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Sensing materiality in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic

Abstract

It might be expected that practitioners of contemporary magico-religious traditions consider they have a special relationship with the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall. In this ethnographic article I examine how visiting practitioners in search of familiarity and authority approach the collection in a sensory and emotional manner that generates dialogic relationships between people, places, and things. While much museological debate acknowledges dynamic relationships between people and things, for contemporary witches these objects are literally alive in an inspirited world. This has a bearing on how they apprehend the museum as a space for multiple forms of engagement.

Keywords

Museums, magical consciousness, senses, contemporary witchcraft, historicity

Feeling sea witchcraft in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic

In Devon and Cornwall the witches living along the north facing coasts did a good trade in selling the wind to sea faring men. The sale took the form of exchanging a white rope with three knots tied in it for money. The idea being that when one required a certain wind the sailor unleashed one of the knots and so on ...¹

A long length of knotted rope, a wind spell, can be found in the dedicated display on Sea Witchcraft in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in the Cornish coastal town, Boscastle (figure 1). Another hangs on the wall in the Witches Cottage (figure 2). A sign on the museum exterior depicts two witches, one young, the other elderly, selling these potent strings of knotted ropes to sailors on the nearby harbor (figure 3).² While there is no archival evidence that describes this act taking place in Boscastle, nor any traces of earlier generations of wise women in this part of Cornwall, these claims present a crucial backdrop to magical continuities offered in the museum. Sea witches have an important place here, positioned as wise women actively practicing folk magic. Many visiting practitioners of modern magico-religious traditions find a sense of ancestry, and respond in sensory and emotional ways through experiences, memories and the imagination that underscore relationships with the sea.

¹ Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (MWM), text by Cecil Williamson, DOC 9831.

² Painted by Cornish artist Vivienne Shanley after the flood in 2004 to replace the one hung by Williamson many years earlier.

In 2004, I stood in front of the sea witch display with Gavin, a self-described Traditional witch, discussing the significance of the nearby sea to the museum and to magical practice.³ The collection is housed in a long, low building nestled at the end of the harbor where the river Valency meets the Atlantic ocean in a naturally formed port. Once a thriving fishing industry, now it is a flourishing tourist site. Gavin turned to the gallery and indicated the thick knotted rope. He described how the wind would be contained inside the three tight knots, and sold to sailors. As he relates the process, and makes connections between the sensory feeling of the rope, he entwines the repetitive action with the act of speaking, he is clearly experiencing something both corporeal and intangible, as his hands work to illustrate weaving the rope into a working charm. Imagine, he said, focusing your energy on tying those knots into that rope. He continued with a reflection on what magic is: concentrated movement and action, repetitive chanting, that in this instance contained a call to the wind.

Deep resonances with folklore are forged between the museum, the sea, and the elements. Gavin saw himself in an active and dynamic relationship with working charms and other potent objects. For him, the heart of the museum lay in its collection of West Country folk magic, such as Kate the Gull's divination tambourine, or Granny Rowe's fossilized shark's teeth for casting fortunes. As he moved around the museum he talked about how he imagines things feel, to stroke or hold, drawing experientially on his knowledge in highly sensorial ways. Gavin described an ineffable energy that draws or repels touch. He is drawn to folk magic as keys to understanding the collection and as a path for magical experience. Visiting contemporary witches and Pagans consider many items here dynamic and alive through inherent properties in an inspirited world. Objects are considered active and vibrant: the clamor of competing voices described as akin to a noisy zoo rather than a museum, and to be approached with caution.

Contemporary witchcraft, as a multifaceted magical-religion, is manifested materially. It is not simply expressed in material forms, but works through a nexus of 'people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places, and communities', as well as through experience, performance, and ritual.⁴ For modern witches and Wiccans, as part of broad based polytheistic Pagan Nature Religions, practical witchcraft techniques sit alongside divine veneration. The earth is experienced as sacred and animate, while practitioners develop 'intense personal relationships with nature'.⁵ These are modern religious and spiritual

³ In the United Kingdom, the term Traditional witch is often used to make claims to historical legitimacy other than through Wiccan lineages, usually via claims to ancestry through cunning folk, or as the continuation of pre-Christian paganism. See Helen Cornish 'The Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft'. *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon'*. S Feraro & E Doyle White, Eds. (London, Palgrave 2019); Ethan Doyle White, "The Creation of Traditional Witchcraft: Pagans, Lucifarians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy," *Aries: Journal for the study of Western Esotericism* 18 no 2: 188-216 (2018).

