witches' Sabbath, 1510

By Hans Baldung Grien

(about 1484–1545), Germany

This woodcut print (above) mocks the macabre and sexualised view of witches in texts like the **Malleus maleficarum** (below). Set at night in a woodland scene, it shows naked women brewing a potion surrounded by bones, as one rides backwards through the air on a goat. Flaccid sausages hang on a branch nearby. Although satirical, the circulation of such prints may have contributed to a popular association between witchcraft and women.

Woodcut print on paper

British Museum 1852,1009.203

Malleus maleficarum

In Europe the heightened suspicion that witches were female partly stemmed from religious teachings that women were more susceptible to the devil's influence. This argument was widely circulated in the **Malleus maleficarum** (Hammer of witches), a now infamous witch-hunting manual. It explicitly connected harmful magic with women and advocated using torture to extract confessions. This copy contains several annotations added by its owners, including a phallus drawn alongside the entry accusing witches of magically removing men's penises.

Paper, linen, goatskin and cloth, Nuremberg, Germany, 1494
The Syndics of Cambridge University Library,
Inc.4. A.7.2 [4165]

Commentator Elizabeth Day:

This text, which is so sinister in many ways, feels quite modern in a really negative sense. I can trace that kind of othering of women from the 1400s to certain tabloid newspapers and sidebars of shame today.

Children of Artemis

During the development of the exhibition, the Museum worked alongside a collective of people who identify as witches and Modern Pagans. They are members and associates of Children of Artemis, a UK-based Witchcraft organisation aiming to promote an understanding of Witchcraft. Their lived experience and unique personal insights have added greatly to the Museum's research and accompanying publication. In particular, it helped create an understanding of the continued relevance and power that the goddesses and associated spiritual beliefs in this section still hold today.

The consultants included:

Laura Daligan, Olivia Ciaccia, Lucya Starza,
Jenny Cartledge, Raegan Shanti, Merlyn Hern

case to the right:

Medusa

villain or victim?

With snakes for hair and a stare that turns onlookers to stone, Medusa is one of the most well-known figures of Greek legend. In one myth, she was once a beautiful mortal sexually violated by a god in the temple of the goddess Minerva. Turning against Medusa, Minerva transformed her into a monster. Even after decapitation Medusa's head retained its petrifying power. Over the centuries her image has been used as an emblem of chaos and, more recently, of feminist resistance and rage.

Contrasting portrayals

In ancient Greek and Roman art, images of Medusa's terrifying severed head were used for protection. This terracotta antefix (above) showing her with a beard and tusks was mounted on a roof to ward off evil. Artists occasionally showed her human side.

Magic and malice

The engraving on the ring shows the terrible moment of Medusa's transformation. With downcast eyes she appears sorrowful, as wings sprout from her temples and her hair writhes like snakes.

Painted terracotta, Italy, about 500 BC
Donated by Alessandro Castellani
British Museum 1877,0802.4

Cornelian and gold, Italy, 100 BC – AD 100
British Museum 1867,0507.388

Political propaganda

Medusa's image has often been used in propaganda to symbolise disorder and chaos. This medal was made by opponents of the French Revolution (1789–1799). One side shows the French Queen Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) with the date of her death by guillotine. The other shows Medusa holding a flaming torch and a set of unbalanced scales, representing mob rule.

Silver medal by Daniel Friedrich Loos (1735–1819),
Germany, 1794
British Museum 1947,0607.637

wall to the left [back of panels]:

Dance of the Nine Maidens, 1940

By Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988), UK

During the 20th century there was a growing interest in magic in the UK. Colquhoun draws on folklore that ancient stone circles are witches who have been turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath. She called such monuments 'Fountains of Hecate', believing they were conduits of divine feminine energy inherent in all things. Colquhoun believed in a 'hermaphrodite creator'. She argued that female and male are 'co-equal and co-existent' within the divine, perhaps represented here by a phallic standing stone fused with a female figure.

Watercolour and ink on paper
Tate Archive

To find out what this representation of magic means to a practising witch, scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/maidens



Contemporary responses to witchcraft

‘Witch is a word of power. It’s about reclaiming that in a positive way, bringing it back to wisdom and being in tune with nature and yourself, your own power, energy and magic.’

Laura Daligan, witch and Modern Pagan

‘Wicca is about balance. It’s a bit of a counter-balance to traditional society in that the female is given the lead role, but it is still about balance.’

Merlyn Hern, founder of Children of Artemis, a UK-based Witchcraft membership organisation

wall behind to the left:

Takiyasha the witch and the skeleton spectre, 1845–1846

By Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), Japan

Battles between female demons and samurai warriors were popular in Japanese art of the Edo period (1603–1868).

