

Introduction to the Special Issue of *The Pomegranate* on Paganism, Art and Fashion

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This special issue of *The Pomegranate* on Paganism, Art and Fashion was inspired by the increase in the last few years of both extremely beautifully-styled and curated witchcraft and Pagan accounts on Instagram, often owned by young women who are also selling related products, and apparent interest in witchcraft and associated magical topics by fashion designers and magazines. Glamorous “witch” accounts on Instagram feature carefully composed and choreographed, beautiful images that rival the professional photography of fashion publications. In these romanticised visual vignettes young women adopting a witchy aesthetic are the stylists, models, and photographers, as well as business owners, mixing aesthetics, popularity and entrepreneurship together as part of an empowering fourth-wave-feminist-meets-New-Age package. Such accounts are made by and cater to the new, young, intersectional iGen witches, but fashion mega-brands are also realising the appeal of Pagan archetypes and subsequently plumbing the now decidedly vintage second-wave feminist penchant for female empowerment through the idea of the “Great Goddess”.

For luxury brand Dior’s Spring-Summer 2020 Couture collection, creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri commissioned the famous artist and heroine of the Goddess Spirituality movement, Judy Chicago, to design the set for the show which was installed at the Musée Rodin in Paris. Best known for *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), a sculptural installation that highlights the role of women in history with an elaborate 3-place table setting featuring hand-painted porcelain plates designed as stylised vulvas on embroidered runners (housed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum), Chicago’s design for Dior, titled *The Feminine Divine*, was based on her 1977 sculpture design, *Inflatable Mother Goddess*, the exterior of which evokes a Palaeolithic female figurine, while the interior suggests a vaginal canal.

Described in the press as “the mighty womb of a female deity,”¹ the set was decorated with twenty-one of Chicago’s trademark textile banners hanging from the ceiling along either side of the vaginal runway which featured embroidered textual provocations such as: What if women ran the world? Would buildings resemble wombs? Would old women be revered? Would God be female? Would the earth be protected? Inside the structure models paraded the season’s haute couture garments which were inspired by the Graeco-Roman *peplos* worn by goddesses depicted in classical art. The collaboration between Chiuri and Chicago aimed to evoke the “pagan

¹ Hettie Judah, “If women ruled the world: Dior’s Judy Chicago tribute is more than a gimmick.” *The Guardian*, 22 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jan/21/dior-judy-chicago-feminist-banners>

worship of goddesses and the struggle of women artists to find their own means of expression within the female-excluding patriarchal system of western art.”²

Since becoming Creative Director of Dior in 2016, and its first female artistic director since the company’s founding in 1946, Chiuri has been inspired by and promoted the work of women artists including Georgia O’Keefe, Niki de Saint Phalle, Leonor Fini, and Penny Slinger, as well that of as female art historian Linda Nochlin. Rather than simply being a marketing device, however, Chiuri is genuinely passionate about feminist art and believes that it deserves a bigger platform. Although today Judy Chicago’s art could be criticised as being essentialist and, to those familiar with her oeuvre (spanning 50 years), may seem to be old news, perhaps for a new generation of fashion consumers it isn’t. Chiuri, whose cultural adviser and muse is her 23-year old daughter Rachele Regini, sees the 2020 show as “bringing the reference points of female power in the past to a new generation” and explains that “the new generation has raised big questions about gender, race, environment and cultures that we have to reflect in fashion.”³

While a feminist artistic response to female oppression and environmental and species injustice has been apparent within the art world – although not at its commercial forefront – for decades, as is evident in Katy Deepwell’s article “Feminist interpretations of witches and the witch craze in contemporary art by women”, one wonders whether the use of broader “Pagan” and “magical” subject matter as artistic inspiration within the fashion industry is always a good thing. Artist and designer, Charlotte Rodgers, believes that it is not. In her article, “High Glamour: Magical Clothing and Talismanic Fashion”, she reads the fashion industry’s appropriation of Pagan iconography as shallow commercialism that cashes in on what will ultimately prove to be a passing trend.

What about when Pagans themselves are behind the commercialisation of Pagan imagery through fashion-esque styling? Ross Downing, in his article “Hashtag Heathens – Contemporary Germanic Pagan feminine visuals on Instagram” interprets the commercial aspect of prominent female Heathens’ profiles on Instagram positively, seeing it as part of the wider project of the communication of Heathenry, in particular by young women whose voices outside the internet are often drowned out by the predominance of males within the religion. Of course self-fashioning through clothing is also part of the more right-wing forms of Heathenry, as Mariusz Filip explains in his article, “Wolves Amongst the Sheep: Looking Beyond the Aesthetics of

² Sara Radin, “Judy Chicago Designed Dior’s Runway To Look Like A Birth Canal.” *Refinery29*, 22 January 2020. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/01/9247308/dior-spring-2020-haute-couture-collection>

³ Jess Cartner-Morley, “Clothes fail to match ambition at Christian Dior’s Paris show.” *The Guardian*, 21 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jan/20/clothes-fail-to-match-ambition-at-diors-paris-show>; Vivian Chen, “Dior’s Maria Grazia Chiuri: what you need to know about how she is shaking up the fashion world.” *South China Morning Post*, 27 September 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/news-trends/article/2167470/diors-maria-grazia-chiuri-what-you-need-know-about-how>

Polish National Socialism”, in which he analyses the dress ideology of the Zakon Zadrugi ‘Północny Wilk’ (Order of Zadruga ‘Northern Wolf’).

Contemporary Paganisms often look to the past and to pre-Christian civilisations as sources for knowledge, wisdom and personal empowerment. The use of Pagan, magical and goddess imagery in recent fashion design is intended to be aesthetically interesting and, as Chiuri and Chicago claim for Dior’s current collection, empowering for women. Female empowerment through connecting with ancient Pagan goddesses is a prominent theme in Áine Warren’s article, “The Morrigan as a ‘Dark Goddess’: A Goddess Re-imagined Through Therapeutic Self-narration of Women on Social Media.” Here the self-fashioning of Morrigan devotees as survivors of trauma is shared in confessional mode through videos uploaded to YouTube.

But is a focus on empowerment through the aesthetics of magic, ancient gods, gender, race, and sartorial savvy really just a case of self-obsessed naval-gazing, based on historically-inaccurate fiction as seen in novels and television series that distort the findings of academic history and archaeology? Diane Purkiss’s article, “Getting it Wrong: The problems with Reinventing the Past”, interrogates historical fictions that have found widespread acceptance by Pagans as well as within broader popular culture. Purkiss argues that “despite good intentions, much of the enabling and empowering simply pushes contemporary Paganism into the safe but relatively ineffectual space of self-help”, consequently “we risk creating powerless religions...that cannot address the overpowering emotions that accompany human life.”

Through the examination of ways in which Paganism, modern Goddess worship, witchcraft and magic are depicted in visual art, fashion, literature, on television and the internet, this special issue of *The Pomegranate* opens up under-researched areas in the study of Contemporary Paganisms. While treading some familiar ground, the contributors to this issue on Paganism, Art and Fashion uncover new and surprising manifestations of Pagan religion in the world today. In particular these include issues around identity-construction, gender, race, ethnicity, self-care, personal growth, popular culture, and the aesthetic intersection of DIY Pagan visual styling with professional, commercial fashion design. Social media platforms function as spaces of therapy, counselling and empowerment and also as places where the amateur construction of glamour rivals, and thus blurs the boundaries between, Pagan style and the expensively curated mode of the professional hi-luxe fashion industry.

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