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⁴ Birgit Meyer et al., "The origin and mission of Material Religion," *Religion* 40 (2010):207-11, 208 [doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010); Elisabeth Arweck and William JF Keenan, eds., *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).

⁵ Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: an anthropology of consciousness* (Oxford: Berg, 2005):vii

responses, rather than dusty survivals from the distant past. Gardnerian Wicca was established during the 1940s.⁶ However, today's eclectic array of witchcraft traditions often situate magicity as timeless and universal at the same time as recognizing the relatively shallow history of the modern witchcraft movement. In recent years, there has been a demonstrable shift away from finding ancestors in the pagan priestesses of antiquity found in Gardnerian Wicca. Instead, they seek continuity through the practices of cunning folk, as Traditional or solitary forms of witchcraft. Despite a lack of documentary evidence that connect wise women directly to the emergence of modern witchcraft, alternate connections to the past are found through material culture, folklore, ritual, the landscape, dreams, and myths, often through expanded magical consciousness.⁷

The wise woman is brought to life in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic through carefully narrated accounts of folk magic, associated artefacts, and connections to the rural landscape. Cecil Williamson brought the museum to Boscastle in 1960, although he founded it on the Isle of Man at least a decade earlier. The museum has a large eclectic collection with an international reputation and audience.⁸ It provides a unique repository for the personal artefacts of many well-known members of twentieth century witchcraft and Wiccan movements, as well as weaving interlinked histories of occult and folk magic. At the center of Williamson's vision was the wise woman, the Wayside Witch. In the museum his louder displays of showy occultism attracted more immediate attention, but West Country folk magic could be found around the edges. When Graham King took over in 1996 he brought this somewhat shadowy figure into the light through thematic displays on folk magic and the construction of a Witch's Cottage at the heart of the museum. His explicit attention to the stories and artefacts of cunning folk contributed towards reconfigured senses of ancestry for modern witches.⁹

⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Helen Cornish, "Cunning Histories: Privileging Narratives in the Present," *History and Anthropology* 16 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200500219610>; Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic*.

⁸ The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic is an extremely successful independent 'micro-museum', with a footfall of upwards of 50,000 visitors Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁹ The most detailed account of the thematic changes made at this time are in Hannah Fox, "Representing the Craft for 50 years: A cauldron of inspiration, bubbling away for half a century," *Dark Mirror* 30 (2002). Steve Patterson reflects on his long relationship with the museum that started in the 1980s in "Hauntology, the Numinous, the uncanny and the labyrinth of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic," *The Enquiring Eye* 3, no. Spring (2020). The reorganisation carried out by King contributed to the emphasis on cunning histories that have emerged as critical ancestors for contemporary witches since the revision of Gardnerian orthodoxies between the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. More detailed histories of the museum can be found in Steve Patterson, *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft: A Grimoire of the Museum of Witchcraft* (Penzance: Troy Books, 2014); Graham King, "The Museum of Witchcraft," *The Cauldron* 101 (2001); Sara Hannant and Simon Costin, eds., *Of Shadows: One Hundred Objects from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2016); Julia Phillips, "The Museum of Witchcraft and

My discussion builds on long-term ethnographic research. An initial visit to the museum in 1997 as a curious MA student continued into doctoral fieldwork and a sustained relationship with the museum and its Friends Association.¹⁰ On returning to the museum in 2000, I carried with me voices from the Sussex Pagan Circle as I established intersecting networks. While visitors were predominantly passing tourists, many were practitioners of multiple forms of modern magico-religious traditions, often returning to visit their beloved collection. Since then, I have walked through its narrow corridors with others, discussing ideas about magic, witchcraft history, Boscastle, and most of all, the objects. Along with practitioner visitors I have followed changing exhibits and curatorial emphases. In 2013 it was passed to The Museum of British Folklore director, Simon Costin, who continues to update the collection and displays.¹¹ Working towards an ethnography of history, my primary focus has been to understand how the past is continually negotiated and revised between practitioners through relational processes of historicity.¹² Knowledge about the past is actively produced within inspirited and analogic Pagan worldviews. In this way, the senses and the imagination contribute to expanded ideas about the past that avoid the need to measure how successfully these conform to rationalist forms of modern history making.

