Cunning Folk: Witchcraft, Magic, and Occult Knowledge

"The word *witch* signifies originally a Wise Man, or rather a Wise Woman… And they are vulgarly called Cunning Men or Women. An Art, Knowledge, Cunning they have is extraordinary; but it is far from true Wisdom, and the word degenerated into an ill sense, as *Magia* [magic] is."

—Joseph Glanvill, 1681

In early modern Europe, "magic" encompassed a range of practices and forms of knowledge devoted to the secret forces of nature. During this period between the late Middle Ages and the Enlightenment (ca. 1450–ca. 1780), members of learned circles studied ancient occult texts to transform the elements and perceive the cosmos, while local practitioners known as "wise people" or "cunning folk" offered charms and remedies for life's daily concerns.

But where knowledge is power lies its potential to be feared as a threat. Propelled by anxieties about harmful magic and a mythology of malevolent witchcraft performed in service to the devil, violent trials unfolded across Europe and its colonies. These beliefs proliferated in print, including the treatise cited above, in which the English clergyman Joseph Glanvill ascribes "extraordinary" abilities to magical practitioners while discerning their "art" from the "true wisdom" of Christian learning. He describes their work as "cunning," a term that stems from the Anglo-Saxon *cunnan*, meaning "to know." Though historians differentiate among cunning folk, magicians, and witches, Glanvill's indistinction between them was typical of his day. Indeed, for early modern people, "cunning" moved across categories, evoking magical mastery and artfulness alongside the potential to deceive and beguile.

The arts of "cunning" are the focus of this exhibition. Drawn largely from Stanford campus collections and from the medium of print, the selection positions early modern magic as a broad and varied realm of secret knowledge, traversing the helpful and harmful, foreign and familiar, demonic and divine. The affordability and efficiency of printing allowed such diverse expressions of magical practice to materialize in art and in the public consciousness as never before. Freely wielding their own cunning crafts of imagination, early modern artists likened themselves to conjurers of the natural and supernatural worlds alike. Their creations reveal enduring legacies of fear and fascination that arise at the limits of the known.

Sabbath

Witches rarely worked alone. The harmful magical practices (maleficium) associated with "witchcraft" were defined not simply by their evil intentions; they were secret acts and abilities learned and used in allegiance to the devil. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, authors in Central and Western Europe described magical practitioners as initiates in a cultlike, heretical conspiracy to undermine society on behalf of their diabolic chief.

These fears crystallized in notions of the "sabbath": a nocturnal ceremony in a hidden location where witches were believed to gather for night flights, ritual meals, satanic masses, dances, and orgies. These imagined activities often directly inverted Christian social and religious customs.

Artists began portraying the sabbath in the later sixteenth century, informed by a preexisting visual vocabulary of witches. They frequently contrasted these scenes of female community with traditional codes of domestic life, reflecting an understanding of women as especially susceptible to demonic deception and corruption and of female sexuality as a form of sinful "knowledge" that the devil exercised through the flesh. Engaging with such themes of sexual temptation, restraint, and control, male artists accentuated sensual details associated with feminized bodies to suggest the dangerous enchantment of witchcraft and to engage the beholder in subversive viewing.

Hans Baldung (called Hans Baldung Grien)
German, 1484–1545

Witches' Sabbath, 1510
Chiaroscuro woodcut, printed in black and gray-green inks

Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, Museum purchase, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Art Trust Fund, Ludwig A. Emge Fund, and Gift of Ruth Haas Lilienthal, 1984.1.111

Cooking pots and carving forks, sausages and bones, all mark an ominous meal—and in many respects, an inversion of the Christian Mass. Instead of a male priest administering the eucharistic bread and wine, female witches collectively command a vessel banded with pseudo-Hebraic script, reflecting anxieties that linked local Jewish populations and gatherings of women to heretical conspiracies.

