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is treasured

# Witches avant la lettre

26.10.21 - 24.04.22



# Welcome to the KBR museum !



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As part of the general museum itinerary, we are currently offering a themed focus called “*Witches avant la lettre*” to echo the *Witches* exhibition (27/10/21-16/01/22).

Around 40 of the 160 works on display shed light on this theme. This brochure aims to help you find them in the museum. It also provides a general framework and explains the purpose of this theme.

The items selected for the theme are indicated by numbered golden hourglasses in the display cases. The map in the centre of this booklet lists all the works and their locations in the museum.

Each manuscript on display is accompanied by a detailed explanation which is available on the tablets next to the display cases, using the bracelet you received at the entrance.

**“*Witches avant la lettre*” highlights an anachronism in our imaginations. Let’s start with a historical observation: the witch-hunt as we understand it today - the systematic persecution of women under the pretext that they were associating with the devil and performing obscure practices - is not a medieval reality.**

**I**n the Middle Ages, the crime of heresy was not mainly associated with women yet. Magic, considered a set of popular practices and beliefs with its superstitious rituals and appeals to supernatural forces, was part of everyday life. Depending on the context, it sometimes aroused unanimous confidence and sometimes distrust among the authorities.

The dark figure of the witch did not become established until the end of the 15th century, notably in response to

treatises on demonology aimed at recognising and physically eliminating witchcraft. The clerical dread of Satanist activities gradually increased, but it was not until the 16th century, with a peak in the 17th century, that the inquisitorial and secular jurisdictions conducted thousands of trials, most of them against women. Therefore, a vast number of women were burnt at the stake during the Renaissance, the so-called Modern Age, which nevertheless advocated humanism, reason and science. The

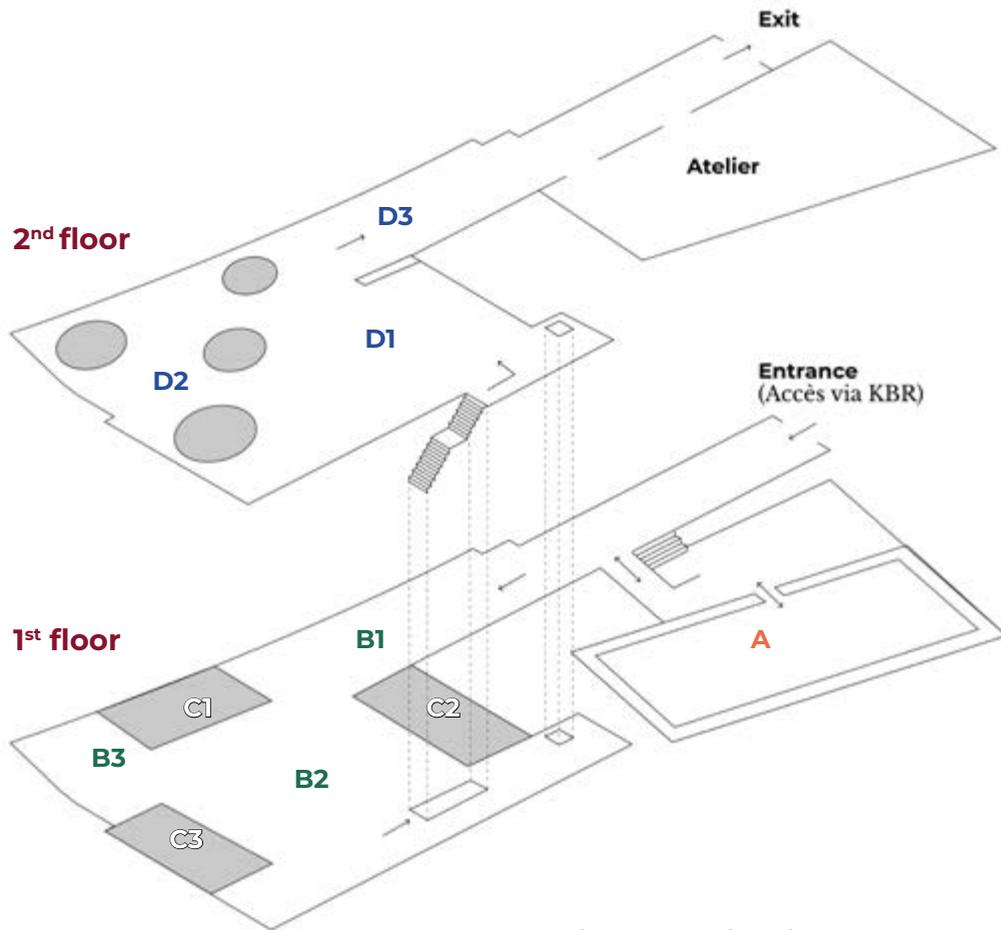
last embers did not die out in Europe until the 18th century.