Magic and malice

This print shows the witch Princess Takiyasha (Waterfall-Demon-Warrior) conjuring a monstrous skeleton to attack two samurai. According to legend her father was a rebel samurai executed by the emperor. She learned frog magic to avenge his death, but was hunted down and killed by a young warrior.

Coloured woodblock print
British Museum 1908,0418,0.2.1-3

statue to the right:

Cihuateteo

Mexica warrior women

To the Mexica (Aztecs) of central Mexico childbirth was likened to war. Women who died in childbirth were known as Cihuateteo (Divine Women) and, like fallen warriors, were deified for their bravery and sacrifice. Also greatly feared, they were believed to descend to earth on five days of the year to steal the children of the living, causing paralysing madness to anyone who saw them.

Marauding spirits

This statue depicts a kneeling Cihuateotl (Divine Woman). Her bulging eyes stare out of a corpse-like face with teeth bared, as she raises her fists. The large ear ornaments and exposed breasts denote her former beauty. The statue may have stood in a shrine or at a crossroads, either to honour the spirits or to frighten them away. The glyph 'one monkey' carved on her head indicates one of the days she descended to earth.

Andesite, Mexico, 1400–1521
British Museum Am1990,10.1

Commentator Elizabeth Day:

This Cihuateotl – seen as both god-like, warrior-like, and yet scary – goes to the core of how we still treat women who don't have children. There's a sense that a woman cannot be a fully realised woman unless she has children.

case to the right:

Rangda

Balinese demon queen

Within Balinese belief, good and evil are both essential forces, which must be brought into balance in order for the world and society to be harmonious. One way of recreating this balance is through masked performances of battles between the demon queen Rangda (Widow) and Barong, the spirit king, representing good fortune and health. Neither will ever fully defeat the other and despite her malevolent associations, people also look to Rangda for protection against death and disease.

Performance piece

This carved wooden mask represents Rangda. In performance, Rangda is played by a respected male community member, who typically enters a trance during which he is believed to be possessed by her. The mask would be paired with a long wig, elongated tongue and extended fingernails to illustrate Rangda's wild nature.

Magic and malice

Painted and gilded wood and boars' tusks, Bali, Indonesia, mid-1900s

British Museum As1984,13.13

Image caption:

Dancer portraying Rangda in full costume during a performance at Ubud, Bali, Indonesia, 2013.

© R.M. Nunes / Alamy Stock Photo, 2013

Taraka

Hindu flesh-eating ogre

In Hindu myth monsters often personify the triumph of emotion and self-interest over acceptance and composure. In the Hindu epic poem the **Ramayana** (650–350 BC), Taraka was a beautiful nature spirit with the strength of 1,000 elephants. When her husband was killed by a sage she attempted to avenge his death, but in doing so was punished and transformed into a monstrous flesh-eating ogre – an outer reflection of her inner rage. She was eventually defeated by Rama, the poem's hero.

Dance mask of Taraka

This mask depicts Taraka with bloodshot eyes glaring from beneath unkempt hair and a red tongue hanging between tusks. Such masks are worn to re-enact scenes from folklore and epic poems at community-wide celebrations marking the Bengali New Year.

Papier mâché, clay, fibre and silk,
from the workshop of Sri Kajal Datta (born 1973),
West Bengal, India, 1994
Donated by Daniel J. Rycroft
British Museum As1995,17.2

Hannya mask

In Japanese folklore women who express negative emotions, especially jealousy, turn into demons. In Noh theatre, **Hannya** masks are used by performers to convey the woman's physical transformation, as well as their inner turmoil. This mask reflects the moment when the character is neither fully demonic nor fully human. When viewed face-on, her gaping mouth and glaring eyes express rage, yet when tilted, her deeply furrowed brow conveys suffering and despair.

Magic and malice

Wood, by Suzuki Nohzin (1928–2003), Japan, about 1994
Donated by Suzuki Nohzin
British Museum 1994,0421.10

image caption:

Actor in full costume wearing a **Hannya** mask.

© Lucas Vallecillos / Alamy Stock Photo

Commentator Elizabeth Day:

It interests me how male dominated cultures have sought to explain jealousy as a specifically female emotion. This mask conveys that moment of perceived transformation where a woman's jealousy, a woman's sadness and suffering, transforms itself into otherness, into monstrosity.

Proceed to the next room.

panels straight ahead:

Justice and defence

In many religious traditions, femininity is associated with outstanding physical strength. Powerful female deities like the lion-headed Egyptian goddess Sekhmet unleash extreme violence or engage in war, a realm more often associated with men.

