Magical Collections

Chris Wood

March 2026

The Ickeny Collection
East Anglian Museum of Magic and Mythology

Do you have a favourite museum? Why that one?

What is/are your favourite thing(s) in that museum?

Does it have anything you would consider magical?

How does it present magical things?

What is Magic?

Magic has been *defined* in many ways. It is the making of change in accordance with will. It is the performance of an act with the intent to cause change – whether or not there is any physical connection between the act and the effect. It is causative influence beyond scientific explanation, or 'non-causative causation'. It is meaningful coincidence or synchronicity, or things working out in accordance with a pattern not obvious to the mundane eye. The power of an effective spell is similar to that of a prayer answered. The agency is different, but the effect and objective process is comparable.

The will that patterns the change can be yours, or that of one or other deity, or of the Universe. The magician, shaman or priest may pray to, call upon, supplicate, appease or otherwise persuade – or sometimes command – a spiritual entity or subtle natural forces to perform some act or behave in a certain way. He or she may pull on the threads of the Web of Wyrd, journey to the Ancestors or the Otherworld to act out a mythopoetic reality, present suitable archetypal symbols to the subconscious mind, or set up the appropriate patterns in the memeplex we call reality to effect change.

The change can be in the outer world, or within yourself. The intent and outcome can be good or bad – magic is not black or white, but the magician's motivations may be! And the outcome can be different to that expected – good intentions can pave roads to wrong destinations.

Magic has always been part of human life. Similar patterns of folk magic exist regardless of formal religion or belief system. Religion itself uses magic, although it employs different terminology. All too often the magician is a saintly follower of the religion if they are a priest engaged in orthodox practices, but a 'witch' or 'evil sorcerer' if a lay practitioner, outside holy orders or using unorthodox practices.

Magic in the museum?

Museums, at best, are temples of culture, but they have become highly secular. The legacy of the old missionary museums, gathering idols from converted heathens and neutralising them in trophy rooms, has perhaps persisted into the materialist museum ethos, such that matters spiritual, religious or magical tend to be suppressed, contained or, at best, treated as superstitious aspects of art history. So, Nigel Pennick could write, just five years ago, that magical items in museums are diminished and neutralised, frozen in time, with their captive narratives edited by their curators for their exhibition value – or lost in storage.[1]

He has a point – a strong one. I have seen many instances of poor presentation in museums that don't understand, or in some cases (thankfully a diminishing number) respect what they have. Without naming institutions, I would include:

- object 'branding' – where accession numbers and even descriptions are written across an item, even a ritual mask (an accession number is important for identification and locating things, but *how* you attach it matters);
- objects from colonised peoples presented in displays from the coloniser's perspective;
- magical items presented and described in a patronising style, as 'superstitious';
- ritual equipment displayed incongruously (such as a Levantine horned altar upside-down, as if the horns were feet!); or
- out-of-date histories regurgitated because they are the popular stories and the latest thinking (or, indeed, what a practitioner says) is not deemed important enough.

[1] Nigel Pennick (2021) *The Ancestral Power of Amulets, Talismans, and Mascots: Folk Magic in Witchcraft and Religion*, Destiny, pp. 275-280.

But things are changing. One driving force is the recognition of the validity of the worldviews of formally colonised peoples and the sterling work towards reconciliation being undertaken by an increasing number of museums, with the Pitt Rivers in Oxford and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge perhaps being the leading lights in this regard, together with the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG: see below).

In Norfolk, there are Pagans on the staff of the Museums Service. The Sainsbury Institute for Art brings together a group of organisations working to similar ends, including the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (SCVA) at the University of East Anglia and the South Asia Collection in the city centre, which, since its beginnings in 1979, has always worked with local craftspeople, particularly from marginalised communities, across the sub-continent. And the SCVA now asks its visitors to relate to the art and artefacts on display as *living entities*.

This sort of approach has been slower in its application to domestic culture and, indeed, cultures of the ancient past, but again, things are getting better. There seems to be less fear in admitting to having a spiritual, religious or magical perspective – even a Pagan one – in British museums than a decade ago.

More museums are treating religious matters in a sensitive, inclusive fashion. The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life & Art in Glasgow, once under threat, is flourishing again and a new Faith Museum has opened in Bishop Auckland, County Durham.

