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## **Episode 109: The Witch Depicted: Images and iconography in early modern times**

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#### VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research, opinion and analysis podcast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

#### JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook. Thanks for joining us. If you ask a child what a witch looks like, the chances are you'll be given a list of unflattering attributes that anyone, regardless of age, will recognise. An old bent-over had wearing a black pointy hat, a hooked nose perhaps with warts, maybe riding a broom and definitely owning a black cat and a cauldron. Or perhaps she's a young, beautiful temptress skilled in the art of poison and magic, not unlike the sirens or maenads of Ancient Greece who used their feminine wiles to tempt their hapless, usually male, victims and bend them to their will.

But just how did this iconography come to hold such sway over our imaginations, and what does it reveal about the ways in which we construct and control culture?

Joining us in this episode of Up Close is Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, Charles Zika. Together, we'll discuss how the visual image of the witch was created in late 15th and 16th century Europe by artists and printers and how those images were manipulated with skills not too far from today's advertising and media spin doctors to convey loaded messages about female sexuality, male fantasy, moral reform, divine providence and punishment and, tragically, the ways in which the belief in those images underpinned three centuries in which around 50,000 people - most of them women - were put to death as witches and thousands more persecuted and imprisoned. Charles, thank you for joining us on Up Close.

#### CHARLES ZIKA

It's a pleasure.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, as young postgraduate student in the '70s, you - like most of us - had somewhere in the recesses of your mind an image of what a typical witch looked like. But in your book, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, which was published by Routledge, you tell us about the particular moment when the seeds of your academic fascination for witchcraft imagery were sown. Where were you and what did you see?

CHARLES ZIKA

I was a postgraduate at the University of Tübingen, which is in south west Germany near the city of Stuttgart, and I'd gone up to see some friends in Frankfurt and went to the so-called Städel Museum, which is one of the most important art museums for the Old Masters, you might say, but also has some fantastic material on the 19th and 20th centuries. But I was there and I was blown away by the richness of that museum. I saw this small painting by an artist that I have to say at that time I didn't know anything about, a man called Hans Baldung - also called Hans Baldung Grien - of *Two Weather Witches*, it was called. It really surprised me because I had that very Hollywood-ish image, the image from their childhood from various fairytales of the witch with the hooked nose and the pointy hat. These were totally different. Here they were, two beautiful women with voluptuous, seductive bodies and, you know, I was in my early 20s; I knew a seductive body when I saw one. And they were looking out at me, the viewer, in this seductive and coquettish way. I gathered slowly by the caption that they were engaged in some kind of sorcery. You could see a sort of stormy sky in the background with wonderful gold and red colours in the sky, sulphurous in its brilliance. These were weather witches. It was that experience that really fascinated me and gradually, over the next year or so, I saw a bit here and a bit there, a drawing, a print - similar kinds of images - and I really thought, I must look into this more. It wasn't my field of research specifically, but after a while, when I got back to Australia and got an academic job, the image kept coming back and I wanted to see, where did it come from? What did it mean? How are our views of witches created?

JENNIFER COOK

And the fascination began.

CHARLES ZIKA

That's right.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, you say that it's only been in the past two to three decades that these witchcraft images have even been considered a serious subject for scholarly study. That up until then, historians saw them as little more than illustrations to enliven their own texts or as evidence of demonological beliefs or attitudes. What do you believe has changed now and why?

CHARLES ZIKA

It really is part of a very big change, I think, in the humanities; a change that's

probably been going on for a good hundred years, in a way, where there's been a move away from this idea of the separation between reality and appearance, between representation and essence. There's been for many centuries, I think, a kind of prejudice and bias to get at the reality, to get at the ideas underlying surfaces, representations, to get behind the sensible. And gradually, people have realised that that's a very artificial distinction, that the surfaces - the appearances - are what things are. Consequently, there's been a tendency to look again in a fresh sort of way at images as not only leading to ideas but having a relevance and significance in themselves.

