



The British  
Museum

The Citi exhibition

**Feminine power**  
the divine  
to the demonic

19 May – 25 September 2022  
Guide for teachers

Supported by



*Lilith*, Kiki Smith, 1994. Image © The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York, photo by Hyla Skopitz.

## Planning your visit

We recommend the following planning guidelines:

- Provide a focus for students to keep in mind as they explore the exhibition which you can then follow up afterwards.
- Do some preparatory work in school to develop the focus of the visit and familiarise students with the content of the exhibition.
- Allow students some scope to explore and find objects that interest them.

### Curriculum Links

The exhibition can be used to support the following curriculum areas:

#### **History/The world around us/Social studies:**

Exploration of feminine power around the world and across culture and time.

#### **Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts:**

Human artistic expression, sculpture and sacred objects. Decorative design, patterns and how we showcase power within art and design.

**PSHE/RSHE/Health & wellbeing:** RSHE exploring gender, feminism and identity through femininity.

## Using this resource

This resource is designed to support your visit to the Citi exhibition *Feminine Power: The divine to the demonic*.

It aims to be cross-curricular and offer opportunities to work the exhibition into different curriculum subjects.

The resource is accompanied by a downloadable image bank of objects displayed in the exhibition.

The images can be used to introduce students to some of the objects they will see in the exhibition. The images are grouped under curricular areas which link to the follow-up activity suggestions in this guide. They can also be used as starting points for teacher designed activities which support the themes of the exhibition, topics and skills being studied in the classroom.

## Introduction to the exhibition

*Feminine Power* is a cross-cultural look at the representation of female spiritual beings over the last 5,000 years. The show will explore the role that goddesses, demons, witches and other spiritual beings have played – and continue to play – in shaping attitudes towards gender identity around the globe. Objects on display will include sculpture, artwork and sacred objects. Together they highlight the many faces of feminine power – ferocious, beautiful, creative or hell-bent – and its seismic influence throughout time.

## Using the exhibition

### In advance

Decide on a focus for the visit and follow-up activities. Go through this with the students. Use the image bank to familiarise students with some of the exhibition content. Go through any exhibition activities with the students and accompanying adults beforehand.

### On the day

Encourage adults to allow students to linger at objects which interest them and to discuss what they see and share ideas as they go round. Remind students to behave calmly and politely. Photography without flash is allowed in the exhibition and students may also take photographs of relevant objects in the Museum's permanent galleries.

### Afterwards

Use the information (written, drawn, photographed and/or discussed) gathered by the students in the exhibition and the Museum galleries as a starting point for follow-up activities back at school.

## The 'Big' questions

It is a good idea to have a big question for students to keep in mind during their visit to the exhibition. Here are some possible examples:

- Which did I think, and why, was the most interesting object in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about female spiritual beings over the last 5,000 years that I did not know before?
- What sources of evidence does the exhibition include and how useful did I find them for learning about feminine power across time?

- How does the perception of these beings, their nature and their power, impact our understanding of 'femininity'?
- What else would I put in the exhibition to make it engaging/informative?

## Exhibition themes

The exhibition is divided into themed sections.

### Introduction

Whether they are goddesses, spirits, demons or saints, powerful spiritual female forces live in the hearts and minds of people around the globe. Their presence and influence have been observed in all aspects of human life, from universal experiences, such as birth, life and death, to cultural events including war, peace and justice, and natural phenomena stretching from the abundance of spring to the destruction of floods. These forces may be perceived as generous and comforting, or terrifying and aggressive, and their celebration and veneration over thousands of years has produced a wealth of art, poetry and literature.

Across world belief systems, there is much to inspire and affirm female identity, particularly the widely held belief that divine power – and in some traditions the supreme divine power – manifests in female or bi-gendered form. This exhibition is a thematic exploration of some of the diverse spiritual forces attributed to female influence, which have been chosen from ancient and modern world cultures.

### Creation

The creation of the world, the cosmos, and life remains one of the great mysteries of the world. All religions seek to provide answers to the fundamental question of existence.

Many of the oldest religions share a concept that the female is intimately connected to the ability to create. The power of the womb to grow and produce new life is a key metaphor for the birth of all living things. The power of these ancient Goddesses is often combined with that of a God, imbuing creation with both feminine and masculine forces.

### The Natural World

The fertility of the female body, capable of bringing forth life and sustaining new growth, has often

been viewed as a metaphor for the fertility of the earth. This is, no doubt, why female divinities are so commonly connected to the natural world in many human cultures. Concepts of 'Mother Nature' even exist where no actual deities are worshipped. Worship of the earth and its provisions was critical to many ancient cultures when survival was closely tied to the fertility of the ground.

However, nature can both sustain and destroy life. Goddesses of nature are both generous and destructive, closely embodying the environment in which they are worshipped. In the world's more extreme environments, Goddesses of nature are both loved and feared, and rituals, sacrifices and prayers offered to appease their wrath.

### Passion and Desire

Often considered an intrinsically female power, in ancient Europe and the Middle East, passion, love and desire were the domain of formidable goddesses.

Two of the most famous are Inanna and Aphrodite. Far from the domestic wife and mother, they each had many lovers and were easily provoked into violent rages. These Goddesses were irresistibly seductive, the epitome of female allure. They were also associated with war, ruling over the intense rivalry of both the bedroom and the battlefield.

