The New-York Historical Society presents The Salem Witch Trials: Reckoning and Reclaiming. Even after 300 years, Salem’s witch trials remain a defining example of intolerance and injustice in American history. The extraordinary events of 1692–3 led to the deaths of 25 innocent people, the vast majority of whom were women. Organized by the Peabody Essex Museum, the exhibition includes tangible fragments from the past that illuminate the real lives of Salem’s residents: those accused of witchcraft, their accusers, and those who defended them against legal charges, risking their own lives and reputations in the process. The exhibition seeks to ask: In moments of injustice, what role do we play?

Alexander McQueen (1969–2010)
**Evening dress** (detail), from the *In Memory of Elizabeth How*, Salem, 1692, Ready-to-wear collection, fall/winter 2007
Velvet, glass beads, and satin
Peabody Essex Museum, Gift of anonymous donors in London who are friends of Peabody Essex Museum, 2011.44.1
Photo by Bob Packert

For centuries, the story of the Salem witch trials has captured the popular imagination and stands as a defining example of intolerance and injustice in American history. The extraordinary events of 1692–3 in Salem, Massachusetts led to the deaths of 25 innocent women, men, and children. Women bore the greatest burden of suspicion and violence. The exhibition includes contemporary responses to this moment in history, including a gown by fashion designer Alexander McQueen who had familial links to the trials.
Heinrich Institoris (1430-1505)

*Malleus Maleficarum*, London: 1669

Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society

This treatise in Latin by German Inquisitor Heinrich Institoris was a bestseller, containing instructions for finding and legally prosecuting witches, including the use of torture to obtain confessions and the death penalty as punishment. It signaled out poor, elderly, unmarried women as the most likely threats to Christian society. Originally published in 1486, this edition would have been in circulation at the time of the Salem trials.

Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680)

*Saducismus Triumphatus*, London: 1700

Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society

Featuring intricate woodcuts, Glanvill’s treatise provides a point-by-point rebuttal to any skepticism about the existence of witchcraft. His text shows that despite widespread belief in the occult, there were also vigorous debates about its existence and how authorities should respond to its threat.

David Teniers II (1610-1690)

*Incantation Scene*, ca. 1650-1690

Oil on copper mounted on masonite

New-York Historical Society, Gift of Thomas Jefferson Bryan, 1867.175

Witch trial transcripts were widely circulated during the 16th and 17th centuries, influencing literary narratives and artistic imagery, such as this painting from Flanders. Witches were almost exclusively depicted as women, regularly accompanied by demons, skeletons, and boiling pots.
Historically misunderstood and maligned, Tituba was a central figure in the Salem witch trials. She was enslaved by Reverend Samuel Parris, whose daughter, Betty, and niece, Abigail Williams, were two of the original accusers. Parris brought Tituba to Massachusetts from the sugar plantations of Barbados. Often misremembered as Black, it is more likely that Tituba was of Arawak descent, kidnapped from Guiana to labor for this crucial colonial commodity. Out of fear for her survival and after beatings from Parris, Tituba confessed and later disappeared from the legal record.

Attributed to the shop of James Symonds, Salem, Massachusetts
Chest owned by the Osborn family, 1680-1705
Oak, maple, and pine
Peabody Essex Museum, Museum purchase, 1983, 135944

Few families were as severely impacted by the witch trials as the Towne family. Three sisters, Rebecca Nurse, Mary Esty, and Sarah Cloyce—older, well-respected married women with large extended families—were accused of witchcraft. The Osborns, landowners and farmers, signed a village petition in 1692 defending Rebecca Nurse.

Artist in Salem, Massachusetts
Tape loom owned by Rebecca Putnam, 1690-1710
Oak
Peabody Essex Museum, Museum purchase, made possible by an anonymous donor, 2001, 138181
Photo by Kathy Tarantola

Rebecca Putnam was part of an influential and prominent family that actively accused and testified against neighbors during the trials. She also owned this household object, which reveals how folkloric and Puritan beliefs could coexist in tension. Carved into the handle of this loom are symbols—a heart, crosses, pinwheels or daisy wheels, and a human face. While some may be emblems of Christian belief, others relate to folk magic practices for warding off evil.
John Proctor Sr., who owned this sundial, was an affluent farmer and tavern keeper. In April 1692, young women accused him and his wife Elizabeth of witchcraft. While imprisoned, John wrote to Boston ministers begging them to intervene on behalf of innocent victims. Two petitions signed by more than 50 neighbors supported the Proctors and attested to their innocence. These pleas were disregarded. John was hanged, though the judges granted Elizabeth a stay of execution due to pregnancy. She later gave birth to a son in prison.