Their role is often to bring about justice. They can appear to be figures of unrestrained bloodshed, but they are more likely to be invoked for defence, willing to take whatever measures are required to protect the people.

Female power is in some cultures the source of authority and leadership. To this day, deities such as the Hindu warrior goddess Durga are worshipped for their supreme wisdom and fearlessness.

Commentator Rabia Siddique:

It's time to embrace our lioness instincts, our warrior capabilities, to create change.

To explore Rabia Siddique's response to the objects and ideas in this section scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/rabia-siddique



statue behind to the left:

Sekhmet

Egyptian Lady of Slaughter

The Egyptian goddess Sekhmet (The Powerful One) was depicted with the head of a lioness to signify her ferocity and destructive power. According to myth, she was sent to destroy humankind by her father, the sun god Ra. Later regretting his harshness, but unable to control her bloodlust, Ra subdued his daughter with beer dyed red to look like blood. Able to withhold her rage to bring about healing, Sekhmet was also known as the Mistress of Life.

Honouring Sekhmet

Pharaoh Amenhotep III erected hundreds of large statues of the goddess Sekhmet, probably to foster military victory and long life during his reign (1391–1353 BC). This one shows the goddess standing, while holding a papyrus staff and an ankh, the symbol of northern Egypt and the hieroglyph for 'life'. A solar disc on her head (now lost) connected her to her father, the sun god Ra.

Granodiorite, Egypt, about 1391–1353 BC
British Museum EA520

image caption:

Many of the statues of Sekhmet from Amenhotep III's reign have been discovered at Karnak, an ancient Egyptian religious complex in modern Luxor.

© Magica / Alamy Stock Photo

Commentator Rabia Siddique:

We need to embrace the full breadth and measure of our power in all of its multi-dimensions, to be willing and able to be life-givers, to be mothers, but also to be lionesses and warriors, to be advocates, to be change agents.

case to the right:

Sekhmet and Hathor

Sekhmet was honoured with blood and this branding-iron cast in her image (1) was probably used on sacrificial cattle. Some ancient sources describe Sekhmet as the ferocious manifestation of Hathor, the gentle goddess of beauty and pleasure. Part of a large ceremonial necklace, this bronze counterbalance (2) shows Hathor in three guises – a woman (top), with bovine ears (middle) and as a cow (bottom). Both goddesses were worshipped annually at the Festival of Drunkenness.

Bronze, Egypt, about 1550–1295 BC
British Museum 1928,0604.1

Justice and defence

Bronze, Egypt, 1390–1352 BC
British Museum 1888,0512.69

image caption:

Branding-iron stamp in the image of Sekhmet's head and upper torso.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Mother of the pharaoh

Sekhmet was the most prominent of many lioness-headed goddesses petitioned across ancient Egypt for defence and protection. This green-glazed amulet (3) shows either Sekhmet or the goddess Mut (Mother) breastfeeding a child, perhaps a young pharaoh. A symbolic act, it conveys the transference of the goddess' strength to the recipient.

Green-glazed faience, Egypt, 1070–712 BC
British Museum 1913,0111.6

Protection from disease

Thousands of personal amulets (4–7) in the form of Sekhmet or other lioness-headed goddesses have been discovered across Egypt. Made from either inexpensive or precious materials, they were carried by the living or buried with the dead. Their popularity may reflect a widespread belief in Sekhmet's ability to cure disease.

4. Glazed composition, Egypt, 1069–305 BC

5. Glazed faience, Egypt, 720–525 BC

6. Glazed faience, Egypt, 900–700 BC

Donated by H.L. Hansard

7. Red jasper, Egypt, 664–332 BC

Donated by Mrs Marion Whiteford Acworth J.P.

British Museum 1838,0405.12; 1895,1115.11; 1913,0308.5;
1952,1213.16

statue to the right:

Athena / Minerva

Greek goddess of war and wisdom

Athena was the ancient Greek goddess of war and wisdom. Known to the Romans as Minerva, she presided over all aspects of public life from the military, justice and politics to the arts. Still viewed as an emblem of strength, intellect and order, images of Athena / Minerva continue to be placed on government buildings, law courts, military insignia and universities around the world.

Strategy and strength

This characteristic depiction of Athena shows her helmeted and heavily robed. Her contemplative stance reflects her status as a martial deity embodying intellect and strategy over brute force. The breastplate, adorned with Medusa's head, symbolises Athena's power to conquer evil. Originally she held a spear and probably a figure of Nike, the goddess of victory, which was later restored as an owl.