Major museums have in any case been holding special exhibitions related to magic or material religion, from the Ashmolean's *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* (2018-2019) or Bristol's *Do you believe in magic?* (2019-2021), to the Fitzwilliam's *Madonnas and Miracles* (2017), the BM's landmark *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* (2012) or Norwich Castle Museum's *The Art of Faith* (2010).

But when English Heritage re-opened the Neolithic flint mines at Grimes Graves (near Thetford) to the public in 2024, the organisers of the opening event invited Val Thomas not only to speak, but also to perform a blessing. Things have certainly moved on!

There seems also to be a greater sense of openness and inclusivity as regards spiritual and religious identities in non-specialist museums, although religious literacy could do with enhancement, but not for lack of will. Whilst the over-

arching Inter-Faith Network for the UK folded under the previous government, local inter-faith groups still provide a resource that museums can tap into.

What's more, there is help within the museums and heritage sector itself. There is a highly positive willingness to share expertise in the museums world and one way this manifests is through the diverse organisations known as 'subject specialist networks' (SSNs). This is a dynamic field, dependent on the time and energy of busy museum staff and, often, volunteers. Sadly, one valuable resource, the Society for Decorative Arts Collections, was lost a couple of years ago and the Money and Medals Network looked vulnerable until its administration was taken on by the University of Warwick.

Some SSNs are long-established, with strong institutional support, like MEG, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2025, whereas others are new and dependent on small groups of enthusiastic people.

One such is the Folklore Museums Network (FMN), founded in 2020 by Peter Hewitt, who is also Museum Galleries Scotland's Intangible Cultural Heritage Officer and used to work at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. The FMN exists "to identify, display and disseminate knowledge about the material folklore collections held in museums across the UK".

The Religion, Collections & Heritage Group (RCHG) was founded in 2021 and exists to raise public understanding of religion by increasing knowledge of collections of religious interest and enhancing their interpretation and care, linking and supporting those who look after them. Taking a broad definition of religion, RCHG has taken full advantage of digital conferencing to bring together a global audience. Its third international virtual conference, in October 2024, brought together speakers from Africa, China and the USA as well as the UK, in a programme that was interesting to curate due to the time differences! As well as organising RCHG's conference, I am currently Interim Chair…

Earlier that year, I also spoke at a ground-breaking workshop on objects with souls, organised by veteran specialist on religious objects in museums, Crispin Paine, and hosted by the Panacea Museum in Bedford. With discussions ranging from how to deal with 'secret' objects of power from colonised source communities to the treatment of Christian relics, from care of objects with agency to the question of offerings, a profoundly thought-provoking day will, it is hoped, lead on to other things. I have been asked to organise a similar workshop on Paganism and magic in museums next year.

Another ground-breaking initiative took place in 2024. ‘Amulets, charms, and witch bottles’ involved Museum of London Archaeology, Peter Hewitt, Christina Oakley-Harrington (Treadwells Bookshop, London), Sarah-Jane Harknett (University of Cambridge Museums) and Kirsty Ryder. The main focus was a workshop at Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, which brought together Pagans, Witches, curators, academics and artists to discuss magical objects in museums. This has helped bridge the gaps between Pagans and magical practitioners on the one hand and museums on the other, and Christina Oakley-Harrington has put together some initial guidance for better terminology for use in museum catalogues to describe magical objects.

Magical museums

But, of course, there are already some specialist magical museums – reflecting the fact that mainstream museums have traditionally not served the subject or the community well…

The ‘national’ in this area is, of course, the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (MWM) in Boscastle, Cornwall. As the pre-eminent magical museum in the country, MWM has an outstanding collection of witchcraft and magical artefacts, together with an important library. It is now joined in Cornwall (Falmouth) by Steve Patterson’s Gwithti An Pystri – A cabinet of folklore and magic.

There is the Doreen Valiente Foundation, based in Brighton, which is involved in temporary exhibitions. In London, there is the Viktor Wynd Museum Of Curiosities, Fine Art & Natural History. Edinburgh now has a Museum of Magic, Fortune-Telling & Witchcraft as well.

In East Anglia, we have the developing Ickeny Collection (East Anglian Museum of Magic and Mythology), which now incorporates the Living Norfolk Magic contemporary collecting project. We have yet to graduate from pop-up to permanent displays, but we’re working on it!

