

# Broomsticks

by Silvia Bombardini



Prada Talisman

There's a joke that Slavoj Žižek, the Marxist philosopher and psychoanalyst, likes to tell at his public lectures.

It goes something like this. A friend visits Danish physicist Niels Bohr at his country house, and notices a horseshoe above the entrance door. In Northern Europe, superstition has it that horseshoes are lucky: to hang one above the threshold will keep out the evil spirits. *'I thought you were a scientist!'* the friend exclaims, *'do you believe in that sort of thing?'* *'Of course not, I'm not crazy'* answers Bohr. *'But why is it there then?'* *'Because I was told that it works even if you don't believe in it'*. It is perhaps with the same rationale that we should consider *Prada Talisman*, Prada's first range of unisex jewels. *"What makes a pendant a talisman? It is only named such after it has performed its magic"* notes the webpage, *"whether these elegant compositions of wood, shell, labradorite, amethyst [...] will indeed ward off evil, summon good will, or guarantee luck, depends in part on one's trust in the power of symbols"*. Žižek maintains that it's with both scepticism and a curious communal compliance that most of us observe religious rites today, especially as it pertains to Christianity. As Prada politely declines to guarantee the efficacy of its product, it anticipates a similar response

**from its customer base – of intrigue, and a willingness to participate in the style without feeling pressured to entertain too seriously the mystical attributes its name implies.**

But let us get back to that all-powerful horseshoe. Žižek’s theory is controversial by design because Christianity is grounded in what’s supposed to be a utterly sincere belief in God. But the *‘power of symbols’* as it were, of superstitions and rituals, reaches back further and maybe further forward than that in the history of humanity. In 2017, all of it is needed – and if it’s safe to assume that the talismans will sell, it’s not only because of their ornamental beauty, or Prada’s reliable cultural sway. According to a 2012 Pew Research study, one fifth of all Americans and one third of the youth are religiously unaffiliated, but 37% of these still classify themselves as *‘spiritual’*. Wicca, a Pagan Witchcraft tradition, is widely reported to be the fastest growing religious movement in the country. A noncommittal approach toward its two deities – the Moon Goddess and the Horned God – may have much to do with it: *“the Craft is one of the few religious viewpoints totally compatible with modern science, allowing total scepticism about even its own methods, myths and rituals”* High Priestess Margot Adler famously wrote. Wicca suits our time because it can coexist in harmony with rational thought. Still, it is precisely when rationality fails us that we most devotedly turn to magic. On days of uncertainty toward our future and disillusionment that can’t be reasoned away, in the front rows of the women’s marches, witches are casting spells to elevate the consciousness of political leaders, or remove them from office should all else fail. Lana Del Rey confirmed on Twitter a few months ago that she casts her own too, every waning crescent moon at midnight.



conical bra at Stella McCartney, FW17

For witches to take politics seriously shouldn't come as a surprise, only a handful of centuries ago they were hunted and burnt at the stake. The scapegoats of all society's troubles, accusations of sorcery would befall those who lived at its margins. In modern times, its practises are reclaimed to unite the oppressed in resistance and defiance: everyone from indigenous groups to immigrants, and women, who for such accusations over the course of history have suffered the most. It is perhaps telling that Wicca first spread across the United States at the end of the 60s, riding the wave of the gay and women's liberation movements, and that in the 70s a variant of it developed that refused to worship the Horned God. Indeed, witchhood and feminism were often so tightly intertwined, some scholars have argued they might just be one and the same. The renaissance of both in the present day points to the urge to protect, by supernatural means if necessary, some of the rights and freedoms second-wave feminists have fought so hard for back then – which may be once again, well, at stake.

As a result, the pervasive presence of witch lore and symbolism across all sites of cultural production is as hard to ignore as it is to resist: from magazines like *Sabat* to films like *The Love Witch* and the promised sequel to 1996 cult-classic *The Craft*, we're drawn in by her powers and our nostalgia. Earlier this year, an exhibition titled *What Does Our Future Hold?* opened in London for one night only. Co-curated by The Coven, a feminist art collective, it invited 50+ young artists to redraw a more inclusive tarot deck, and tarot readings too were done on the evening. Karen Vogel and Vicki Noble had done something similar in the late 70s, drawing their Motherpeace Tarot in which most of the figures are women of colour. Some of their cards – Death, the Tower, the Five of Swords and the Priestess of Wands – were featured in Dior's 2018 resort collection, and Maria Grazia Chiuri told Vogue she'd like to have Noble read tarots in person at Dior's Paris flagship store someday. Whereas at her fall 2017 show, Stella McCartney sent girls down the runway in self-assertive conical bras, chanting "*don't you fuck with my energy*" to the notes of *Brujas* by Princess Nokia. In the song, the rapper recasts herself as the supreme witch of her coven. Coincidentally or not, the Cone of Power refers in Witchcraft to the practice of raising energy by chanting in a circle while holding hands. Sarah Burton for Alexander McQueen was inspired instead by a Cloutie Tree she came upon in Cornwall: a site of pilgrimage, people tie strips of cloth, 'cloutie', to its branches as tokens for wishes and prayers. Tim Blanks aptly described her floaty floor-sweeping gowns, embroidered with Druidic and alchemical symbols and trailing threads, as a "*celebration of female paganism*". For a more casual alternative one should consider Preen's SS17 polo shirts monogrammed with pentagrams, or Aries' streetwear staples printed in capitals with the word 'PAGANS'.

We might still think ourselves too rational to participate in occult rites. Still, we'll pick up these styles because they look good, or maybe we wish to honour witches for their womanly wisdom and resilience. But when we have the tools, the confidence, and plenty of good enough reasons, surely it wouldn't make sense not to put them to use? We don't believe it will work – just maybe it will, even if we don't.