Justice and defence

Marble, Italy, AD 1–100

Lent by National Museums Liverpool, World Museum

image caption:

The current US Army Medal of Honor shows a bust of Minerva with an owl on her helmet, a symbol of wisdom.

© Public Domain: Arlington National Cemetery, 2017

Commentator Rabia Siddique:

If you're angry, harness that. If you're frustrated, express that. If you're more of a peacemaker and a quiet, persevering advocate, own that as well. It's about not having to subscribe to any stereotypically masculine or feminine form of power.

case to the right:

Mythical birth

In Greek myth Athena was born fully grown and fully armed from the head of her father Zeus after he complained of a terrible headache. The king of the gods had devoured Athena's mother Metis after learning her child would be more powerful than him. The scene on this wine jar shows the smith god, having split Zeus' head open with an axe, looking back in surprise as Athena leaps forth.

Painted pottery, Athens, Greece, about 510 BC
British Museum 1837,0609.27

Athenian priestesses

This amphora depicts a priestess preparing to pour a libation as an offering to Athena. Ancient Greek culture was highly patriarchal, but the two most important cults of Athena in Athens were presided over by women. By attending to Athena these priestesses ensured the city's divine protection, giving them considerable status and influence as important public figures.

Justice and defence

Painted pottery, Athens, Greece, 460–450 BC
British Museum 1867,0508.1059

Sulis–Minerva

In Roman Britain Minerva was equated with Sulis, a local goddess of healing. With powers over justice and health, Sulis–Minerva was petitioned by women and men to punish personal enemies. Archaeologists have recovered about 130 lead sheets inscribed with curses from her sacred pool at Bath. Many ask the goddess to inflict illness, injury or even death upon thieves unless their stolen property is returned to the temple.

1 Lead alloy, UK, AD 275–400

2,3 Lead alloy, UK, AD 175–275

The Roman Baths, Bath & North East Somerset Council

Divine vengeance

‘Docimedis has lost two gloves. He asks that the person who has stolen them should lose his minds and his eyes in the temple where she appoints.’

Justice and defence

‘... I, Arminia, complain to you, Sulis, that you consume Verecundinus ... who has stolen ... two silver coins from me. You are not to permit him to sit or lie or ... to walk or to have sleep or health ...’

‘To Minerva the goddess Sulis I have given the thief who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether slave or free, whether man or woman. He is not to buy back this gift unless with his own blood.’

other side of case:

Enduring icon

As the personification of military victory and wisdom Minerva’s image has endured in European art. It was used on medals made to honour female rulers, such as Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland (1533–1603) and Maria Theresa (1717–1780), the Holy Roman Empress (1–2).

They were portrayed alongside Minerva or wearing her distinctive breastplate as a flattering allusion to their leadership and virtue.

Justice and defence

Minerva's image was also used by male military leaders (3–4), including the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) and his British adversary, the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852).

1. Silver medal of Elizabeth I, England, 1602

2. Bronze medal of Maria Theresa
by Lorenzo Maria Weber (active 1740s–1787), UK, 1743

3. Bronze medal of Napoleon Bonaparte
by Pierre Ferrier, France, 1796

4. Bronze medal of Wellington
by Thomas and Benjamin Wyon, UK, 1821

British Museum 1897,0605.1; M.8472 ; M.2611; M.5783

image captions:

These medals are displayed to show the images of Minerva. Their other sides portray:

1. Elizabeth I holding a sceptre and orb, symbols of sovereignty.

2. Maria Theresa wearing Minerva's breastplate and a laurel crown, a symbol of victory.

Justice and defence

3. Napoleon Bonaparte.

The inscription around Minerva reads, 'Here is, valiant soldiers, the fruit of your work'.

4. 1st Duke of Wellington.

'Mars has triumphed under the guidance of Minerva' encircles the goddess.

© Trustees of the British Museum

case in front of panels:

Luba

royal power comes from women

Women have been central to Luba political and spiritual practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and depicted in royal arts since the 1700s. As givers of life they are pivotal to the concept of kingship, which is rooted in notions of protection and the prosperity of humanity. Considered to possess enhanced spiritual powers, women have public status as royal advisers and diviners.

Secrecy and power

Almost all Luba art depicts the female form. Stools, which function as symbolic thrones, are supported by carved figures of women with elaborate hairstyles and scarification, acknowledging the combined political and spiritual importance of women. Similarly, divination bowls used to communicate with the spirit world are held by carved female figures, embodying ideas of secrecy, protection and healing.

Wood, Democratic Republic of the Congo,
probably 1800–1900
Acquired with Art Fund support
British Museum Af1949,46.479

Wood, Democratic Republic of the Congo,
probably 1800–1900
Donated by Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine
British Museum Af1954,+23.1532

Commentator Rabia Siddique:

We need more feminine energy in the world today.
We need more women in positions of power
and influence.