Museums are notoriously enchanting, and many exhibit sacred artefacts considered to be active and powerful by visitors who recognize their function and meaning.¹³ Fiona Candlin observes that most passing visitors share the view that The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic is a site of magical potency. The collection is full of ritual and folk artefacts, things that are seen to provide historical validity to esoteric techniques. It is enhanced by curatorial practices that situate the collection within practitioner communities of modern witchcraft and Paganism, this generates senses of liveness amongst the objects.¹⁴ Witches

Magic: Toward a New History of British Wicca." *Journal of Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (forthcoming 2021).

¹⁰ Author. Author.

¹¹ During my research the museum was named The Museum of Witchcraft. In 2015 Costin amended this to The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, to better reflect the collection and its history. See H Alexander "Interview: Simon Costin and the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic." *Nettle's Garden - The Old Craft*: November 29 2020, <https://www.theoldcraft.com/2020/2011/2029/simon-costin-and-the-museum-of-witchcraft-and-magic/> (2020). I use the current name in this article for clarity.

¹² Historicity is often used in anthropology to create space for cultural perceptions of the past that may not align with criteria for rationalist history. See Charles Stewart, "Historicity and Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (1): 79-94 (2016), <https://doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-100249>; Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga*. (New York, Palgrave 2003).

¹³ Sharon Macdonald, "Enchantment and its dilemmas: the museum as a ritual site," in *Science, Magic and Religion-The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic*, ed. M Bouquet and Nuno Porto (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); Steph Berns, "Considering the glass case: Material encounters between museums, visitors and religious objects," *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515615896>; Crispin Paine, *Godly things: Museums, objects and religion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000).

¹⁴ Fiona Candlin, "Keeping Objects Live," in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

and Pagans move through the museum feeling and sensing in participatory ways, and anticipate that it will reflect and confirm their own experiences. Gavin, the Traditional witch who talked me through the wind spell, noted that his attention is often alerted by a sensory trigger, perhaps something caught out of the corner of the eye, the place where ‘magic happens and gateways to other worlds wait.’ He related how objects are ‘magically efficacious’ either because they are made of active substances, or because intentions have been worn into them ‘like the rubbing stones. These objects don’t need us [in order] to have meaning’. Gavin reflected he felt people had lost connections with the natural world and modern witches sought to rekindle immersive relationships with other-than-human worlds. The affective relationships he describes are participatory, and work towards creating meaning out of established knowledge combined with sensory experiences in the museum between people and things. Anthropological attention to the senses demonstrate how physical responses are provoked, as well as emotions and memories. There are particularly salient arguments in the light of recent debates about affective sensory responses in museums.¹⁵

Magic has long been a problematic academic term, and while recent theorizations have sought to wrest it away from the classic magic-religion-science triad of rationality debates, this is not always successful.¹⁶ However, recent scholarly approaches have reconsidered its place amongst practitioners of magico-religious traditions. Sabina Magliocco examines how modern Pagans embrace magic as a set of ‘spiritual techniques to change consciousness at will’: the imagination is used to ‘re-enchant the universe, expand human potential, achieve self-realization and planetary healing, and ultimately bring humans into contact with the sacred’.¹⁷ This conceptualization of magic as a form of knowledge produced through the imagination as ‘a doorway’ into magical consciousness is also found in Susan Greenwood’s work. Rather than being seen as something not to be trusted, the imagination enables perception to open out a ‘panpsychic worldview’.¹⁸

I approach magical-religion in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic as an experiential, emotional, and sensory dialogue between place, visitors, and things that work through the imagination and materiality. The museum provokes attention to the senses through the pungent smell of incense and the sometimes damp aromas. Looped soundtracks mean that chanting can be heard when passing the Witch’s Cottage, the top gallery is filled with harmonious singing, and narrow corridors echo. Shadowy corners add to heightened

¹⁵ Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009). Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, eds., *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). David Howes, Ed. *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Graham, "Do You Believe in Magic?," *Material Religion* 14, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1443843>; Peter Pels, "Magic," in *Key terms in material religion*, ed. S Brent Plate (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

¹⁷ Sabina Magliocco, "New Age and Neopagan Magic," in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: from antiquity to the present*, ed. David J Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 637.