You know, one might ask, why does this happen? I mean, it happens because of changes in philosophy, changes in views about subject and object. It also has a lot to do with changes in technology. It has a lot to do with the beginnings of the photograph, the fact that we can represent. Then, of course, in the 20th century with other phenomena to do with the visual, such as television, such as film. So the old prejudices about those kinds of things - at least in academic study, I mean ? and, you know, this gap between the academic and the popular have begun to break down. So sociologists, philosophers, literary theorists as well as historians have been slowly beginning to look at the actual representations and what power they have in affecting society, in moving people to action, in getting them to understand their world in different sorts of ways. I mean, that's fairly general, I know, but I think that that's the kind of change we're talking about.

JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook and on Up Close this episode we're speaking with Charles Zika about imagery of witchcraft in the 16th and late 15th century. So Charles, why is this particular period so important to understanding the ways in which witches were represented?

CHARLES ZIKA

Well, I think there are fundamentally two things. On the one hand, it was in that period that the eyes of theologians, judges, lawyers, medical doctors, social critics of all kinds - and moral critics, I should say - began to look at these people - people who engage in various forms of magic and sorcery. They began to construct - we can now put it down to a fairly close period of time - the 1420s and 30s - when we get the first treatises, the first discussion in a serious sort of way about such a figure called a witch. It takes a while for the particular paradigm to be clearly created, but they're people who are in some association with the devil. They use the devil's power for their own benefit and usually for the harm of someone else - an individual or a community - and they meet on a regular basis with the devil, both individually and as a group.

Individually, they form technically what was called a pact: a kind of agreement with the devil which, slowly, over the next couple of decades is cemented through sexual intercourse. They meet communally with the devil in what we now generally know - and it's a terms that people know about - in the so-called Sabbath. The meeting at night with the devil where they engage in everything which is considered most negative about society. They engage in abnormal sex with male and female devils and with each other. They mix up their potions and poisons and so on. So it was in

this period in the 15th century, the first third of the century through to the second third of the century, that this kind of construct, this idea of the witch began to be formed. So that's one reason.

The other reason, of course, when we're talking about the visual imagery of witchcraft is that the later 15th century is a period of extraordinary technological transformation. We have from the 1450s, of course, the beginnings of print culture. Suddenly, we have print being used to disseminate materials which previously could only be disseminated in hand written form and now this can be done far more quickly in far larger volume than had been the case before. And together with, although not directly reliant on that, we have a change in print making. That is in Western Europe - China, of course, as in so many of these technological advances as doing this much, much earlier - but in Western and Central Europe, you have the beginnings of print making with especially then the use of the woodcut, the metal cut or metal print, the engraving and so on.

These print techniques, because of the genius and skills of a range of artists - especially from southern Germany and northern Italy - are instrumental in raising the status of these prints to that of high art. People like Albrecht Dürer, for instance, probably one of the best known of them. But many of them, because when you have these technological and artistic changes in society, it doesn't just depend on one individual. One individual can often be the stimulus, but it's got to be a group that pushes it through, has it accepted, is copied in various sorts of ways. And that's what happens at this time and images of witches, then, these two things coincide and the image of the witches really comes to the forefront of European visual culture.

JENNIFER COOK

Now Charles, let's talk about some of these images of witchcraft from these painters. In these prints we start to see some signifiers, don't we? Tell us about those; they're quite fascinating.

CHARLES ZIKA

Well, we usually think of witches as having brooms, but most of the early images, for instance, from southern Germany, witches don't have brooms at all. They have a kind of pitchfork or a two pronged fork which is used as a cooking fork around the fire. So they're used for carrying pots, for turning things on the fire. They're usually shown around the fire even in scenes that have nothing to do with witchcraft at all. So this is one of the signifiers which comes up. Now, I think what that does is immediately associate witchcraft with women because it's women's work which is involved here: women's work of a domestic nature around the fire. Of course, being around the fire also has connotation. It's not just physical fire but it's the fire within women's bodies; it's the fire of lust. The fact that witchcraft has something to do - and I would argue - with the power of sexuality and especially women's sexuality. And the other way in which this is signified is through hair and the wild, flying hair of the witches which becomes a real trope through this period, the very end of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century.