(There is also the Essex Witch Museum, but its vision is “to collate and preserve the history of the witch trials held in Essex” rather than be a collections-based museum of witchcraft and magic.)

Specialist museums tend to have a closer knowledge of the objects and more-than-objects in their collections, and have a better idea of how to handle them. Any decent museum will look after things in a material sense (conservation-grade storage, controlled micro-environments, *etc.*), but magical museums will

also take into account the impact of its actions on the objects and their spirits or power (and anthropological museums are catching up). For instance, ensouled or powerful items should not be marked, especially obtrusively (accession numbers can be linked to them in other ways) if they are not to be disempowered, and neither should the standard pest-control method of freezing be employed. Powerful items may need to be housed specially to safeguard other items (or people). The MWM displays curses immediately opposite a display of apotropaic (evil-averting) devices. However, whilst these specialist museums exist, they all have their own collecting focus and, critically, space limitations.

The Ickeny Collection, for instance, has aspirations to become an archive for the Pagan community locally, but we do not currently have the space or time to fulfil that. It is also developing a research library to accompany the collection and, similarly, Norwich Pagan Moot started a Pagan library some years ago – and this is currently being re-catalogued with a view to making it available again after a hiatus of a decade!

The general museums landscape

But much of magical importance is to be found in 'ordinary' museums – and we have now established that things are getting better! Some collections are large and very important, such as the Clarke collection of charms in Scarborough or the Lovett collections in London (charms and amulets) and Edinburgh (dolls).

In the UK, there are many museums serving their local areas, often council-run, but also community-based charities and trusts, not forgetting the larger number of small, private museums that operate on a shoe-string and can be highly specialised, but are a vibrant part of the museum sector. In addition, there are the major museums run by universities in, for instance, Manchester, Oxford and Cambridge, and, of course, the 'nationals', including the British Museum, V&A, Natural History Museum, Imperial War Museum, Tate, Horniman, *etc*. Other heritage bodies, particularly The National Trust, English Heritage, Cadw and Historic Scotland, also have collections relevant to the places they conserve.

Some independent institutions have their own collections; relevant examples here include the collections of local Masonic lodges and the national Library and Museum of Freemasonry, the Wellcome Collection and the Royal College of Physicians Museum. Similarly, there is a network of county archives or record offices, as well as specialist archives held by a variety of organisations. A healthy burgeoning of folklore centres and repositories is also evident. For instance, a

new East Anglian Folklore Centre opened in Colchester, Essex, in 2024, complementing the wonderful work of the Norfolk Folklore Society.

Overall, it is a complicated picture, but private museums tend to be overlooked and indeed are looked down upon, such that there is a real gap between established museums, which have at least managed to find the financial resources to set themselves up as publicly accountable trusts and start out on the road to 'museum accreditation' (in addition to premises, staff, display, conservation and research costs), and the plethora of labour-of-love museums that are vulnerable to lack of money and discontinuities in their creators' ability to continue, whilst not being able to gain access to funding streams available to better funded and accredited institutions.

Not surprisingly, this means that small museums with some private money behind them and a greater profit-orientation are more likely to survive, yet this approach is exactly why 'private' is considered a bad thing in the museums world! Local museums – of whatever kind – need your support!

What to do with magical things?

I don't mean the deeply personal things that we feel should be destroyed, nor spell residues that need to be cleansed away for spiritual hygiene as much as magical efficacy. Neither are we talking about ritual running orders printed from popular web-sites, nor that accumulation of crystals and feathers on the mantelpiece that is *really not* an altar! No, I mean items from years of working magically, researching, writing, creating and, indeed, collecting. The important things. Things that can't just be thrown away or even, respectfully, be given to a charity shop.

What can we do with them when there's no room left, when we move house or, it comes to us all eventually, pass to the Summer Lands? You may have magical friends, mentors or trainees who can give them a good home or, if you're in a more formal magical group, there may even be rules about some things. If so, well and good. Otherwise?

Who would be interested?

From the perspective of someone looking to donate magical items – whether objects, manuscripts, art or books and magazines – to a museum or archive, there are various things to consider.