¹⁸ Greenwood, *Developing Magical Consciousness*: 9.

emotions and anticipation. For many practitioners magical understanding is constituted through imagining how objects might feel. They calculate the weight of objects, the relative smoothness of some surfaces, the dustiness of fabrics, dry hair and fur. Many things are crafted for the purpose of touching, they are tools made to be held and used, and claim attention in tactile ways, drawing the hand to feel, hold, and stroke. Contained inside glass cabinets, objects elicit sensory interaction and imaginative participation. These reflections are woven through with accounts of extrasensory perception around the quality of the air, invisible vibrations, and emotional responses to intention. Uncanny feelings are sometimes embodied by feelings of dislocation in the twisting and labyrinthine route through the building.¹⁹

The Museum between the land and the sea

All along the wild north coasts of Devon and Cornwall the sea witch is mistress of her kingdom the sea. The white capped wind-driven waves of the ever-relentless seas thunder, crash and retreat, to re-gather strength and again to hurl themselves against the ancient cliffs. Far down, deep below the surface and away from this everlasting battle of the waves and granite cliffs, lies a land of peace and tranquility. This is the kingdom of the sea witches and of lost Atlantis.²⁰

Place is evocative, and links between Cornwall and the collection have been emphasized over three generations of museum directors. Stories are woven about West Country wise women and their arcane possessions, found in tales about the wild Cornish landscape that offer romantic images of a place lost in time, and excluded from modernity. An image somewhat at odds with its deeply industrial history.²¹ Deep roots forged into the local landscape encompass the labyrinths carved into the cliff at Rocky Valley, the waterfall at Nectans Glen, and the memorial to the life and death of Joan Wytte in Minster woods. For many visiting practitioners of contemporary magico-religious traditions these are envisaged as pilgrimages, or opportunities for journeying. Uncanny experiences are sought through interconnected landscapes that include the surrounding coastline and seascape in an inspirited 'magical valley'.²²

The sea has a constant presence in the life of the museum. Only meters away, the sight and the sound provides a permanently ebbing and flowing backdrop, and a perennial subject of conversation. The building that houses the collection was once a pilchard warehouse, another sign of changing town fortunes from fishing to tourism. Prosaic chats with visitors refer to walking up the cliffs to the White Tower or Victoria Head, the state of the tide, the

¹⁹ Patterson, "Hauntology": 37.

²⁰ MWM text Cecil Williamson DOC 9947.

²¹ Amy Hale, "Representing the Cornish: Contesting heritage interpretation in Cornwall," *Tourist Studies* 1 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100205>; Patrick Lavolette, *The Landscaping of Metaphor and Cultural Identity: Topographies of a Cornish Pastiche* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011).

²² Cornish, Helen. "In Search of the Uncanny: Inspirited Landscapes and Modern Witchcraft." *Material Religion* 16, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2020.1794578>

weather and the wind; swimming, kayaking, or fishing depending on the time of the year. Visitors give accounts of watching birds, occasionally seeing seals in the harbor, or spotting basking sharks out to sea. In the right conditions, a deep boom can be heard reverberating from the 'blowhole'.

Cecil Williamson made a concerted effort to make connections between the land, the shore and the sea. This is exemplified in his text accompanying a copy of a seventeenth century woodcut of sailors releasing the wind on ships out to sea:

In this early illustration we find confirmation of the fact sea farming folk did actually purchase knotted wind or storm ropes from the Sea Witches. There were well known Sea witches Selling the Wind in each of the following places: Sennen, St Ives, Appledore, Lee, Lynton and Porlock where one found mother Leaky still trying to flog her wind strings with their knots. Right up to the mid 1930's.²³

There is a repeated emphasis on how these actions are found across the West Country. A collection of belemnite fossils is explained through folk references, but situated within the working practices of Cornish occult expert, Nancy of Newlyn:

With her sea stones, as she called them, she made predictions for the local fishermen. At the turn of the [twentieth] century, it was commonplace to hear people in Newlyn say, "We'll go and ask old Nancy – she will give you a straight answer".²⁴

These entanglements continue, the 2001 guidebook revealed that 'witches are greatly influenced by their surroundings and in Cornwall there has always been an affinity with the sea'.²⁵ The found objects deployed for esoteric purposes provide connections to place as well as engage sensory imagination and memories.

Many objects held in the displays come from the underwater world: shells, stones, fish bones and teeth, mermaid's purses, coral, glass fishing floats, and more. These are often associated with named occult practitioners from across the West Country, and used for divining, healing, and finding lost things. Proximity to the tools that had belonged to earlier generations of magical experts is often highly emotional for visiting witches. These things are seen as not inert but alive and inspirited. For practitioners, these objects are sacred and imbued with spirit; fashioned out of inherently magical substances (such as wood, metals, or semi-precious stones); or invested with intentions during crafting (through repetitive actions like rubbing, knitting or knotting); or made for seeing into other-than-human-worlds, fortune-telling, or divination.

