

# Feminine power: the divine to the demonic

19 May – 25 September 2022

The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery

Supported by Citi

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The first major exhibition to explore female spiritual beings in world belief and mythological traditions around the globe, **The Citi exhibition *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*** opens at the British Museum on 19 May 2022.

This exhibition brings together ancient sculpture, sacred artifacts and contemporary art from six continents to explore the diversity of ways in which femininity has been perceived across the globe, from the ancient world to today. It explores the embodiment of feminine power in deities, goddesses, demons, saints and other spiritual beings, associated with diverse areas of human experience, from wisdom, passion and nature, to war, mercy and justice.

**For the first time, the British Museum has invited special guest contributors to respond to the themes in the exhibition**, sharing their personal and professional viewpoints. The video and audio thought-pieces addressing each section will encourage discussion around the universal themes of the show. The contributions will conclude the exhibition alongside an area for visitors to share their responses as part of the conversation.

The special guest contributors include: **Bonnie Greer**, OBE, playwright, author, presenter of the podcast “In Search of Black History” and former Deputy Chair of the British Museum, will reflect on ***Forces of Nature***; **Professor Mary Beard**, classicist, author and broadcaster will speak to ***Passion and Desire***; award-winning writer and presenter of the podcast *How To Fail*, **Elizabeth Day**, will explore ***Magic and Malice***; former British Army Major and human rights lawyer, **Rabia Siddique**, will share her thoughts on ***Justice and Defence***; and **Deborah Frances-White**, the writer and comedian best known for her podcast *The Guilty Feminist*, will explore the theme of ***Compassion and Salvation***.

Objects from cultures across the globe are displayed together for the first time including painted scrolls from Tibet, Roman sculpture, intricate personal amulets from Egypt, vibrant Japanese prints and Indian relief carvings alongside contemporary sculptures. The exhibition features over 80 unique and spectacular objects, drawn from the British Museum’s world-class collection complimented by spectacular loans.

The exhibition will go on an international tour later in the year starting at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra before being shown at five venues in Spain in partnership with Fundación Bancaria La Caixa.

**A new icon of the Hindu goddess Kali** by Bengali artist, Kaushik Ghosh, commissioned especially for the exhibition and is the first contemporary 3D representation of Kali in the collection. As one of the most prominent and widely venerated goddesses in India, this devotional image of Kali reflects the living tradition of her worship, important for millions of Hindus around the world today. Commissioned especially for the exhibition, together with the

Loved and feared for her formidable power and aggression, Kali is the goddess of destruction and salvation, who transcends time and death, destroys ignorance and guides her followers to enlightenment. Although superficially terrifying, the bloodied heads that she wears and carries represent her power to destroy the ego, setting her followers free from worldly concerns, and the belt of severed arms signifies that she liberates them from the cycle of death and rebirth, by the many weapons she wields.

Since the late first millennium AD, **Lilith** has been known within Jewish demonology as the first wife of Adam and the consort of Satan. Her origins are thought to lie in Mesopotamian demons. The exhibition will include a ceramic incantation bowl from 500-800 AD Iraq, featuring a rare early image of Lilith in female form. Buried upside down under the thresholds of houses these bowls were inscribed with charms to protect the named patrons from demonic forces and regularly name Lilith; sometimes as grammatically singular and feminine, but also masculine or plural.

In the nineteenth century, Lilith's cultural relevance grew to embody defiance of patriarchal moral expectations. On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is the sculpture, *Lilith* (1994), by American artist Kiki Smith. Smith's sculpture is cast from the body of a real woman, her piercing eyes of blue glass directly confront the viewer as she crouches on all fours against the wall, her anatomy hidden preventing a voyeuristic view of her body. This vision of Lilith is both defiant and unnerving, possessing an intangible quality, acknowledging her shifting identity through time.

**Kiki Smith said**, "Lilith becomes this disembodied spirit that goes off and wreaks havoc and doesn't want to be subjugated. Here she is transcending gravity and the constraints of her body."

"Through material culture this exhibition explores how the representation of feminine power in world belief and mythology has played – and continues to play – an important role in shaping global cultural attitudes towards women and gender identity."

