Exhibition map and main texts

Feminine power
the divine
to the demonic
About this guide

This guide gives you an overview of the exhibition’s layout and main texts. An online large print guide containing the entire text is also available.

Your visit will take about 50 minutes.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.