Visiting practitioners reflect on their own altars set up at home, or their ritual practices. Stones and shells found along the Cornish coast are often included to represent watery elements. Conversations turn to the importance of water, its power and energy as one of the four key elements (earth, air, fire, water) in thinking magically about the world. Once I

²³ MWM text Cecil Williamson object 468.

²⁴ MWM adapted text Cecil Williamson, object 468.

²⁵ Museum of Witchcraft Guidebook 2001: 24.

listened to a visiting Wiccan tell how she had sat by the river looking out to sea feeling the grassy verge beneath her as she meditated on the movement of the waves, the noise and smell of the incoming tide. She described how this activity built energy to greet the collection.

The water is not necessarily gentle. As well as wild winter storms such as the one that threw up enough boulders to build the witch's cottage installation in 1997,²⁶ a flash flood in 2004 caused significant damage to the town. Boscastle was closed for nearly a year while roads, bridges, and buildings were repaired. The museum was fortunate that although it filled with foul water, the building held firm, and remarkably few objects were lost. When the museum was preparing to reopen in 2005 the inaugural gathering of the formal Association of Friends of the Museum of Witchcraft²⁷ saw some blustery wintry weather. After the talks and the AGM were concluded, many participants gathered in the windy harbor. Dancing into the wind, with the sea churning, and bullroarers whirling noisily above our heads, we danced hand in hand over the newly re-built bridge, and into and around and through the museum and back out to the harbor, to celebrate the sea and the museum together, and to continue the long conversations between the water and the things held inside.

Magic and the senses in the collection

Calling down the moon is a form of self-hypnosis or mesmerism. The sea witches of Devon and Cornwall have long practiced this art and still make use of it. This is briefly what one does. When the moon is full, select a vantage spot high up on a cliff top with a clear view of the moonlit sea and the moon beams' path over the moonlit sea. Sit down, gaze at the moon, then slowly lower one's gaze from the moon's face and with your eyes concentrated up on the path of the moonlit sea, trace it to the point where it goes out of your sight in the sheer cliff face under one. As it goes out of your view the moon will come up to you, right up to you. Do this time and time again, eventually the moon will, like a vast balloon, appear from below the cliff edge and roll up, right up to one.²⁸

Williamson's description of local sea witches embarking on the art of calling down the moon is evocative. For some, the use of the present tense and personal narration offers a note of historical continuity, and evokes a sense of their own presence on the hillside at night envisioning the full moon over the sea. While this text draws many passing visitors into a sense of enchantment, for practitioners it recounts a well-known Wiccan ritual, Drawing Down the Moon. It generates memories and enhances a sense of place as some described how they imagine Boscastle cliffs on a moonlit night. One practitioner related how the drawing aroused visions of silvery moonlight on the water and the sensations of chilly wind,

²⁶ Fox, "Representing": 9.

²⁷ In 2005 the informal friends gatherings that had taken place since the late 1990s was registered with the UK Charity Commission and the British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM) to help manage the influx of funds after the flood. In 2021 the Friends of the Museum was replaced by a new Patron system.

²⁸ MWM text Cecil Williamson for drawing of Calling Down the Moon, lost in 2004 flood, DOC 137.

and the feeling of attention and focus to being in place through ritual practice. He said the description is like poetry and he followed the words like following the moonlight. He recognized his expertise and affective experiences in the museum collection. It was a reminder of numerous conversations with witches who urged me to pay attention to the natural world. To avoid reading books on witchcraft, but to stand in the woods, walk on the beach, or climb the hills. In turn, these instructions resonate with the large number of uncrafted, found items held in the museum collection which are shown to have arcane purpose and utility.