Justice and defence

wall behind to the left:

Kali Puja, Camden, London

2–6 November 2021

Kali Puja is a major Hindu festival dedicated to the goddess Kali. It is celebrated across the world, but especially in north-eastern India. Devotees ask Kali to help them destroy evil, and for happiness, health, wealth and peace.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

This film has sounds of devotees praying to and celebrating the goddess Kali during the puja ceremony.

© Trustees of the British Museum

London Durgotsav Committee

The London Durgotsav Committee is a Bengali Hindu charitable organisation based in London, UK. They have held annual Durga and Kali Puja celebrations for devotees since 1963, generously allowing us to attend and film the 2021 Kali Puja ceremony in Camden, north London. The Committee's expertise has been instrumental in the acquisition of the Kali icon for the British Museum's permanent collection. Their personal insights and perspectives on the enduring nature and contemporary relevance of the goddesses has contributed greatly to the exhibition and accompanying publication.

image caption:

London Durgotsav Committee led by Dr Ananda Gupta (centre), Sunbir Sanyal (left) and Anjali Sanyal (right).

case to the right:

Mahadevi

Hindu Great Goddess

Shaktism is a branch of Hinduism popular in north-eastern India. Followers honour Mahadevi (Great Goddess) as the embodiment of shakti (power), the divine feminine energy that pervades and animates the universe. Mahadevi is the singular creator, preserver and destroyer of all things. Her power is expressed through all Hindu deities, but she is particularly identified with the warrior goddess Durga and Kali. These goddesses battle demonic forces representing chaos, fear, ignorance and arrogance, teaching followers to defeat such qualities within themselves.

Durga slaying the buffalo demon

The earliest and most important text to honour Mahadevi is the **Devi Mahatmya** (AD 400–600), in which the Great Goddess appears as Durga to slay the buffalo-demon Mahisha. Shown on this relief, Durga stands with one foot on her lion mount, the other on the dead buffalo. As Mahisha tries to escape, she spears him through the mouth. Despite such violence, her face radiates calm. Her supreme wisdom is represented by her third eye. In her many arms she holds all the weapons of the gods combined.

Schist, India, 1400–1500

Donated by Mrs John Bridge, Miss Fanny Bridge
and Mrs Edgar Baker

British Museum 1872,0701.77

Contemporary responses to Durga and Kali

‘I feel that we all have that Durga and Kali within us. A mother within us. When any kind of injustice happens, she’s there to slay the evil **asura**, the demon. That’s what is important for me.’

Gairika Mathur, Kali devotee

Justice and defence

‘Ma Kali is the embodiment of a woman’s rage. If I get annoyed and angry, many times I have been told in an endearing way that I’m becoming like Ma Kali.’

Anjali Sanyal, Kali devotee

Kali

the Terrible

In the **Devi Mahatmya** (AD 400–600) the goddess Kali is the ferocious manifestation of Durga’s rage. Terrifying in appearance, Kali is connected to the creative and destructive power of time and is both feared and loved. Often worshipped as Ma (Mother) Kali, her insatiable aggression destroys ignorance, guiding her followers towards enlightenment. In art she is depicted wearing a garland of severed heads symbolising her power to destroy the ego, while her fearlessness and generosity are shown through her hand gestures.

Justice and defence

Kali icon, 2021

By Kaushik Ghosh (born 1974), India

This icon of the goddess Kali was made for the exhibition by Ghosh, a Kolkata-based artist, who creates sculptures of Hindu deities for temples and festival parades. Here, Kali dances on the motionless body of the god Shiva. In some Hindu traditions, all existence results from the unity of shakti, the active power embodied by Kali, and consciousness, represented by Shiva.

To find out more about this icon and what it means to devotees, scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/kali



Fibreglass, wood, ply, oil-based colour, cloth, jute hair, gold thread, pearls, nails and beads
British Museum 2022,3005.1

Justice and defence

case to the right:

Blood sacrifice

Traditionally, blood sacrifices of animals are offered up to Kali using a curved sword. Here, the eye of Kali etched onto the blade allows the goddess to witness the sacrifice. The animal represents the donor's pride and greed, which is destroyed by Kali in an act of compassion. Today many worshippers dedicate vegetables instead of animals.

Iron, other metal and wood, Nepal, 1800–1940
Donated by Mrs A. Crooke
British Museum 1947,1112.11

Commentator Rabia Siddique:

These goddesses are all about slaying the wrongs in us as individuals and enhancing and maintaining this life-giving feminine energy and force in the world.