Extremely influential in its time, this print remains emblematic of the Northern Renaissance fascination with witchcraft. Baldung employed the new "chiaroscuro woodcut" technique, successively printing in several colors to achieve the rich dimensionality of contoured flesh and curling smoke against the black forest night. The witch flying backward on a goat cites an engraving from about 1500 by the artist's teacher, Albrecht Dürer.

Inset image: https://www.nga.gov/artworks/6674-witch-riding-goat

Albrecht Dürer
German, 1471–1528

The Four Witches, 1497
Engraving

Cantor Arts Center, Alice Meyer Buck Fund, 1981.55

Dangerous secrecy pervades this early engraving by Albrecht Dürer. A mysterious rite unfolds in a tiny chamber as four naked women encircle a human skull that rests on the floor. One wears a laurel wreath, alluding to figures of classical mythology such as the Graces or even Venus, the goddess of love and sex. However, any viewer tempted to seek their gaze finds it returned only by a devil lurking in the flaming doorway at left: a visual trap likely related to published warnings against the diabolical potential of female sexuality. Scholars remain uncertain about the mysterious hanging orb, which bears initials that may even reference a protective prayer. The closed ring of bodies enhances a sense of inaccessible yet organized diabolical knowledge, paving the way for the more sensationalistic witchcraft scenes of Dürer's student, Hans Baldung Grien.

Dominique Vivant Denon
French, 1747–1825
After a painting by David Teniers II
Flemish, 1610–1690

Witches' Initiation, 18th century
Etching

Cantor Arts Center, Gift of William Drummond, 1988.117

Skull-faced and bird-beaked demons offer torchlight to two witches who pore over a grimoire. The elder and younger women exchange knowing smiles, suggesting secrets shared among intimates. At right, the demons help a naked witch mount her broom to enact the night flight of sabbath mythology. They direct her up the chimney beneath a mantle that bears the "hand of glory," a magic candle crafted from an executed person's corpse—a popular motif in such portrayals of the witches' kitchen.

David Teniers II honed his command of magical details in over thirty witchcraft paintings, including multiple variations on this scene. A century later, its enduring popularity inspired Dominique Vivant Denon to translate the dusky hues of the painted renditions into this monochrome etching. Scan the QR code to see one such painting in color.

QR code: https://collection.kunstsammlungenakademie.at/en/collection/item/1301/

Marcantonio Raimondo
Italian, c. 1480–c. 1534
or Agostino de' Musi (called Veneziano)
Italian, c. 1490–c. 1536

Lo Stregozzo* (The Witches' Procession), also known as *The Carcass, c. 1525, plate reworked 1857
Engraving

Cantor Arts Center, Gift of Theodore B. Donson and Marvel M. Griepp, Class of 1974, 2003.139

Beautiful nude men form an unlikely entourage for a diabolical procession as they bear their witch-queen, enthroned on a curling skeleton, through tall swamp grass. The precise meaning and authorship of this well-known print remain debated. In details such as the infant-snatching hag, the composition may take inspiration from a 1523 account of a nocturnal procession of witches that culminated in the trial and execution of men and women in the town of Mirandola. The heroic male figures depart from sabbath tropes emphasizing the primarily female makeup of witch societies. To sixteenth-century viewers, the old woman's sexually charged dominance over such strapping young men would have announced a corruption of nature's divine order, a theme, echoed in the fantastic combinations of mismatched animal parts below.

Jean Crépy
French, c. 1660–1739

***Description de l'assemblée des sorciers qu'on appelle sabbat* (Description of the assembly of sorcerers called the sabbath)**, 18th century
Engraving

Pasted into Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons* (On the Inconstancy of Witches), Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1613

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, BF1565 L36 1612 248846

In 1606, the royal magistrate Pierre de Lancre investigated recent witchcraft allegations on behalf of the French king. His findings resulted in many executions as well as this demonological treatise. While some editions included a famous illustration of a witches' sabbath by Jan Ziarnko (see reference image to the right of the book), someone has incorporated into this one a rare foldout that directly parodies the original diabolical scene. The inserted image comes from Laurent Bordelon's satirical novel *A History of the Ridiculous Extravagancies of Monsieur Oufle* (1710), whose protagonist—an anagram of the French word for "folly"—gullibly believes in witchcraft. Here, the elements of the fearsome sabbath—night flights, orgiastic dancing, a cannibalistic meal, and even an enthroned demon—become an absurd spectacle, observed by Oufle and a fool at left. The composition reflects an emerging Enlightenment view of the sabbath as the effect of a superstitious imagination rather than a threatening reality, while demonstrating the enduring resonance of its artistic portrayals.