JENNIFER COOK

Does that link back to the images of the Classical world? Could you talk to that?

CHARLES ZIKA

Yeah. I think that there's no doubt that the literature of the Classical world, the literature concerned with individuals like Circe and Medea - and of course it was just in this period, again, that European scholars were re-exploring - in some cases discovering - some of these stories. They were re-discovering them with, I suppose, all kinds of things in mind. And here they saw these very powerful female witch or sorcerer figures acting in society in very violent kinds of ways and this did certainly become a model for them.

JENNIFER COOK

Of course, because we had Circe turning people into pigs and Medea killing her children and so this transformation and slaughtering of babies, that became quite a theme, didn't it?

CHARLES ZIKA

That's right. However, even though I absolutely agree that the re-discovery of the Classical world through what's often called humanist culture and humanist interests in both Italy and Germany was fundamental to this movement, the 15th century images when you look at them are really not such wild figures at all. Individuals like Medea and Circe look very controlled. So it is hard to know whether, is this simply a matter of artists developing techniques in order to display this kind of wildness, the need for sexual gratification and punishment and violence against others? Or is it that they're coming to this material in a new kind of way because this is part of the discourse of the time? So they're exploring and displaying and representing these figures in this new way. I think it's the latter rather than the former.

JENNIFER COOK

Yes, they're looking at it through their own eyes, aren't they and taking these incredibly complicated and wild stories and images and trying to process them? As you say, contain them in the woodcut or in the painting.

I'm Jennifer Cook and on Up Close this episode we're speaking with Charles Zika about images of witchcraft. Now Charles, I understand that one of your projects involves the study of the only witch to be mentioned in the Bible, the Witch of Endor. Can you tell us a bit about her story and what you've discovered about her changing image?

CHARLES ZIKA

Sure. It was actually at the time when I was doing work on the Classical witches. But I realised that there was another figure of which we had far more images and virtually no historians or art historians had looked at all and this is the so-called Witch of Endor. Now, the Witch of Endor comes into the Book of Samuel, Kings - depending on what version of the Bible you're reading - as part of the story of Saul and very central not only to paintings and other forms of visual representation but also comes into oratorios and operas like Handel's Saul and many plays of the period, really from the 15th century on.

These series of events occur towards the end of Saul's life and Saul at this stage had been vying with his very precocious and successful son-in-law David. And in fact

they were at war with each other for much of this time. At one stage, when he's attacked by the Philistines and after a period where all sorts of things had been going wrong for him, he becomes incredibly fearful as to what is to happen and especially what is to happen in the upcoming battle. So he decides, after he attempts to get word from God as to what his fate will be on the next day, to go together with a couple of his servants to a nearby village - a village which we can still almost identify in northern Israel today - to a village of Endor where he's told by some of his court that there is a woman who foretells the future.

He dresses up in mufti, goes to her at night and says that he would like her to divine for him, to foretell his future since God no longer speaks to him. The extraordinary thing about this in the context of the story is that just a few years beforehand, King Saul had outlawed any sorcery within his kingdom. As a result of this, the woman is incredibly fearful and shrinks back and says, do you really mean that I should do this? Don't you know that King Saul has prohibited it? He assures her, as politicians often do, that no harm will befall her, and she should go ahead and do it. Anyway, she does and he asks her to call up the prophet Samuel. She does this; the prophet Samuel appears and announces to King Saul that he has been forsaken by God because he's refused to obey him on so many occasions.

