

Class explores witches' history

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AMHERST – As Halloween approaches, more than a few will don the familiar pointy black hat and hold on to that broomstick as they head out to a party or a neighbor's doorstep for treats.

But those images are more than just costume. They hearken to a time when women were killed because some feared they held imagined powers.

"It's a very unfortunate sinister association with (witches)," said Kyle Frackman, Five College Lecturer in German.

He is teaching a class called "Witches: Myth and Reality" at Amherst College, in which he looks at the history and "connects it to the (images) of the present day." The history helps explain contemporary iconography, he said.

Hollywood has a lot to do with people's images and beliefs about witches, with the green-faced witch in the "Wizard of Oz" looming large. There are witches in today's popular culture as well, appearing in HBO's "True Blood," for example.

Their association with Halloween comes from a Wiccan celebration called samhain on Oct. 31 which is a time for the "honoring of ancestors. It's celebrating nature and darkness" and was seen as a transition to All Saints Day, celebrated by Catholics the following day.



Two witches on broomsticks from "Le Champion des Dames" ("The Champion of Women" 1451) by Martin Le Franc depict an image of the way witches were portrayed.

It was also believed that "a lot of spirits would come and witches would convene at this time." He said some people were afraid "witches would do harm."

Witches were believed to be "almost exclusively women."

Women who were "inherently lustful" were thought to be witches. People believed they had the power to fly and could cause crop damage and had "relationships with the devil."

He said "one of the challenges of the course is to get them (students) to understand how people thought in that period."

The class is more popular than he ever imagined.

What he envisioned as seminar for 10 to 12 is about

three times the size and made up of those studying women and gender, those fascinated with the idea of witchcraft because of the Salem witch trials and two neo-pagans who are Wiccan practitioners.

Since the class is meeting on Halloween, they will talk about some of the images such as where the pointy hat came from – it's linked to the Puritans.

While the course is new at Amherst, Frackman said he learned much of what he's teaching from his University of Massachusetts advisor Susan Cocalis of the German Department, who has taught a class there for years. Frackman teaches at UMass but is on loan, he said, to Amherst College for the year.