Jan Ziarnko
Polish, c. 1575–1630

Reference image of *Description et Figure du Sabbat des Sorciers* (Description and figure of the witches' sabbath)

Spell

Both in its sources and applications, magical knowledge traversed the spheres of the learned and the local, the intellectual and the everyday. Myriad practitioners tapped into nature's secrets using verbal utterances and physical gestures, texts and diagrams, and crafted objects.

Sometimes funded by noble patrons, occult natural philosophers integrated magic into their scholarship, looking to ancient Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Artists reinforced the authority of classical mythology by depicting sorceresses such as Circe and Medea to suggest dangerous ties between femininity and magical power.

Despite many distinctions drawn between the "learned" magician and the "popular" cunning person, the boundary between them was fluid. People turned to local cunning folk to resurface lost items, heal ailments, promote luck or love, and defend against misfortune or even witchcraft itself. These everyday customs often drew from intellectual discourses of the occult, which circulated widely in vernacular printed texts. Likewise, folk magic did not reside firmly outside of established religion, as those spells and items often incorporated Christian elements. Belief in the shaping of the universe by invisible forces left a tangible legacy in objects such as grimoires (handbooks of magic), amulets, and charms.

Jan van de Velde II
Dutch, c. 1593–1641

The Sorceress, 1626
Engraving

Cantor Arts Center, Robert E. and Mary B. P. Gross Fund, 2005.16

A company of merry monsters all smoke, gamble, and guzzle around an unnamed sorceress's cauldron. Flashes of supernatural light reveal their unsavory activities and merge with her magical spells: a glittering substance pours from her cornucopia to meet a shower of white sparks arcing from the tobacco pipes clenched in a tumbling demon's rear end. Although this gathering resembles sabbath scenes, it is more of a moral commentary than a serious portrayal of black magic. Its Latin inscription advises against the deceptive evils of unchecked desire, and the monsters' indulgences evoke seventeenth-century Dutch tavern scenes that mocked bad habits like drinking and gambling. The sorceress's magical powers embody the bewitching potential of such vices to lure unsuspecting viewers into spiritual darkness.

Giulio Bonasone
Italian, c. 1530–1576
After a drawing by Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola (called Parmigianino)
Italian, 1503–1540

Circe Drinking from a Cup with the Companions of Ulysses, 16th century
Engraving

Cantor Arts Center, Robert M. Loeser Collection, 1944.2.117

This engraving reproduces one of the Italian painter Parmigianino's drawings of the enchantress Circe, as described in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. When the hero, Ulysses, and his crew encounter Circe, she tricks them into consuming a potion that transforms them into beasts. Here, she has already offered her poison cup and calmly sips from it as they transfigure, mocking their horror with quiet control. For some sixteenth-century viewers, this lone woman's transformative power over a boatload of men would have tapped into fears around female-dominated witchcraft's potential to seduce and corrupt.

Louis Desplaces
French, 1682–1739
After a design by Charles-François Silvestre
French, 1667–1738

Jason and Medea, c. 1720
Etching and engraving

Cantor Arts Center, Robert E. and Mary B. P. Gross Fund, 2007.15

Like her aunt Circe, Medea was a sorceress from classical literature. She remained popular in the French cultural imagination well into the eighteenth century. In this scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medea agrees to magically rejuvenate Aeson, the aging father of her lover, Jason. This print shows the moment when Medea forbids Jason to watch her work. As he turns away, he becomes a mirror image of his father, while frenzied demons approach the sorceress from the left. The creatures' wildness foreshadows the story's conclusion, in which Medea punishes Jason for leaving her by fatally turning her magic on their sons.