The antiquity of these Goddesses, and their prominence within their respective religions, is testament to the fundamental power of desire within human culture. In the patriarchal societies of the Middle East and Ancient Mediterranean, most women lacked political and social influence. The fear and reverence that Inanna and Aphrodite inspired may be an acknowledgement of the chaotic potential of the heart and the seductive power of women, to which no man, however elevated in mind or status, was immune.

### Danger and Deviancy

Throughout the world, danger and misfortune have been personified into malicious entities who seek to harm. In patriarchal societies, they commonly take female form. Whether malevolent deities, demons, spirits or monsters, these entities fulfil an important role in belief – they explain and justify personal misfortune, and through fear and the threat of harm, they keep both male and female worshippers on the righteous path.

Many of these figures exist on the peripheries of religion, lurking in the grey areas of superstitions, folk beliefs, legend and magic. They nonetheless reveal interesting insights into beliefs in female power. The susceptibility of women to evil has a long history in Western thought, beginning at least in Ancient Greece and reaching a pinnacle in Medieval Christianity. These cultures placed a high value on female domesticity, reflected in the vilification of the wilful female who was viewed as not only wicked, but foolish. The first woman in both Greek and Christian belief unleashed all evils on humankind and the 2nd century Christian author Tertullian called women 'the devil's gateway', a line of thinking that saw over 10,000 women killed as witches in Christian Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries.

### **Destruction and Salvation**

The struggle between good and evil, order and chaos, lies at the heart of most world religions, in which forces of good fight to protect the cosmos and humankind from forces of evil. This is particularly true of Ancient Egyptian religion and Hinduism, both strongly concerned with the maintenance of cosmic stability. The female is visible in matters of defence and protection, both in the temporal and cosmic planes. However, it is hard to understand this as being associated with maternal care and strength. These goddesses lack all maternal characteristics, instead their power comes with a lack of control and they are associated with bloodlust, drunkenness and violence. Their role is to defeat the forces of evil and chaos. They use extreme power to uphold social order and enforce divine will, but they themselves often need to be restrained.

### **Motherhood and Compassion**

A mother's unconditional love for her child is the ultimate metaphor for divine love. Most people's first experience of tender compassion is from their mother. The loving, protective mother traditionally represents the ideal of selfless compassion. This no doubt arises from the traditional role of women as caregivers to the young and the vulnerable in many world cultures.

The symbolism of the mother cradling a child is the universal metaphor for the caring deity. It expresses the power to shield, protect and nourish, strengthened by the image of the lactating breast offered to the infant. Mary cradling Christ is the quintessential image of maternal devotion in

Christian iconography, mirroring the care of the church for its congregation. It is an image with older roots in Ancient Egypt, where a multitude of figurines and amulets show Isis, the Queen of Heaven, nursing her divine son Horus. Isis and Mary are highly complex and widely revered figures. Both transcend religious boundaries, having been adopted by faiths other than those of their origin. Both are figures of protection and strength, for their divine infants and for the faithful alike.

### **Wisdom**

Wisdom exists in many forms. It reflects what is most highly valued by an individual or culture, it may be inner knowledge of oneself and the ability to exist in harmony with the world, or the shrewdness to overcome enemies and gain worldly success. Human desire for greater understanding runs to the heart of much religious experience. Deities who hold the answers offer guidance and advice to mortals.

Formal education is still less accessible to women than men in much of the modern world. In addition, societal expectations that place women in supportive roles, whether to children or to husbands, makes extended personal religious devotion difficult for all but the wealthy. Despite this, the divine female is prominent among deities of wisdom, and venerated by both male and female worshippers.

## **Curricular opportunities**

### **Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts**

All the objects in the museum are exploring power through female deities, goddesses, spirits, saints or demons.

Use the exhibition to explore how people used artistic expression to create spiritual objects. Can you think of any contemporary artists that explore femininity and power?

### **Spotlight objects:**

See pages 1, 2, 3 and 11 in the powerpoint that accompanies this resource.

### **Follow up activities:**

- Discuss the different techniques and materials used to create an artistic outcome on objects

you saw in the exhibition. Review the shapes, motifs and materials used.

- Create your own artistic outcome using lines, patterns and motifs seen on exhibition objects. You might draw your object, use paint, create an object using clay or foil to sculpt.
- Discuss the responses to objects you saw in the exhibition. Think about how you would want to respond to Feminine Power in the modern world. Different responses could be combined to create a class response.

### **PSHE/ PD&MU/Health & wellbeing**

This exhibition explores female power and femininity across cultures and time through a variety of female spiritual beings. How has this exhibition changed your perception of these beings? Has it impacted our understanding and meaning of 'femininity' historically? Discuss contemporary approaches to femininity and how we challenge that in the modern world?

#### **Spotlight objects:**

Use any image in the powerpoint that accompanies this resource.

#### **Follow up activities:**

- Discuss as a group the role that goddesses, demons, witches and other spiritual beings have played – and continue to play – in shaping attitudes towards gender identity around the globe?
- Include ways in which the object was used (function), what it looks like (form) and how people might have felt about it (emotional or symbolic value).
- Discuss why you think female spiritual beings are still important today. How do they help us understand people in the past and ourselves today?