Magical or religious artefacts in museum collections have usually been considered rather awkward, despite the high number of sacred objects they often hold. Secular museological approaches have been generally challenged, although the focus has leaned towards indigenous non-Western or mainstream Abrahamic religions.²⁹ European folk magic has seldom been taken seriously by museologists although attention has been paid to how objects had been collected and curated and how they accrue agency over time. While studies largely concern nineteenth and early twentieth century folkloric collections and how they are situated by secular curators and curatorial practices today, the focus on materiality challenges the predominance of words and rituals in most histories of magic.³⁰ Elizabeth Graham observed that it remains important to recognize the historical and Christian roots of definitions of magic to expand scholarly attention beyond that of 'folk and popular belief' to include mainstream religious artifacts in museums, but does not acknowledge religious dimensions of modern European magical materiality.³¹

Museum acquisitions of crafted and natural folk magic items collected in the late nineteenth century illustrate theories of imitative and sympathetic magical techniques, but also resonate with popular views and rituals. In recent studies of Finnish and Estonian folk

²⁹ Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited encounters: American Indians protest museum policies and practices* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008); James Clifford, "Four northwest coast museums: Travel reflections," *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display* edited by I. Karp and S. Levine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Mary M. Brooks, "Seeing the Sacred: Conflicting Priorities in Defining, Interpreting, and Conserving Western Sacred Artifacts," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 8, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183412x13286288797818> .

³⁰ Natalie Armitage, Ceri Houlbrook, and Chiara Zuanni, "cataloging magic: an introduction," *Material Religion* 14, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1443890> ; Kristiina Johanson and Tõnno Jonuks, "Are We Afraid of Magic? Magical Artifacts in Estonian Museums," *Material Religion* 14, no. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1443894> ; Jude Hill, "The Story of the Amulet Locating the Enchantment of Collections," *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 1 (2007) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183507074562> ; Tabitha Cadbury, "The Charms of Scarborough, London, etc.: The Collecting Networks of Charles Clarke and Edward Lovett," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 25 (2012) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41710657> ; Frances Larson, "The Curious and the Glorious," *Museum History Journal* 4, no. 2 (2011: 181-202 <https://doi.org/10.1179/mhj.2011.4.2.181>;

³¹ Graham, "Do You Believe in Magic?": 256

collections it is noted that fashioned items are favored over 'natural unworked objects' which can be considered problematic, where provenance is often unknown, and evidence of function unclear.³² Archaeological and historical discussions are beginning to take magical materiality from earlier centuries more seriously.³³ However, these seldom consider how twenty-first century practitioners of magico-religious traditions approach material items with inspirited worldviews. Wider comments include critiques of curators who have speculated that unknown and unfamiliar objects were likely to have a magical origin or function.³⁴ Pertinently, Wingfield argues that the Witch's Ladder (a knotted string tied with feathers) collected by Edward Burnett Tyler and held in the Pitt Rivers Museum was more likely to have been a deer scarer than a ritual tool, and is an example of outdated curatorial practices.³⁵ However, the Ladder has been used as a source of inspiration by Pagans and witches who make replicas for use in rituals. The creative and innovative ways that practitioners deploy and respond to objects displayed in museums are often disregarded. In the Boscastle museum historical witches might provide the backdrop, but they are found meaningful through continuities made in the present.

In the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic discussions around realist forms of evidence follow well-trodden territory. The collection holds examples of contemporary ritual and esoteric items donated by practitioners. These personal belongings of well-known modern witches and occultists offer recognizable attributions and readily fit conventional acquisition criteria. However, the occult artefacts identified as the possessions of West Country wise women are not so easily verified, and some visitors are suspicious of the veracity of these claims.³⁶ At the same time, the high number of unworked items in the collection provide opportunities for emotional recognition. Often akin to things visiting practitioners use themselves for ritual purposes, while engagements with inspirited world views offer ways of experiencing the collection as dynamic and inherently magical: potent, alive, and an active part of affective dialogues.

³² Johanson and Jonuks, "Are We Afraid of Magic?"; Sonja Hukantaival, "The Materiality of Finnish Folk Magic: Objects in the Collections of the National Museum of Finland," *Material Religion* 14, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1443893> .

³³ Brian Hoggard, *Magical House Protection: The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft* (Berghahn Books, 2019); Ronald Hutton, ed., *Physical evidence for ritual acts, sorcery and witchcraft in Christian Britain: a feeling for magic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Natalie Armitage and Ceri Houlbrook, eds., *The Materiality of Magic: An artifactual investigation into ritual practices and popular beliefs* (Oxbow Books, 2015).

³⁴ Johanson and Jonuks, "Are We Afraid of Magic?": 201

³⁵ Chris Wingfield, "A case re-opened: the science and folklore of a 'Witch's Ladder'," *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2010 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183510373982> .