Proceed to the next room.

Compassion and salvation

panels straight ahead:

Compassion and salvation

The concept of a loving, protective mother is, in many spiritual traditions, an ideal of divine compassion. The unconditional love of a parent towards a child – patient and non-judgemental – has long been reflected in beliefs about spiritual love and guidance.

Compassionate female figures are uniquely important in the daily lives of worshippers. From Mary in the Christian tradition to Guanyin in Buddhism, some are believed to appear directly at times of need.

The attitudes to such feminine powers are often paradoxical. While female figures are sincerely venerated, that reverence in many societies has not translated into a higher status for women themselves.

Compassion and salvation

Commentator Deborah Frances-White:

Whether she's nurturing or whether she's a warrior, she is active. There's no passivity.

To explore Deborah Frances-White's response to the objects and ideas in this section scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/deborah-frances-white



small statue to the left:

Isis

Egyptian Great Mother

Isis was one of the most important and widely worshipped goddesses in ancient Egypt. Her divine authority was connected to wisdom, healing and protection in both this life and the afterlife.

According to myth, she resurrected the body of her brother and husband Osiris in order to conceive their son, Horus, the god whom all pharaohs were believed to personify.

Compassion and salvation

Protection and defence

Isis was sometimes depicted with wings.

This statue shows her using them to shield the mummified body of Osiris, ruler of the afterlife.

An inscription on the base asks her to grant long life to the donor, who honours her protective power with the words 'O Isis ... Mistress of all the gods, who protects her brother Osiris and overthrows his enemies'.

Siltstone, Egypt, 590–530 BC
British Museum 1895,0511.51

case to the right:

The source of life

Figurines of Isis nursing her son Horus (above) were popular in ancient Egypt from about 700 BC, positioning her as both the source of life and its protector. Amulets of the goddess were carried by the living and wrapped in the bindings of the dead. This 'girdle of Isis' (below) was placed on the neck or chest of the deceased.

Compassion and salvation

Usually carved in red stone to represent the goddess' blood, such amulets were shaped like a tied sash resembling the ankh, the hieroglyph for 'life'.

Bronze, gold and copper, Egypt, 400–300 BC
British Museum 1868,1102.3

Cornelian, Egypt, about 1400 BC
British Museum 1857,0811.20

Commentator Deborah Frances-White:

Isis' story is not just about nurturing and compassion, but about protection. I also see Isis as a warrior. These are qualities that I see in many women around me. A woman can lift a car off her baby, if necessary.

Compassion and salvation

wall to the right:

Maryam

'the righteous one'

Maryam, as Mary is known in Arabic, is highly revered in Islam. Described as **siddiqa** (the righteous one) and favoured by God above all women, her devotion and virtue are considered a model for all to follow. In the Qur'an a chapter is named after her, and stories of her life are related alongside the miraculous events surrounding the virgin birth of her son, the prophet 'Isa (Jesus).

Kaf ha ya 'ayn sad, 1980

By Osman Waqialla (1925–2007), Sudan

Traditionally, important Islamic figures are remembered through the recitation of Qur'anic verses and calligraphic art. Here, calligrapher Waqialla captures the entire **Surat Maryam** chapter of the Qur'an in tiny script woven around its opening five letters – **kaf, ha, ya, 'ayn and sad** – painted in bold large font.

Compassion and salvation

The beginning of each verse is marked in gold.

Ink and gold on vellum mounted on paper

Purchased with support from the P.T. Brooke Sewell

Permanent Fund and the Arab World Education Budget

British Museum 1998,0716,0.1

Contemporary responses to Maryam

‘Learning about Maryam and hearing about her trials – the things we go through in life will be nowhere near as severe, but she didn’t lose hope or faith, which I feel is the message Allah sends to us about her.’

Nusrat Ahmed, connected to Maryam as a Muslim woman, daughter and mother

‘One of the best women to grace the earth, Maryam – upon whom be peace – encapsulated strength, honesty and spiritual fortitude. A timeless role model for all.’

Patricia Anyasodor, for whom Maryam has been a role model during her journey through womanhood

Compassion and salvation

Muslim women's group

The community consultants for this part of the exhibition included Abira Hussein, Nusrat Ahmed, Patricia Anyasodor and Robina Afzal. Practising Muslims, they generously shared personal and faith-based insights on Maryam's role in their spiritual and daily lives, reflecting on how her story both inspires and supports them. Their contributions have added depth and nuance to both the exhibition and accompanying book.

The consultants included:

Abira Hussein, Nusrat Ahmed,
Patricia Anyasodor, Robina Afzal.

case to the right:

Mary

Christian Mother of God

In Christianity the Virgin Mary is the most beloved and prominent female spiritual figure. In the Bible she was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus Christ, the divine saviour of humankind.