The Middle Ages thus preceded the “witch hunt” and the litany of suspicions and prejudices that it would bring to bear on women, even long after it was over. The Burgundian manuscript collection, with its miniatures, stories and testimonies, offers a window into the way in which the female condition and magic were seen and experienced just before the dramatic increase in trials and convictions.

Witches “*avant la lettre*” because, “before time, in an avant-garde way, ahead of their time”, some women anticipated the struggles whose echoes can still be heard in current feminist ideals.

The selection of manuscripts provides a number of leads for investigating where the persecution of witches would take root. “*Avant la lettre*”, so before the final, definitive establishment of the stereotype. On this basis, an imagery was emerging that would ultimately affect the freedom of all women.

# Museum map



- A. The Nassau Chapel
- B. Creating a Manuscript
- C. The Burgundian Century
- D. The Library of the Dukes

## 1<sup>st</sup> floor:

1. Community of Beguines listening to Abbot Gilles Li Muisit - **A**
2. Saint Wilgefortis - **A**
3. Saint Barbara - **A**
4. Guillaume de Tignonville, *Moral Sayings of the Philosophers* - **B1**
5. The Virgin and Child Jesus writing on a scroll - **B2**
6. Work of the copyist Katherina van Ghiseghem - **B2**
7. Miniature added: the patron... - **B3**
8. Jacqueline of Bavaria - **C1**
9. Joanna, Duchess of Brabant - **C1**
10. *Invectives against the sect of Waldensians* - **C1**
11. Joan of Arc - **C1**
12. The fortune teller - **C1**
13. *Treaty against the Diviners* - **C1**
14. Christine de Pizan, *The City of Ladies* - **C2**
15. Jean Gerson, *Book of Spiritual Mendicancy* - **C2**
16. *The Misfortune of France* - **C2**
17. *One Hundred Merrie and Delightful Stories* - **C2**
18. Jean de Courcy, *Bouquechardière* - **C2**
19. Coat of arms of the inverted world - **C2**
20. Arms of Margaret of Burgundy - **C2**
21. Mustio, *Gynaecia* - **C3**
22. *History of the Good King Alexander* - **C3**
23. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose* - **C3**
24. Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica* - **C3**
25. *Book of simple medicine* - **C3**

## 2<sup>nd</sup> floor:

26. Rules of divination for predicting the future - **D1**
27. Antoine de la Sale, *La Salle: the Sybil* - **D1**
28. Christine de Pizan, *The City of Ladies* - **D1**
29. Christine de Pizan, *The Letter of Othea to Hector* - **D1**
30. *The Book of the Knight of the Landry Tower* - **D1**
31. Jean Wauquelin, *The Beautiful Helen of Constantinople* - **D1**
32. Christine de Pizan, *The book of the path of long study* - **D1**
33. *Debate on the Romance of the Rose* - **D1**
34. Boccaccio, *On Famous Women* - **D1**
35. Martin Le Franc, *The Champion of Women* - **D1**
36. Jean Wauquelin, *Chronicles of Hainaut* - **D2**
37. *Life of Christ* - **D3**
38. Saint Agnes in the *Golden Legend* - **D3**
39. Pious stories: miracle of the Virgin Mary - **D3**
40. Pontifical of the church of Sens - **D3**
41. *Mirror of Human Salvation* - **D3**

## The anxieties of a pivotal era

The repression of witchcraft, a dreaded heresy, affected both reputed witches and sorcerers in the 15th century. In the sky of the *Invectives against the sect of Waldensians* (no. 10), men and women are riding demons, flying to the Sabbath.

Fear of a satanic conspiracy increased at the end of the century, leading to the regulation of superstitious practices that had previously been rather vague. Thus, divination (nos. 13, 26) and cartomancy (nos. 12), whose practice was tolerated according to the manuscripts, were defined and condemned as they were now associated with the Devil. At the same time, the male prerogative of institutionalised science took back medical authority; mistrust of women who knew remedies and formulas for treatment became entrenched in society.

Religious, state and academic authorities progressively created the framework for witch-hunts, causing the loss of many social rights and lives.