What do you want to achieve? Is it simply the preservation of items that speak for themselves? Are you offering something (such as a box of magazines) which may be of practical value to a library? Or are these items which actually help tell the story of prominent figures in the Pagan or magical community, or of that community itself? Is their significance purely local or are they of regional, national or even international importance?

Think about information too. Any museum will welcome as much information about items donated as can be given. Think about privacy, though. Do your notes talk about other identifiable people? What about people in photographs? Whilst complete information is preferable, historically speaking, do you have those other people's permission to make their names, associations and images public? Will archival material be digitised for on-line perusal? Is that appropriate? There *may* still be interest even if the material is to be kept confidential, but *specialist* collections may be more willing to take it for its future value.

Think then of the institutions or collections you might approach. What do they collect? What geographical area do they cover? Read their collecting policies. Local museums frequently have a focus on social history, but religion is increasingly recognised as part of this and significant local people will be of interest. Sometimes museums that are close to each other geographically have collecting boundaries which might not make sense in terms of local life, but which allow them to avoid treading on each others' toes.

If your local museum is more universal, it may well have more than one department, so that collections sometimes get split between them (even if of similar types of object). Would this reduce the relevance of some items or is the cohesion of the collection to be donated simply an artefact of ownership?

Equally, the collecting policy of a museum that may not seem relevant may make it the best option due to some other factor. It is sometimes surprising what turns up in collections. For instance, Norfolk Record Office has the correspondence course issued by Raymond Howard's Coven of Atho in the 1960s and an exercise book describing aspects of toad magic collected in 1958.[2]

[2] 'Remote Learning with the Coven of Atho': https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/2020/07/04/remote-learning-with-the-coven-of-atho/ . 'Norfolk's Ancient Animal Magic': https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/2023/03/23/norfolks-ancient-animal-magic/ .

Think also of the resources available to the museum or archive for conservation, cataloguing and access. Most items in museums are not on display (although MWM actually has a much higher proportion of its collection on display than the average museum).

Due diligence

Care must be taken, of course. Any reputable museum (public or private) should be able to give a clear statement of what can be expected to happen to items donated, as a written receipt for deposition.

Names vary, but an 'object entry' form may be issued when something is offered (or even left for identification) and a 'transfer of title' form can be used to acknowledge the change of ownership legally, both specifying the items involved and bearing terms and conditions. The collection is normally listed in an accession register linked to the general catalogue.

Similarly, museums are encouraged to have detailed collecting policies, setting out the kinds of things they collect, from where and when. All museums, big or small, have issues with storage space; usually what is on display is a small proportion of what is held (although that in store may be used for research as well). The collecting policy keeps the museum's holdings manageable as well as appropriate.

Trust goes beyond legal forms, of course. Some years ago, there was a scandal when a military museum accepted the donation of war medals, then decided they were not a useful addition to the collection and put them on an on-line auction site. They should never have been accepted in the first place or, if left for consideration, returned to the donor when deemed unsuitable. It is not only in small museums where procedures can break down, of course, as the recent British Museum collections scandal demonstrated.

Conclusion

Wherever magical items end up, their preservation will help the identity of Pagan and magical communities. There is no harm and much value in being able to look at and experience the creativity of other practitioners, and appreciate the physical evidence of the heritage we have built up.

Further information

Chris Wood (2017) *Temple of the Muses: Beyond the Secular Museum*: http://www.norwichsphere.org.uk/essays/templeofthemuses.pdf

Museums and collections

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic: https://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/

Gwithti An Pystri: https://www.stevepattersonantiquarian.com/museum.html

The Doreen Valiente Foundation: https://www.doreenvaliente.org/

The Viktor Wynd Museum: https://thelasttuesdaysociety.org/museum/

Museum of Magic, Fortune-Telling & Witchcraft: https://www.museummfw.com/

The Ickeny Collection: http://www.ickeny.co.uk/

The 'Amulets, charms, and witch bottles' project: https://www.mola.org.uk/get-involved/iaa-grants/partnerships-grants/amulets-charms-and-witch-bottles

Subject specialist networks

Folklore Museums Network: https://folkloremuseumsnetwork.org.uk/

Museum Ethnographers Group: https://museumethnographersgroup.org.uk/

Religion, Collections & Heritage Group: https://religioncollections.wordpress.com/

Patreon: An Ickeny Pilgrimage by Chris Wood: https://www.patreon.com/cw/ickeny