Compassion and salvation

Mary means many things to worshippers from diverse religious traditions around the world, yet is almost always seen as a boundless source of compassion and protection for the vulnerable.

She Who Shows the Way

This Russian Orthodox icon is known as the Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way). It shows Mary directing the faithful towards her son Jesus and therefore towards salvation. The original is said to have been painted from life by the Gospel-writer Luke, with each copy retaining the authority of his eyewitness account. It has been partially encased in a gilded silver frame to protect it from the smoke of candles and incense used in worship.

Brass, enamel and silver, Russia, mid-1500s
Donated by Ella Wentworth Dyne Steel
British Museum 1998,1105.27

Compassion and salvation

wall to the right:

The Virgin of Guadalupe

Made using a pre-colonial technique called **popotillo**, this vibrant straw mosaic depicts the Virgin of Guadalupe, an apparition of Mary said to have occurred in Mexico City in 1531. Appearing as an Indigenous woman crowned and wearing a veil of stars, this vision has made Mary a figure of Mexican national pride tied to nationwide spirituality and independence.

Straw and cardboard, Mexico, 1980s
British Museum Am1989,12.368

image caption:

Constructed where Mary is said to have appeared, The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world.

© Jerónimo Alba / Alamy Stock Photo, 2015

Compassion and salvation

case to the right:

The cult of the Virgin

Across Western Europe devotion to Mary flourished from about the 1300s. This statuette shows Mary crowned and regally dressed, tenderly cradling her infant son. The goldfinch in Jesus' hand symbolises his later crucifixion for the salvation of humankind. As his mother, Mary's importance to salvation is demonstrated by the hybrid monster representing evil that she effortlessly crushes underfoot.

Ivory and gold, France, 1275–1300

British Museum 1856,0623.141

Commentator Deborah Frances-White:

The Bible is full of men, and we're asked to look out of their eyes, but there is Mary, all the time quietly looking after the Messiah. I think we need to pay full respect to Mary if we are going to enter into the paradigm of the Christian story.

Compassion and salvation

Queen of Heaven

This crozier head (the top of a bishop's staff) shows Mary being crowned as Queen of Heaven by Jesus. Both sit on ornate thrones and wear fine robes. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Roman Catholics believe that after her death Mary was taken directly to heaven. Known as the Assumption, this became a popular subject in European art from the 1100s onwards, emphasising her elevated spiritual status.

Gilded copper and enamel, France, about 1250
British Museum 1853,1113.1

Pilgrimage medals

Mary is believed by some Christian denominations to appear before mortals, offering guidance and protection. Thousands of sightings of Mary have been reported across the world. Some sites have become centres of pilgrimage and healing, such as Lourdes in France, which attracts millions of pilgrims each year.

Compassion and salvation

Sacred medals depicting these appearances are sold at such sites for private worship and are often worn, carried or strung on rosaries.

1. Plastic, aluminium, white metal and alloy, UK, 1900–2000
British Museum 1992,0113.6705

2. Alloy, France, 1958
British Museum 1992,0113.3219

3. Aluminium badge by A. Taylor, UK, 1960s
Donated by Joe Cribb
British Museum 1978,1218.3

statue to the right:

Guanyin

Chinese goddess of mercy

In Chinese Buddhism Guanyin is honoured as the bodhisattva of compassion. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who guide others towards nirvana, the ultimate liberation from the self and worldly suffering. Guanyin means Perceiver of Sounds, as the bodhisattva is believed to hear the cries of the suffering and appear before them to administer aid.

Compassion and salvation

Known in Japan as Kannon and in Korea as Gwan-eum, Guanyin has the power to take on many forms – male or female, young or old, bodhisattva or layperson.

Guanyin meditating

Images of spiritual beings are used as meditation aids in Buddhism. This large bronze sculpture shows Guanyin seated on a lotus, representing enlightenment. Her head is bowed in meditation and with both hands she makes the gesture for patience.

Bronze, lacquer and gold, China, after 1260
Purchased from John Sparks Ltd with the
P.T. Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund
British Museum 1952,1217.1

Compassion and salvation

case to the right:

Becoming Guanyin

In South Asian and Tibetan Buddhism, the bodhisattva of compassion is known as Avalokiteshvara and depicted as either male or androgynous. From the 1st century AD, as Buddhism began to spread eastwards into China, images of the bodhisattva gradually took on female characteristics and became known as Guanyin. Both Avalokiteshvara and Guanyin are sometimes shown with many arms, symbolising their power and ability to reach out to all those in need.