Jean Tinctor, *Invectives against the sect of Waldensians*, Southern Netherlands (Bruges?), between 1460 and 1467 (ms 11209, fol. 3r); no. 10



*Book of simple medicine*, Southern Netherlands, 15th century (ms. IV 1024, fol. 30v); no. 25

## A mosaic to be recreated

The works on display highlight brilliant, strong, cultured, unexpected since sadly erased female figures. They lived in the Southern Netherlands before the flood of denunciations and trials. As many facets of a vast spectrum, they lived in communities within the beguinages (no. 1), worked and enjoyed relative independence (nos. 4, 40) and contributed as patrons to the flourishing of the arts. They engaged in battle and refused to play a secondary role in the political arena (nos. 8, 9, 10, 11, 23, 35). They held undisputed ancestral knowledge and were authorities on medical matters as healers and midwives (nos. 13, 16, 17). They commissioned, read and collected illuminated manuscripts (nos. 6, 7, 15, 18, 19, 20). They also wrote and painted (nos. 4 and 6). Of course, these privileges were not granted equally to all women, as social standing was always a major constraint. Portrayals of women from disadvantaged classes are rare and biased (no. 28).



Christine de Pizan, *The book of the City of Ladies*, France (Paris), 15th century (ms 9393, fol. 2v-3r); no. 28

**“For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.” - Virginia Woolf**

Archival records show the presence of female apprentices and practitioners registered with the guild of book professions. Female copyists rubbed shoulders with female parchment makers, illuminators (the word “enlumineresse” has been used in French since the 13th

century) and bookbinders. However, their work has largely remained in the shadows, with the exception of recent studies. If we list the long series of names attributed to “anonymous masters”, it is likely that many of them were actually “mistresses”.

## Prey and projections of the imagination

**F**ictional characters illustrate medieval portrayals of womanhood, in works mostly written by men. Some of these figures, endowed with varying degrees of supernatural powers, question the perception of women's power and bodies, with a mixture of fear and attraction, approval and control.

Sibyls, seers and sorceresses are ranked on the same level as biblical prophets (nos. 15, 25). Lives of saints portray the courage and martyrdom of women who refused to marry, with the help of sometimes spectacular magical occurrences, such as the appearance of life-saving body hair (nos. 2, 3, 32). The Virgin Mary, the incarnation of the mother (nos. 5, 34), is also presented as a goddess whose lactation is her superpower (no. 33), or as a warrior overcoming the devil (no. 34). In literature, the ancient mistresses of the art of potions, such as Circea and Medea, were sometimes portrayed positively and sometimes belittled (no. 31). Whether they were infernal or celestial deities (no. 8), their power was reflected in the myth.



Jacques de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, France, early 15<sup>th</sup> century (ms. 9228, fol. 48v Saint Agnes); no. 38



Christine de Pizan, *The Letter of Othea to Hector*, Southern Netherlands, ca. 1460 (ms 9392, fol. 20v); no. 29

**E**xamples of misogyny also abounded. Mocked and punished, women were the protagonists in many episodes of the One Hundred Merrie and Delightful Stories (no. 21). They were hairy and wild, appearing as animals in stories featuring the peoples of the East (no. 22). The nudity of their bodies betrays a gaze that subjugates, instrumentalises and dominates. The tragic fates of heroines in popular stories, such as *The Beautiful Helen of Constantinople* (no. 28) show the extent to which patriarchy ruled women's bodies and lives.

The tension around the role and status of women was such that it led to the first written literary debate in French-speaking history, concerning the values expressed in the famous *Roman de la Rose* [Romance of the Rose] (no. 23). This *Querelle des femmes* opposed clerics, writers and intellectuals. Leading the "champions" of women was the writer Christine de Pizan, who dedicated her entire body of work to the defence of women, their virtues and their place in the world and took an open stand against the prevailing misogyny (nos. 14, 23, 28, 33, 35).



Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Southern Netherlands, 1460-70 (ms. 9235-37, fol. 3r); no. 14



Echoing the EXHIBITION

# Witches

27 Oct 21 – 16 Jan 22

Espace Vandenborgh, Brussels  
[witches-expo.ulb.be](http://witches-expo.ulb.be)

*Reduced admission upon presentation of your KBR museum ticket*

## Witches avant la lettre: activities in the KBR museum

- **Inside the lab of the miniaturist:** workshop on how to make colours, in collaboration with the National Center for the History of Science
- **Lectures**
- **Guided tours**

Calendar and more information [www.kbr.be](http://www.kbr.be)



## The KBR museum turns the page

Discover a new selection of manuscripts as of 3 May 2022.



Expo

## Toots 100. The sound of a Belgian Legend

22 April – 31 August 2022

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