Magic roll with prayers and formulas, symbols, and seals for rituals (grimoire), southern Germany or Austria, c. 1790
Red and black ink on paper; leather case

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, MS2354

Amulet, southern Germany or Austria, probably 18th century
Brown ink on paper

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, MISC 2764

These two eighteenth-century amulets reflect the enduring role of folk magic in warding off evil. Their effectiveness was anchored to premodern belief in the real protective power of words—whether written, spoken, or worn on the body. Filled with prayers alongside efficacious names and powerful symbols, the two objects in the case at left were believed to shield their owners from many types of misfortune.

The long roll was made to be worn and carried in its compact case. Its inscriptions in red and black ink include unofficial prayers and magical seals invoking Christ's wounds and divine names, while various signs further safeguarded from evil and demonic forces, murderers, weapons, illness, and difficult childbirth: everyday dangers believed to be influenced by malevolent supernatural power.

The circular amulet was designed to guard specifically against the bad weather often viewed as a key manifestation of local witchcraft. Its spiraling configuration of blessings and invocations calls upon Christ, Mary, the Three Magi, and even names of God associated with Jewish mysticism. Amulets like this were commonly hung in homes or field chapels, sometimes alongside relic to strengthen their power.

These amulets show how folk magic—far from being external to mainstream religion—remained deeply intertwined with Christian belief.

Bellarmine Jug, Germany, late 17th century
Salt-glazed stoneware

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of the Museum Society through the Julius Landauer Estate, 1985.53.8

Nicknamed “baartman” (bearded man) for their anthropomorphic round bodies and embossed male faces, stoneware jugs of this type were exported from the western German Rhineland to England and its North American colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cunning folk sometimes repurposed them as “witch bottles”—magical objects filled with potent materials like urine, hair, twigs, nail clippings, or pins (like those shown)—that could be placed within walls or floors for magical protection against malevolent witchcraft.

Thomas Cross
English, active 1645–85

Frontispiece to James Primrose, *Popular errours, Or the Errours of the people in the matter of Physick* [. . .], London: W. Wilson, 1651
Engraving

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, R729.9.P75 1651

Early modern health care depended much on the traditional knowledge of women and cunning folk. As medical institutions emerged, however, some authorities characterized these healers as charlatans, or even prosecuted them alongside people accused of witchcraft. The Oxford physician James Primrose (c. 1600-1659) stressed this separation between learned medicine and female-dominated healing arts in the illustrated frontispiece for his book *Popular errours* (1651). An angel restrains a woman healer from a patient's bedside, presenting in her place a male doctor and stating, in Latin (the language of learned medicine): "Entrust your sick body to a faithful physician." The accompanying poem decries her traditional remedies. In reality, such popular healing customs and the treatments offered by physicians often deeply informed one another.

Jacques Callot
French, 1592–1635

Frontispiece, from the series *Sacra cosmologia* (Sacred cosmology), 1630
Etching

Cantor Arts Center, Gift of Andrea Rothe and Jeanne McKee Rothe, 2015.52

Learned masters gather around an armillary sphere in this frontispiece to *Sacra cosmologia*, a 17th-century encyclopedia by the Jesuit Caspar Ruthard. Its chapters chart the cosmos—from plants and metals to mankind and the heavens. The central tablet bears a biblical verse underscoring humanity's limited knowledge of divine creation, stating, "No man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end."

The surrounding figures represent this knowledge via occult and philosophical traditions. At center left, a man holds books, a crown, and a basilisk, evoking alchemy and astrology; to his right, another holds an hourglass and fire, symbolizing magic. The two flanking figures bear geometric representations of mathematics. At far right, a Cabbalist performs necromancy with a human bone, inscribing a tablet with esoteric formulas. The men's honorific staging around a celestial model in an Edenic landscape contrasts with the private, dark interiors common to witchcraft scenes, where community and conspiracy merge.