**Belinda Crerar, Curator, British Museum**, said "This exhibition is a tour through history and around the world to see the different ways that female power and authority

have been perceived in spiritual belief. The diversity of these goddesses, spirits, enlightened beings and saints, and their profound influence in people's lives today and in the past, gives us pause to reflect on how femininity – and indeed masculinity – are defined and valued now and in the future.”

**Muriel Gray, Deputy Chair of Trustees of the British Museum**, said ‘**The Citi exhibition *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*** is brimming with magic, wisdom, fury and passion. I am very proud that through the breadth and depth of the British Museum’s collection, alongside special loans, we can tell such powerful and universal stories of faith and femininity from the most ancient cultures to living traditions around the world. I would like to thank Citi, whose on-going support has allowed the Museum to realise this ground-breaking exhibition.’

**James Bardrick, Citi Country Officer, United Kingdom** says: “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. To drive that message of equality and the power and influence of women over time, we are delighted to see the Museum use 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.”

“Following the display at the British Museum, the exhibition will be seen internationally, starting at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. It will then travel to on a five-venue tour of Spain in partnership with Fundación Bancaria La Caixa until 2025. Both international partners have long-standing relationships with the Museum, having collaborated on previous exhibition projects.”

**National Museum of Australia director, Dr Mathew Trinca** said, “I am excited to bring such a fascinating show to the country in December 2022, with Canberra as the only Australian venue.”

“Australian audiences will be fascinated by this show which melds historic and contemporary reflections on feminine power – the exhibition is the fifth in a series of British Museum exhibitions that have featured at the National Museum of Australia, and builds on our strong partnership.”

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## Notes to Editors

The Citi exhibition *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic* runs from 19 May to 25 September 2022 in The Joseph Hotung Great Courty Gallery at the British Museum.

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Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 80 mins before closing.

Tickets £15, under 16s free and concessions and group rates available.

[britishmuseum.org/feminine-power](http://britishmuseum.org/feminine-power)  
+44 (0)20 7323 8181

A full public programme of events will accompany the exhibition. More information will be available soon.

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*, written by Belinda Crerar, will be published by the British Museum Press in May 2022. Paperback, £30, ISBN 9780714151304

For young readers, a fascinating and empowering introduction to 50 female figures from around the globe, *Goddess: 50 Goddesses, Spirits, Saints and Other Female Figures Who Have Shaped Belief*, written by Janina Ramirez and illustrated by Sarah Walsh, is published by Nosy Crow in collaboration with the British Museum. Reading age 9+, Hardback, £16.99, ISBN 9781788009959.

For more information on the books please contact:

Toni Allum [tallum@britishmuseum.org](mailto:tallum@britishmuseum.org)

#### **For further information**

Contact the Communications team on

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**High resolution images and caption sheet available at <https://tinyurl.com/yckvas2b>**

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#### **Contributor biographies**

**Bonnie Greer, OBE**, is a playwright and author. She has had over a dozen plays produced on BBC Radio, a short film for BBC 2, and co-produced, wrote and presented the documentary *Black art in the West: Reflecting Skin* (2004) for the BBC. Her books include two novels, a memoir/music history *Obama Music* (2009), and her biography *Langston Hughes: The Value Of Contradiction* (2011). Bonnie has served on the boards of RADA, London Film School and Theatre Royal, Stratford East. She was a British Museum Trustee between 2005 and 2013 and was Deputy Chairman from 2009 to 2013. In collaboration with Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, she curated 'The Era of Reclamation', a series of conversations focused on the most vital issues facing museums and cultural spaces in the UK and globally.

**Mary Beard** is one of Britain's best-known Classicists. Professor at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Newnham College, she has written numerous books including the Wolfson Prize-winning *Pompeii*, the best-selling *SPQR* and the thought-provoking *Women & Power*. Mary is a regular media commentator, committed blogger and has made highly-acclaimed television documentaries on the Ancient world and co-presented the BBC's *Civilisations* series. She hosts the television arts show, *Inside Culture* and her recent BBC documentaries, *Mary Beard's Forbidden Art* attest to her ability to tackle challenging issues head on. Mary was awarded an OBE in 2013 for services to Classical scholarship and then made a Dame in 2018. Other accolades include the J.Paul Getty Medal, Fellow of the British

Academy and Trustee of the British Museum. Her latest book is *Twelve Caesars – Images of Power from the Ancient World to the Modern*.