First of all, Samuel in a very petulant kind of way tells him that, why is he doing this? Why is he disturbing him in his sleep? But after he gets over that, he tells him then, you've forsaken God and tomorrow you will die. All your sons will die and your kingdom will pass over to David which is a total shock and in the story and in some of the representations of this story, Saul falls back in absolute traumatic shock at this news. I mean, it's not only the end of himself, it's the end of his family. It's the end of his kingdom; he's the first King of Israel. Now look, I'm just telling you the Biblical story here; there are many interpretations of it and we know that Biblical stories have all sorts of meaning but I'm just telling you because this story then became very, very powerful.

JENNIFER COOK

It's got so many links to the Classical myths. Agamemnon going to the Sybil, reading birds' entrails. It's fascinating.

CHARLES ZIKA

That's right. It's about the power of necromancy; it's about the power of fate. It's about the power of obedience and disobedience. We get treatises on this story from as early as the second and third century partly to do with, how did this woman do it? And in the Greek text, she's actually described as a ventriloquist that in actual fact, she tricked Saul. So the question is, is necromancy illicit or not? Can people engage in necromancy? Will prominent prophets such as Samuel who supposedly is with God or at least waiting to get into heaven in the Christian understanding - the Jewish understanding, he is there already. Will they appear to people when they're invoked by a necromancer?

So this is the kind of problem and it's tackled in all kinds of ways, but the interesting thing for me is that in the first 10 centuries or more, the emphasis is very much on Saul's disobedience and the figure of Samuel. Was Samuel really Samuel? Was it the devil in the shape of Samuel used to trick King Saul, or was it simply come kind

of strange hallucination? So the emphasis is very much on these two figures. What begins to happen in the late medieval period is the focus moves to the figure of the witch. How did the witch do it? Who was she? What techniques did she use? And in the visual images of this witch figure, suddenly we start getting the witch being portrayed naked for a start; a sexual, alluring figure of which we have nothing in the Bible and no reason to believe she was that. She starts using circles and magical inscriptions and talismans and magical books and things. It becomes more and more and more fantastic. Goats start appearing and different sorts of animals. So the focus becomes very much on her as the focus in European culture in general begins to move on witchcraft and what witches do and the importance of the devil in particular in this whole process. So it's a very interesting study of the way in which - I suppose one area which is common I think to humanity in almost every culture: the attempt to use forces outside the human to understand the world and the future. How this begins to mix up with the way in which cultures change.

JENNIFER COOK

Now Charles, where to now with your research?

CHARLES ZIKA

I would like to continue this study of the construction of the witch really through to the 19th century. I'll give you just one little point; the point with which you began. The image of the witch with the pointed hat and hooked nose, nobody's really done a study of where that came from. We don't really know. It seems like it probably came from the 18th century, maybe from the satirical images of Hogarth and so on, and then was taken up especially in the 19th century, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, in the English speaking world, and consequently you had then the popularisation around Halloween in the late 19th century. But we don't really know. There are a few guesses here; nobody's done any detailed study.

So the study I've done in any detail has really been up until the early 17th century and I want to take that through into the 18th because there are a lot of changes that occur together with changes about religiosity, changes about the nature of science. In other words, witchcraft was no longer prosecuted in many parts of Europe from the late 17th century and then in all parts of Europe, really, from the late 19th century. But that didn't mean that people didn't still believe in witchcraft. It's just that it wasn't a crime of state and there are many extrajudicial lynchings and so on of those perceived to be witches and witches do stay on in European culture.

JENNIFER COOK

So you still have a lot of work to do that you're very keen to get into.

CHARLES ZIKA

I certainly am.

JENNIFER COOK

Charles Zika, thank you so much for your time today and for taking us through the 15th and 16th century and giving us an insight into witchcraft and the imagery. Thank you so much for your time.

CHARLES ZIKA

It's a pleasure.

JENNIFER COOK

Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au). Up Close is brought to you by Marketing and Communications of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Our producers for this episode were Eric Van Bommel and Kelvin Param; audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Kelvin Param and Eric Van Bommel. I'm Jennifer Cook. Until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER

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