Wood and gold, Tibet, 1750–1850
Donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum 1895,0408.24

Porcelain, China, about 1700–22
Bequeathed by Patrick J. Donnelly
British Museum 1980,0728.93

Compassion and salvation

Commentator Deborah Frances-White:

Guanyin can appear as a masculine figure or a feminine figure, but in fact transcending everything, including gender, is the ultimate meditative place where we can be beyond binaries and restrictions. So, I think of Guanyin as a 'they'.

Guanyin and Mary

When Christianity was introduced to China during the 1700s, parallels were drawn between Guanyin and Mary as embodiments of compassion and guides towards salvation. Associated with the granting of children, Guanyin is often depicted holding a child. Between the 1640s and 1720s porcelain figures of Guanyin like this were exported to Europe, listed in ship's cargos as **Sancta Maria** (Holy Mary).

Porcelain, Dehua, China, 1650–1720

Bequeathed by Patrick J. Donnelly

British Museum 1980,0728.55

Compassion and salvation

wall case to the right:

**Amida Buddha accompanied by Kannon
and Seishi**

by Katō Nobukiyo (1734–1810), Japan

In Japan, Guanyin is known as Kannon and is an important bodhisattva in Pure Land Buddhist belief. She acts as an envoy of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, guiding the dead towards the Western Paradise. This scroll shows Kannon (right) descending from the sky with Amida and Seishi, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Rather than brushstrokes, each line and block of colour is made up of characters from the three most sacred texts of Pure Land Buddhism.

Paint on paper, Japan, 1796
British Museum 1881,1210,0.4.JA

image caption:

The skyline at Sendai, Japan is dominated by this statue of Kannon, which is 100 metres tall.

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Alamy Stock Photo, 2016

case behind:

Tara

Tibetan saviour

Honoured as both a mother and guardian, Tara (She Who Saves) has been venerated in Tibet for at least 1,000 years. She is revered as the Mother of All Buddhas, embodying perfect compassion and wisdom. Meditating on Tara is believed to guide devotees from samsara (the cycle of worldly suffering) to nirvana (enlightenment). She is usually portrayed draped in silks and jewels, attracting devotees with her inner and outer beauty.

White Tara

This gilded figure shows White Tara. The eyes on her hands and feet convey infinite wisdom. She sits in a fully meditative pose with her left hand over her heart, while her right hand makes the gesture of divine generosity. Her name refers to the pure light emanating from her, which is believed to have curative powers. Historically statues of Tara have been said to speak, cure disease and redistribute wealth.

Compassion and salvation

Gilded bronze, Tibet, 1700–1900

British Museum 1907,0527.2

Commentator Deborah Frances-White:

I haven't had any biological children. Tara is probably the goddess I relate to the most.

We don't see her nurturing a baby, we see her giving her power to everybody and everything.

wall case to the left:

Green Tara

Tara is honoured in 21 forms, as seen on this painting on cloth. Some are peaceful and others are wrathful, but all are benevolent. In the centre she is shown as Green Tara, her most popular form. Seated on a lotus, her right foot touches the ground, indicating her connection to the world of suffering and her willingness to spring into action whenever needed. Each of Tara's 21 forms is labelled with a vice that she is able to subdue.

Painting on cloth, Tibet, 1800–1900

British Museum 1898,0622,0.22

Proceed to the next room.

Feminine power today

panel to the left:

Feminine power today

The spiritual beings presented here – from the divine to the demonic – demonstrate the vast range of powers attributed to the feminine.

Today, new social movements for gender equality are driving important conversations about inclusivity and ways of understanding sex, gender and identity.

Engaging with the world's many cultures and spiritual traditions across time shows that a wide range of beliefs about femininity has always existed. Those beliefs can help us reflect on our own ideas and preconceptions of what feminine power means today.

Feminine power today

case to the left:

Grow the Tea, then Break the Cups, 2021

By Wangechi Mutu (born 1972), Kenya

'I make images that resemble us, to bring us back our stories, to bring us to life.'

Mutu describes this sculpture as 'a talisman of truths found at the intersection between the mending and remaking of memory and traditions'.

Drawing on East African mythologies and histories, she presents a female divinity formed from found objects and natural elements from Kenyan land. Shards of porcelain and shells suggest breakage and displacement, while quartz evokes healing. In her work, Mutu brings together diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, creating hybrid female figures that reflect her own experiences and explore new ways of representing the feminine.

Soil, charcoal, paper pulp, wood, brown quartz, porcelain, crystal, ornaments, oyster shell, tin can, human and synthetic hair, Kenya, 2021

© Wangechi Mutu, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

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