**Elizabeth Day** is an award-winning author and broadcaster. Her chart-topping podcast, *How To Fail*, is a celebration of the things that haven't gone right. Her latest novel *Magpie*, was published in the UK in September 2021 and will be published by Simon & Schuster in America in Spring 2022.

As a journalist, Elizabeth has been a weekly columnist for *You* magazine on the Mail on Sunday, a contributing editor for *Harper's Bazaar* and a feature writer for numerous publications in the UK and US. Her broadcast work includes presenting on Radio 4's *Open Book* and *Sky Arts Book Club Live*. She was a judge for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2021, the chair of the BBC National Short Story Award 2022 and is the co-founder of *Pin Drop*, a live performance short story studio.

Elizabeth grew up in Northern Ireland and her first job was for *The Derry Journal*. She graduated from Cambridge University with a Double First in History.

**Rabia Siddique** is a former British Army officer, human rights advocate, multi-award winning storyteller and barrister specialising in war crimes, terrorism and human rights. Overcoming a terrifying hostage ordeal and childhood sexual abuse, Rabia has garnered global attention for standing up for justice in the face of public ridicule. In successfully suing the British Government for silencing her about a 2005 hostage ordeal it opened the floodgates for similar cases, heralding policy changes to deliver a fairer workplace for women and cultural minorities in the military and other areas of public life.

Author of the best-selling memoir, '*Equal Justice: My Journey as a Woman, a Soldier and a Muslim*', Rabia has been decorated by Queen Elizabeth II for her humanitarian work in Asia, South America, Europe and the Middle East.

Her greatest joy – being a Mother to her triplet sons – amplifies her drive to advocate for the most marginalised communities and show how values based leadership can foster peace, inclusion, diversity, equity and the sustainability of our planet. [www.rabiasiddique.com](http://www.rabiasiddique.com)

**Deborah Frances-White** is a comedian, podcaster and writer. Her podcast *The Guilty Feminist* has had 95 million downloads in five years becoming something of a cultural phenomenon. She has toured the show around the world and won the 2020 British Podcast Spotlight Award and the 2021 PodBible Award. Her live stand-up storytelling comedy shows have been featured as specials for the BBC on Radio 4 as part of her Writers Guild Award-Winning Series *Deborah Frances-White Rolls the Dice* and her follow up series *Deborah Frances-White Introduces*. Her book *The Guilty Feminist* is a Sunday Times Bestseller and Virago at Hachette has commissioned her new book – *Six Conversations We're Scared to Have*.

Deborah also works closely with *Choose Love* raising funds and awareness and is an official Amnesty International UK Ambassador. Deborah is touring the UK, Australia and New Zealand in 2022 with *The Guilty Feminist Live* show, and her new solo stand-up comedy show, about *Coming Out and Going In* will return to Soho Theatre in April, after its sell-out run in December.

Citi, the leading global bank, has approximately 200 million customer accounts and does business in more than 160 countries and jurisdictions. Citi provides consumers, corporations, governments and institutions with a broad range of financial products and services, including consumer banking and credit, corporate and investment banking, securities brokerage, transaction services, and wealth management.

The Citi exhibition series is a five year programme of support for major exhibitions at the British Museum. The series extends a relationship that started in 2012 with the support of the Citi Money Gallery and is a further commitment to supporting the important work that the museum undertakes. The series will be a fantastic opportunity to use the Museums truly global collection to explore a diverse range of subjects that bring historical context to contemporary themes. We are incredibly proud to partner with the British Museum and to support its role as a museum of the world, for the world. We value the fact that our support enables the museum to continue with its ground-breaking exhibitions and renowned education programmes.

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Follow updates on the exhibition via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram  
Use #FemininePowerExhibition and @britishmuseum

For more content about the Citi exhibition *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*, follow the British Museum blog at [blog.britishmuseum.org](http://blog.britishmuseum.org)