



Teaching notes, written by Dr Sophie Page - Curator of Spellbound

Spellbound explores the history of magic over eight centuries with exquisitely engraved rings to bind a lover, enchanted animal hearts pierced with nails, mummified cats concealed in walls and many other intriguing objects. Although many of the ideas and practices may seem alien and strange, Spellbound invites visitors to recognise magical thinking as something we all do, a habit driven by basic passions: the urge to be loved, fear of danger, and a desire to protect home and family. Magical thinking is a powerful fantasy, often worked out in rituals and invested in objects. It provides hope and a sense of control, but can also make us scapegoat others and has led to appalling persecutions. It is an essential part of who we are.



The medieval cosmos with angelic movers, *Breviari d'Amor*, Southern France, first quarter of the fourteenth century. 35 x 25.5 cm. © The British Library, London, MS Royal 19 C I, f. 50.

How to live well in a complex world

In the universe imagined by medieval people, angels guided, demons tempted and the stars directed (or misdirected) the lives of humans. Manuscript images reveal human bodies exposed and

vulnerable to the influence of the heavens and the wiles of demons. But other images, rituals and objects reflect human confidence in understanding of the cosmos and using its powers: magic rings to bind a woman to love, parchment rolls and amulets to protect against spiritual and physical dangers, crystals to draw down benevolent spirits, and mirrors to divine the future.

In the medieval imagination the earth was the still centre of a dynamic cosmos, enclosed within multiple transparent spheres nested closely within one another like the layers of an onion (a popular analogy of the time). The continuous circular motions of the celestial spheres resonated with secret harmonies that were inaudible to human ears but exerted a powerful influence on the world.

Angels and Demons

In a world swarming with invisible spirits, medieval people feared malign planetary influences and ever-present evil demons. Humans were driven by sensory impulses and confined to the prison of a body, which made them susceptible to deception by demons. But every human being was also assigned a good angel to strengthen their resistance to evil. St Michael the Archangel was especially popular in his role as a protector of the soul. The image of St Michael trampling on the devil was a positive and hopeful image, portraying him as the devil's most powerful enemy (after God) in all the cosmos.



Oak statue of St Michael with a soul shown on the arm, England, first quarter of the fifteenth century. 98 cm (height) x 15.5 cm (width) x 15.5 cm (depth). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London (A.22-1923).

Ritual Magic

Historians reconstruct how rituals were performed and the emotions behind them from surviving instructions and magical objects. Talismans drew down the power of planets, seals and rings offered protection from demons, and mirrors and crystals might dissolve the boundary between the human and spirit worlds. They all give us insight into secretive rituals. Anyone performing these was likely to be anxious about summoning evil spirits or being caught engaging in activities condemned by the Church and secular authorities, but medieval people longed to have conversations with angels because of the extraordinary powers and knowledge they were thought to possess.



A magic mirror to summon the spirit Floron.
© Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Magic and Mystery in the Home

The objects on display in the second room represent what our ancestors have done to protect their homes and families from natural and supernatural threats over the last 500 years. They are only a fragment of the thousands of concealed objects we have on record. Why they were concealed is not always clear, but in every case they provide clues to the fears, emotions, and rituals of everyday domestic life. The home protects us but it also needs protecting. Imagine it is a vulnerable body, with

the doors, windows and chimney as weak spots where unwanted forces enter. Some threats are perennial – thieves, vermin and weather. But in the past there was another world outside, consisting of witches, fairies, demons and spirits who often sought to disrupt the household.



'Witch's ladder' – a rope to which feathers are tied at intervals. Although alleged to have come from a witch's house, the 'ladder' may be a sewel, used for driving deer. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (1911.32.8).

Keeping Witches Away

Witches were considered one of the greatest threats to the home, and some concealed objects were used in anti-witchcraft rituals conducted by people known as cunning-folk. For centuries, these people detected stolen property, revealed the identity of thieves, healed with herbs, consulted the stars, told fortunes, and dealt with affairs of the heart. Above all, they were the formidable foes of witches. Some remedies were simple. People place horseshoes above their doors in a light-hearted way for good luck. But, in the past, horseshoes were a deadly serious preventative against witches. They were made of iron, which was considered a deterrent to witches and fairies. Cunning-folk wrote charms and builders drew protective symbols to protect thresholds, windows and hearths. We know that the pierced animal hearts found in chimneys were placed there, in the beating heart of the home, to punish the witches who dared endanger life.



Something Worn

Since at least the 16th century, people have hidden clothing and shoes in their homes for mysterious reasons. The corset, from around 1630, was found along with the lining from a pair of breeches under floorboards by a chimney. Most items of clothing have been found in voids under or around floorboards, stairs, ovens, attics, chimneys or hearths. All show signs of wear and tear. This is clearly significant: clothes bear the imprint of the people who wore them, and their concealment may have expressed the intimate relationship between home and dweller, a sort of commitment to look after each other. More than two thousand shoes from the 18th and 19th centuries were hidden in this way, most likely by builders during renovations and rebuilding for good luck in getting their next job. Like concealed clothing, most of the shoes are old and worn. Usually only one of a pair was concealed, begging the question – what happened to the other shoe?



Corset of c.1630 found under floorboards next to a fireplace, Sittingbourne, Kent. Sittingbourne Heritage Museum.

The Idea of Witchcraft

Witchcraft beliefs are rooted in psychology and culture, and are universal in space and time. Witches haunt our imaginations as creatures of the night, rebels against God, a secret enemy within. They oppose every positive value in community and society. Belief in witches is widespread across the world and throughout history, including Christian Europe and North America. Between 1400 and 1800, from Massachusetts to Moscow, 100,000 people were prosecuted for witchcraft. Four-in-five suspects were women, many elderly dependants. Their alleged crimes included killing people, damaging property and worshipping Satan. Yet doubts about evidence meant half of those tried were acquitted. The idea of witchcraft was always controversial, though the terror and rage it caused were very real.



Spirit Manifestations

In the 19th century, continued belief in the soul, combined with dissatisfaction with religion, gave rise to Spiritualism. By proving life after death, Spiritualists promised blind faith would become redundant. Spiritualist mediums delivered messages from the dead. The World Wars of the 20th century increased attendance at séances, where bereaved people were comforted by reunions with deceased loved ones. Others said they were being exploited. Helen Duncan allegedly summoned spirits draped in 'ectoplasm' – organic matter emitted from her body. In the 1930s she was denounced as a fraud, and in 1944 prosecuted under the 1735 Witchcraft Act, which forbade conjuring spirits. A six-month prison sentence made her a Spiritualist martyr, and led to the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951.



Large piece of

imitation silk used as
'ectoplasm' at séance held
at Cefn Coed, Wales, 1939.
Senate House Library,
University of London.

Modern Witchcraft

Executions for witchcraft ceased in the late 18th century. But the need to guard against witches, resist their malevolence, and identify them has endured. Protective charms are found in many cultures, and folk magicians still operate today. People continue to seek reassurance about love and loss, illness and death, wherever it might be found. And the figure of the witch, white and black, continues to fire our imaginations, helping us understand the mysteries of being alive. Magic persists, because doubt, danger and desire persist. As always, emotional engagement with unseen forces includes the desire to cause harm as well as to do good.



A modern 'witch bottle' found on the
Banks of the River Thames in the early
1980s. Its contents include a set of human teeth
and a phial containing oil of cloves suggesting the spell
was meant to cure (or perhaps cause) toothache.
and contents from the River
Thames, c.1982. © The
Museum of London.