³⁶ Cecil Williamson is considered by many to be an untrustworthy source, although Louise Fenton has followed the biographies of certain curses in the collection and demonstrated how he protected individuals through disguising their stories: "A Tale of Two Poppets," *The Enquiring Eye* 3, no. Spring 2020 (2020). Peter Hewitt has considered the potency of Williamson's curatorial practices: 'Collecting and fashioning magical objects with Cecil Williamson.' *The Enquiring Eye* 1: 44-60 (2017).

Material culture debates have long since considered object agency in processes of engagement between people and relations.³⁷ Sandra Dudley adds a sensory dimension as a vital part of how people directly engage with things in museums.³⁸ The senses can act as entry points between things, people, and spirits, towards alternative forms of consciousness and practices. These might include experiencing the divine, sensing invisible vibrations, or seeing into – even walking in – other worlds. In *The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic*, many visitors experience the objects as live and animated, dynamic factors in dialogues between place, people, and things in ways that challenge museological and materiality debates.

It has become commonplace for national museums to offer handling sessions to expand sensory ways of knowing that reorient visitor experiences and dislodge ocular-centric assumptions. Candlin's discussion of unauthorized handling provides an interesting perspective.³⁹ Physical contact with the esoteric collection in Boscastle may be contradictory and problematic. Pagan etiquette discourages the causal touching of other people's sacred objects. Some items may appear repellent to touch, such as skulls, moles' feet, or a pickled animal heart, while others are dangerous such as curses, potent healing charms, or spirit houses, efficacious and contagious. At the same time, sensory participation is central to magical ways of seeing the world, in conjunction with the imagination as a form of engagement that marks a distinction from conventional, rational, approaches to knowledge. These may encourage alternative ways of looking, such as gazing or noticing peripheral vision, or a heightened awareness of extrasensory perception.⁴⁰

Sensing Materiality

The talking tambourine, once owned by Kate (the gull) Turner, the sea witch of Penryn. With it she made all kinds of readings and predictions, most of which concerned sea faring matters such as weather, fish catches and contracts for the carrying of cargoes. To operate, she would draw the fingers gently across the parchment on the underside of

³⁷ For example: Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁸ Sandra H Dudley, "Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object," *UM Working Papers in Museum Studies* number 8 (2012).

³⁹ Constance Classen, "Touch in the Museum," in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Sally MacDonald et al., eds., *Touch in museums: Policy and practice in object handling* (Berg, 2008). Fiona Candlin, "Rehabilitating unauthorised touch or why museum visitors touch the exhibits," *The Senses and Society* 12, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1367485>

⁴⁰ Tim Ingold, "Dreaming of Dragons: on the imagination of real life," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12062>. Lynne Hume, *Portals: Opening Doorways to Other Realities through the Senses* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Roger Ivar Lohmann, "Introduction: Naming the ineffable," *Anthropological Forum* 13, no. 2 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1080/0066467032000129770>

the tambourine so causing the sea shells to flutter, tremble and change their positions as set out on the red lines.⁴¹

Visitor experience is participatory and expansive, it includes the building, the atmosphere and the surrounding environment: the museum as an entity has agency, imagined as a 'spider's web' to draw visitors inside,⁴² and is part of the dialogic encounters between visitors and the collection. Many practitioner visitors reflect on their first visit, under Williamson's, King's, or Costin's directorial eye. Some memories stretch back to the 1960s, many relate how their visit was long anticipated and minutely planned, while others remark on their surprise and delight when they stumbled across the museum on family holidays. Some of these arrival stories are recounted in the collection of memories published in celebration of the museum's sixtieth anniversary.⁴³ Whether they found it strangely familiar or disconcerting, they are visceral. They share affective accounts of raised emotions that stretched their senses as they crossed the threshold and took in the collection, that span corporeal, emotional and extrasensory responses. When I walked round the museum with Madeline, a Wiccan, in the summer of 2002, she reflected that the museum always made her feel 'grounded and wholly connected to [her] family, including all the witches. This is a magical place'. She described how she had a vivid sense of some objects leaning in towards her as she moved through the museum, embracing her as one of their own. She follows particular narratives in the thematic displays, and in common with others, finds familiarity in the story of the wise women, as recognizable 'ancestors'. Carrying out the ordinary magic of the past, and for Madeline, continuing into the present.