Philip English settled in Salem Town about 1670 and married Mary Holingworth. English’s success in international maritime trade provided him with resources to build a mansion overlooking Collins Cove, which attracted jealousy and suspicion. In April 1692, trial magistrates issued warrants to arrest the couple and, within a month, both were jailed. However, they escaped to New York, where religious leaders disapproved of the proceedings in Salem. In their absence, the Salem sheriff seized their belongings. English spent the remainder of his life seeking exoneration and restitution of his possessions.
Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society

Salem’s legal proceedings came to an abrupt halt in October 1692 as the mounting death toll alongside widespread chaos provoked a prevailing sense that the trials had gone too far. An influential clergyman, Cotton Mather, provided contemporary justifications of the controversial trials. He and his father, Increase, attacked witches as the embodiment of evil and defended the court’s verdicts and executions, but also voiced discomfort with the court’s admission of spectral evidence. Only verifiable evidence or witnesses, he argued, should “turn the scale” of justice in court going forward.

Alexander McQueen (1969-2010)

*Evening dress*, from the *In Memory of Elizabeth How, Salem, 1692*, Ready-to-wear collection, fall/winter 2007
Velvet, glass beads, and satin
Peabody Essex Museum, Gift of anonymous donors in London who are friends of Peabody Essex Museum, 2011.44.1
Photo by Bob Packert

In 2006, fashion designer Alexander McQueen learned that his ancestor, Elizabeth Jackson How, was executed during the Salem witch trials. His curiosity piqued, he traced How’s history, learning that she stands out among the accused because the documentary record of her case is unusually complete, from the initial accusation to her exoneration in 1711. McQueen’s archival discoveries became a catalyst for the creation in 2007 of an entire ready-to-wear collection, *In Memory of Elizabeth How, Salem 1692*. McQueen explores the injustice of her execution through symbols and imagery associated with witchcraft and the occult.
Examination of Elizabeth How, May 31, 1692
Reproduction
Phillips Library, on deposit from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives, DEP 01, box 8, folder 9

This preliminary examination was meant to determine whether the accusations against How had enough merit to present the case to a grand jury. It notes that several accusers suffered fits, pinching, and pricking in the presence of How, but miraculously became well when she touched them. How unequivocally states her ignorance of witchcraft and innocence.

Frances F. Denny (b. 1984)
Karen, (Brooklyn, New York), 2016, from Major Arcana: Portraits of Witches in America series
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York, NY

While none of the Salem accused called themselves a “witch,” many today have reclaimed the identity. In Major Arcana: Portraits of Witches in America, photographer Frances F. Denny, who is descended from one of the judges involved in the trials, gives new meaning to the word “witch” through her portraits of modern people across the country.

“I never considered myself a witch. I consider myself the descendant of healers. The granddaughter of medicine people...many would call me a witch because of my knowledge of things that are intangible and not always seen.” –Karen

Frances F. Denny (b. 1984)
Keavy, (Brooklyn, New York), 2016, from Major Arcana: Portraits of Witches in America series
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York, NY

“For me, the word ‘witch’ and my genderqueer identity are linked. Both feel like words that describe a facet of my identity that might once have been hidden, but now I embrace; and both are identities that fit me more cleanly than any other, and that bring me a sense of euphoria and power.” –Keavy
Frances F. Denny (b. 1984)  
**Shine**, (New York, New York), 2017, from *Major Arcana: Portraits of Witches in America* series  
Archival pigment print  
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York, NY

“My brand of witchcraft is my own: a wild, eclectic brew of hoodoo that is Black and Indigenous folk spirituality and shamanism. I am a solitary witch and the woods are my church. I pray in nature and use the elements to heighten my rituals and ceremonies. I use tools such as drums, rattles, animal bones, feathers, crystals, and sigils, and I channel animal spirits, spirit guides, and ancestors. I pray with my full body and spirit, not on my knees.” –Shine

Frances F. Denny (b. 1984)  
**Leonore**, (Montpelier, Vermont), 2016, from *Major Arcana: Portraits of Witches in America* series  
Archival pigment print  
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York, NY

“We need to wake up from the idea that witchcraft is just an aesthetic...in a culture as racist and patriarchal and transphobic and homophobic and materialistic as ours is, if you don’t see the way witchcraft is radical and revolutionary, you have some waking up to do.” –Leonore

Thomas Satterwhite Noble (1835-1907)  
**Witch Hill (The Salem Martyr)**, 1869  
Oil on canvas  
New-York Historical Society, Gift of the children of Thomas S. Noble and Mary C. Noble, in their memory, 1939.251

The young woman who posed as the condemned witch was a descendant of one of the hanged victims. While the men in the background look on in suspicion and anger, her figure inspires sympathy, forcing the viewer to reconsider the narrative of the female witch.
Although the practice and symbolism of modern witchery is diverse and expansive, tarot has historically been an important entry into the occult. Originally used for game-playing, the allegorical images of the tarot cards have been used to read fortunes for centuries. The term Major Arcana refers to the central cards in a tarot deck. This 19th-century deck from New-York Historical’s collection comes from Switzerland.