Bartolomeo Guidobono
Italian, 1654–1709

The Sorceress, c. 1690
Oil on canvas

Cantor Arts Center, Alice Meyer Buck Fund, 1980.200

Bathed in the shadows of her darkened lair and the glow of her cauldron's fire, a sorceress works with an array of beasts, bodies, and tools, while the pages of her grimoire flutter under her spell. Through combined references to the classical sorceresses Medea and Circe, the Bartolomeo Guidobono forges a multifaceted embodiment of female power through magical prowess. The dog, gazelle, and fox suggest Circe's penchant for transforming humans into animals, and the male figures flanking the sorceress may represent the elderly Aeson before and after his rejuvenation by Medea. The tablescape of contemporary instruments—including alchemical tools and an armillary sphere (the latter also anchoring the collective of masters in Callot's print at right)—characterizes her as a learned magician of the highest order, commanding the proprietary equipment of scholarly occult practice. Her confident wielding of both the wand and the book echoes the artistry of Guidobono himself, who merges intellectual study and physical command of the brush to transform natural materials into the extraordinary.

Artist unknown

Illustration for Adam Lonicer, *Kreuterbüch* (Herbal), Frankfurt: Egenolff, 1557
Woodcut

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, QK99 .A1 L66 1557 F

Herbal knowledge was an important facet of magical practice. While cunning folk often relied on oral traditions, some also referenced books of medicinal plants printed in their local language. This luxurious example by the German polymath Adam Lonicer covers not just flora but the entire natural world. Among the several species discussed on this page is Saint John's wort, whose uses included warding off witches and caring for wounds. Its botanical name, *Hypericum*, comes from the Greek phrase *hyper eikon*, "above pictures," perhaps alluding to its function in repelling evil spirits from shrines—a possibility Lonicer supports with the additional Latin name *fuga daemonum*, "demon flight." The handwritten Christian prayers and medical instructions demonstrate the book's heavy use, as well as the overlapping of the religious and arcane in early modern healing.

Stranger

Core to the conception of magic in the Western world—and pervading art and literature on the topic as far back as antiquity—is its association with outsiders. The word "magic" even derives from *mageia*, the term used among the ancient Greeks to refer to the priests of their foreign rivals, the Persians.

Similarly, during European imperial expansion, magic became a lens through which continental observers interpreted unfamiliar cultures and, in turn, justified their own colonial aspirations. Customs among peoples of the New World were often equated to forms of devil worship or idolatry. Such stereotypes intersected with those applied more locally to Muslim, Jewish, and other non-Christian groups.

Witchcraft was thus perceived as at once an internal and an external threat, and the witch or sorcerer as a stranger warranting vigilance both within European communities and in encounters with foreign cultures. In addition to conventional, localized imagery of the magician or witch, Early modern artists sometimes tended to represent them as exotic Others engaged in mysterious and obscure rituals, thereby staging the viewer's experience as one of cultural estrangement. Artists and writers thus eagerly sensationalized the foreign magical practitioner, relishing the imaginative opportunities embodied by this entirely invented Other.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
Italian, 1727–1804

Magician Pointing Out a Burning Head to Two Youths, from the series *Scherzi di Fantasia* (Jokes or play of fantasy), c. 1735–40
Etching

Cantor Arts Center, Mortimer C. Leventritt Fund, 1972.34

A crowd looks on in a ruinous setting as youths assist an old man, dressed in robes and a turban is assisted in performing a ritual over a severed head that burns on a pyre. This scene belongs Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *Scherzi di Fantasia*, meaning "Jokes or play of fantasy"—a series of enigmatic etchings whose meanings are deliberately left open to interpretation. Multiple plates include figures in Eastern garb engaged in mysterious occult activities, rendered with a sense of whimsical ambiguity.

Tiepolo's project reflects the eighteenth-century European fascination with magic and superstition as embodied by the imagined, exoticized "Turk." Here, his treatment of this figure incorporates allusions to ancient Egyptian gnostic rites alongside magical animals like the human-faced cat and owl—the latter an early modern symbol of both knowledge and folly. The Eastern magus personifies restricted, potentially demonic knowledge, an irrational counterpoint to Enlightenment ideals of reason.