The museum texts explain purposes and provide biographies and context, and Williamson's stories continue to provoke the imagination. For many practitioner-visitors alternate histories can be encountered directly with the objects, through expanded forms of consciousness, intertwined with the narratives. Objects are described as friends, with deep histories and enduring spirits. Throughout the museum, the skill of making predictions is shown as a strong element of folk witchcraft, as a material and creative practice. Close associations with the sea are made time and again as domestic and found items are repurposed for occult use. Green glass fishing floats are presented as the everyday version of an expensive crystal ball, cunning reflective surfaces for skilled folk. Fish teeth and bones are found throughout the museum: a pair of saw fish snouts or 'mermaids combs' are used for predictions, used by sea witches 'to trace patterns in the sand, and then cast down sea shells, stones or features, and make predictions from the position of their fall' or 'old Granny Rowe's fossilized shark's teeth for 'casting and charming'.⁴⁴ Kate the Gull's sea shells are collected from the shore, but when balanced on the stretched skin of her tambourine they offer invisible insights. It remains a popular object among practitioner visitors who anticipate meeting it on their journey round the collection. Madeline told how she focuses on the tambourine in the display cabinet and imagines the sound of the shells, hearing the pattering, fluttering movement as they settle on the drawn red lines: if she closes her eyes, she can see and hear it in action. It resonates with her own practices that inform her

⁴¹ MWM text adapted from Williamson object 214.

⁴² Patterson, *Cecil Williamson's*.

⁴³ Kerriann Godwin, ed., *The Museum of Witchcraft: A Magical History* (Bodmin: The Occult Art Company and The Friends of the Boscastle Museum of Witchcraft, 2011).

⁴⁴ MWM text Williamson: object 355, 111.

understanding of its function, and the emotions and senses provoked. She explained that you have to relax and open out the senses for other-than-human encounters.

Examples of sympathetic magic are strewn through the museum, and visiting practitioners are highly attuned to recognizing the relationships between properties, shape, and intentions. A 'sea witch's charm' hangs in the sea witchcraft display. Found in Mevagissey, a small town on the south coast of Cornwall, it is crafted out of a lobster claw and 'designed to bring good catches and protection to both boat and crew ... the witch writes a charm which is placed within the claw before sealing with the ringed metal cup' (figure 4). Alongside the claw hangs a bone 'hammer of Thor' amulet wrapped in colorful threads to contain the spell, and triangular fish bones 'much prized by fishermen as a charm against storms' considered by Williamson as the 'the leftover stock in trade of a St Ives Sea Witch'. The collection of sea finds includes a 'mermaids purse' used as a 'fisherman's house charm', and the raked teeth of a ray considered a popular fisherman's charm in the Newlyn area.⁴⁵ While these continue to underscore the connections between place and magical histories through these named persons and places, visiting practitioners also find resonance with their personal belongings and found items. Many reflect on their jewelry fashioned out of shells, stones even bones as akin to these charms, chosen for their innate qualities through material properties, vibrations or shape, but also with emotional affects that encourage feelings of identification with the objects held in the collection. They share recollections, experiences and knowledge, as they find comparable accounts in the museum which offer legitimacy. In turn, their recognition of the museum contributes to its authority on historical and contemporary witchcraft and magic. The museum becomes a repository for multiple forms of knowledge, beyond the instructions of how to carry out rituals such as Calling Down the Moon, toward more experiential suggestions that offer immersion in an inspirited world and to take confidence in affective and emotional responses.

Concluding reflections

The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic provides an important resource for contemporary practitioners of magico-religious traditions. Like other small museums with a single focused collection it offers insights into the history and continuing practices of witchcraft and wider examples of occult and Pagan traditions. For practitioners of modern magical-religious traditions such as Traditional witchcraft and Wicca, the museum is encountered through experiential, emotional, and sensory dialogues that work through the interconnections between the imagination and materiality, situated between location, visitors, and things. Many feel a close identification with the collection, the building, and the surrounding area, and develop emotional and sensory relationships that help constitute expanded forms of consciousness and understandings of magical engagements in an inspirited world. It is encountered dynamically, as part of enduring conversations about practice, inspirited worldviews and other-than-human engagement. Paying attention to sensory and emotional approaches to the museum illuminates opportunities towards a more expanded sense of the past through alternate historicities. In this way the museum becomes a space to apprehend multiple forms of engagement.

⁴⁵ MWM text Williamson: objects 356; 238; 307; 533.

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Figure 1: Sea Witchcraft, photograph by author (2014)

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