Theodor de Bry
Flemish, 1528–1598
After a watercolor by John White
English, c. 1540–1593

***Praestigiator* (Conjurer)**, 1590
Hand-colored engraving

From the Latin edition of Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia*, Frankfurt: Johann Wechel, 1590

Cantor Arts Center, Elizabeth and Leonard Offield Art Fund, 2025.46

As part of the 1585 English settler-colonial project on Roanoke Island (now North Carolina), the naturalist Thomas Harriot published an account of the region and its Indigenous peoples. Having never visited America, illustrator Theodor de Bry based his engravings on original watercolors from the expedition—including this image of an Algonquian healer and keeper of sacred knowledge, performing a ritual dance in a bird headdress and wearing a belt. Although labeled the "Flyer" in the original watercolors, De Bry renamed him "Praestigiator" in the Latin edition on view, or "Conjurer" in the original English, signaling a practitioner of deceitful, demonic magic. The text describes "conjurers or jugglers which use strange gestures, and often contrary to nature, in their enchantments: For they be familiar with devils." Harriot's so-called *True Report* in fact appropriates vocabularies of witchcraft familiar to European audiences, here projected onto a foreign, non-Christian culture.

Candice Lin
American, born 1979

Sycorax's Collection (Herbarium), 2011
Unique etching, watercolor, ink and magazine collage, dried herbs

Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles and New York

A witch stands in her garden, draped with cats and dried plants. She is Sycorax, from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest,* as imagined by the contemporary artist Candice Lin. Exiled for sorcery to an enchanted island, the "damned witch" Sycorax births the monster Caliban and dies. Prospero, a noble Milanese magician, later seizes the island and enslaves Caliban: a character regarded today as a symbol of Native people subjugated by European colonizers.

Here, Lin resurrects the absent Sycorax as an herbalist. The artist cites uses and abuses of plants in the struggles of enslaved and colonized peoples, as well as Europeans persecuted for witchcraft. Sycorax brandishes scrotal sacks containing magical botanicals, surrounded by plants known to induce abortion. These elements recall historical portrayals of witches who seizing and consuming male genitalia: a matrix of indigenous wildness reclaiming control over conquered bodies, extracted knowledge, and stolen land.

Suspicion

Witches shifted shape over the early modern period, conjured in and out of reality by the artists, authors, and accusers who described them. The 1486 treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*) positioned witchcraft as a multifaceted crime that could be tried in court, delineating the "evidence" required to identify, prosecute, and punish it. This text inspired many others that circulated widely in print, adapted to regionally specific concerns and beliefs. Anyone could be suspected of witchcraft, but women were disproportionately targeted, as these sources emphasized their unique susceptibility to demonic control.

This growing literature fueled trials across Europe and its colonies, peaking between 1550 and 1660 with the execution of around fifty thousand people. Over time, however, suspicion fell on demonology itself. Witchcraft became a site for broader philosophical debates around approaches to nature and religion, and legal reforms gradually brought the trials to an end.

Witchcraft and magic persisted in capturing interest across a wide array of eighteenth-century artistic genres, from fantasy to social critique. And this long history endures today. Early modern magical bodies, stories, and crafts resurface both on and off the printed page, as artists continue to wield creative power as another cunning way to know the world.

Heinrich Kramer
German, c. 1430-1505
Possibly with Jacob Sprenger
Swiss, c. 1436-1495

***Mallevs maleficarvm* (The Hammer of Witches)**, Cologne: Johann Gymnich, 1520
Printed book

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, BF1569.A2 I5 1520 T

Written by Heinrich Krämer, possibly with the collaboration of his fellow inquisitor Jacob Sprenger, The *Mallevs maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) became the most influential book on diabolic witchcraft in early modern Europe. It first appeared in print around 1486–87 following Pope Innocent VIII's papal bull declaring witchcraft a form of demonic heresy. The *Mallevs* codified the persecution of witches by detailing their supposed powers and outlining how to identify, try, and torture them. It notoriously emphasized that women were more prone to demonic corruption due to their moral weakness.

Artist unknown

Illustration for Ralph Gardiner, *Englands Grievance discovered, In relation to the coal-trade* [. . .], London R. Ibbitson & P. Stent, 1655
Engraving

Courtesy of Sutro Library, California State Library, HD9551.8.N35 G2 1655

Responses to witch trials reflected locally-specific circumstances along legal, political, and cultural lines. In this Newcastle brewer's published complaint against local authorities, recent trials serve as examples of poor governance. It reports that magistrates hired a fraudulent "witch finder" to extract confessions via physical ordeals: "a Scotch-man who pretended knowledge to find witches by pricking them with pins, paid twenty shillings apiece for all he could condemn." Later exposed, "upon the Gallows [he] confessed that he had been the death of two hundred twenty women." In the illustration on view, the man accepts money while four women hang.

William Faithorne
English, c. 1616–1691

Frontispiece to Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus triumphatus* [. . .], London: Roger Tuckyr, 1700
Engraving

Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford Libraries, BF1581 .G54 1700

Concerned that a declining belief in spirits and witchcraft would promote atheism, the clergyman Joseph Glanvill sought to quell disputes as to whether "witches and apparitions" truly existed or were simply "melancholic dreams." The frontispiece to his treatise merges religious and contemporary visual narratives, reflecting Glanvill's desire to prove his points through a blend of case histories, eyewitness reports, and scriptural citation. The left-hand page shows a scene with the Witch of Endor, an Old Testament figure viewed as biblical evidence for witchcraft. At right, six vignettes illustrate recent supernatural events, from hauntings and celestial apparitions to episodes of levitation, demonic possession, and gatherings of witches.

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo
Italian, 1727–1804

Woman with Distaff and Sleeping Figure, c. 1790
Pen and wash in brown ink over black chalk

Cantor Arts Center, Gift of Mortimer C. Leventritt, 1941.279

A young woman in peasant dress looms over a man lying at her feet in this ominously inscrutable ink drawing by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. The man seems to raise an arm in confusion or defense as she dangles a thread from her distaff (a stick for spinning wool). We see only the woman's back, as though glimpsing a secret, intimate encounter. Tiepolo does not directly allude to witchcraft here. Rather, he weaves in elements suggestive of supernatural forces that circulated in pastoral prints of the previous century. This composition of a man prostrated in bewitchment has Renaissance predecessors, and the distaff also commonly evoked transgressive female power, whether in earlier depictions of the Three Fates, of wives dominating their husbands, or of the entrapments of erotic desire. This one floats in midair, further hinting at an act of supernatural enchantment.

Esprit-Antoine Gibelin
French, 1739–1813

Bacchanalian Dance, 1775–90
Pen and ink with gray-brown wash over faint graphite

Cantor Arts Center, Museum Purchase Fund, 1969.201

Men and women in pagan dress clasp hands and dance around a maypole, silhouetted by ritual bonfire. The classical architecture, swirling smoke, and undulating garments evoke orgiastic rites performed in devotion to Bacchus, the classical god of wine and transformation. Esprit-Antoine Gibelin trained in Rome and was a published connoisseur of the antique; however, while this drawing is titled *Bacchanalian Dance*, it never directly alludes to any specific aspect of Classical culture. The central maypole is of Germanic origin and blends ancient mythology with folk traditions. The dancer's circular movements evoke both maypole traditions as well as "round dances" that were ubiquitous to early modern descriptions of witches' sabbaths. This merging of classical and popular folk imagery reveals the shared borderline between demonic and pagan visual imaginaries.

“Witchcraft discovered and punished [...], 1682
Performed and recorded by Leslie Lancaster Allison
Runtime: 8:30 min.

“Damnable Practises of three Lincolneshire Witches” […], 1619
Performed and recorded by Leslie Lancaster Allison
Runtime: 9:00 min.

Early modern printed broadsides disseminated stories of magic and witchcraft—not just through text and image, but also through music. In these inexpensive prints, current events took the form of ballads set to familiar tunes, sometimes accompanied by illustrations. They were sold by street peddlers who frequently performed the songs aloud, further widening the audience to include those who could not read.

One of the two English songs here tells of Joan Flower and her daughters, servants to an earl. Accused of using witchcraft to kill his two young heirs, they were executed in 1619. The other describes the conviction and punishment of three women for witchcraft at Exeter.

Image: https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/execution-ballads/items/show/1217

Image: https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/execution-ballads/items/show/876

Sunny A. Smith
American, b. 1972

Salem Witch Bureau, 2023
White oak, maple, black walnut, eastern white pine, and brass with linen, wool, wax, dust, and iron ritual objects inside

Courtesy of the artist

Sunny A. Smith descends from participants in the witch trials infamously held at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. This bureau reproduces a chest of drawers from that period, which belonged to Smith's family. An ancestor identified it as "the witch Bureau, from the middle drawer of which one of the witches jumped out who was hung on Gallows Hill, in Salem." Smith worked with an early furniture expert to grow the "witch bureau" into a doorway large enough for a person to pass through—a transitional space of both refuge and revelation, disappearance and exposure.

In 2025, Smith invited fellow contemporary American artist Rachel Howe—a descendent of Elizabeth Howe, who was executed at Salem—to help "consecrate" the witch bureau. They ceremonially passed through its doors to inaugurate a visionary journey centered on personal connections to the object's history, invoking its role as a "portal for transformation and speaking with ancestors . . . opening up possibilities for repair in the lineages" of Salem's violent past. Inside the bureau, a chain of twill and wax seals maps Smith and Howe's interwoven ancestral lines, joining an amulet reminiscent of the practices of cunning folk.

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
Spanish, 1746–1828

***Linda Maestra!* (Pretty Teacher!)**, plate 68 from the series *Los Caprichos* (The Caprices), 1797–98, printed c. 1900
Etching and aquatint

Cantor Arts Center, Gift of Mortimer C. Leventritt, 1941.1017.37

Under an owl's watchful eye, two nude women shoot into the night sky astride a broomstick, the younger rider gripping her older guide. This is the sixty-eighth print in Francisco de Goya y Lucientes's *Caprichos* (*Caprices*), a series of eighty satirical etchings. Each attaches an obscure, mocking title to a fantastical scene to critique superstition and perceived abuses of political and religious power in Spain.

Here, the caption "linda maestra" (pretty teacher) speaks in sarcastic terms to the mentorship between the crone and her acolyte. Goya emphasizes the sexual associations of broom-flying, a fundamental witchcraft trope since at least the fifteenth century. The owl references a slang word for a prostitute, reframing "teaching" as a corrupting form of sexual initiation. Goya uses the historically subversive power of the witch's body as a metaphor for the anxieties and upheavals lurking beneath the new age of "reason" in which he lived

Isabelle Albuquerque
American, b. 1981

Orgy for Ten People in One Body #9, 2021
Bronze with ash patina, straw broom, and wedding ring

Craig Robins Collection, Miami

A naked, headless woman mounts her commercial broomstick, poised to take flight in the manner of history's witches. This sculpture belongs to the ten-part series *Orgy for Ten People in One Body,* in which Isabelle Albuquerque casts her own physique as the collective avatars of embodied experiences like sex, transformation, and death. While her earthbound, decapitated state might summon past persecution, her defiantly ecstatic pose and contemporary broom summon cycles of renewal and persistence that many artists continue to locate in figures of witchcraft across time. Indeed, Albuquerque developed the green-gold bronze patina—which she describes as "wicked, alien, other"—by repeatedly stripping the metal, prompting acts of alchemical violence to generate luminous flesh. The formula also contains ash from the remnants of her family home in Southern California, lost to wildfire, to "strengthen the shadows" across her body, rendering it a permanent vehicle of darkness and reflection, loss and light.