

Exhibition

Periods on display

The silence, shame, and stigma surrounding menstruation are increasingly being challenged from various cultural domains. In a bold, comical, and highly digestible book, *It's About Bloody Time. Period.* (2019), Emma Barnett busts taboos about menstruation. Others have focused on period poverty—the lack of access to sanitary products and safe, hygienic spaces in which to use them. In some settings, period poverty, combined with shame and insufficient knowledge about menstruation, can lead to missing school, thus threatening girls' education. From among a new wave of activists stepping up to address this issue came director Rayka Zehtabchi and producer Melissa Berton's Oscar-winning documentary film, *Period. End of Sentence.* (2018), which follows a group of young women in an Indian village as they learn how to operate a machine that makes low-cost sanitary pads, empowering the women economically and challenging stigmas. And on the heels of that documentary is a new book by Anita Diamant, *Period. End of Sentence. A New Chapter in the Fight for Menstrual Justice* (2021). Weaving together reclaimed traditions with personal accounts from menstruators around the world, Diamant shows just how much our stories matter.

Now, building on this momentum is a new space dedicated to menstruation: an exhibition entitled *Periods: A Brief History* at the Vagina Museum in London, UK. One of the red threads running through the exhibition is the dominance of myths and taboos about menstruation from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome to the present day. Dovetailing with that theme is a focus on the history of medicine. Taking a historical approach felt like a natural step for the Vagina Museum, according to its director,

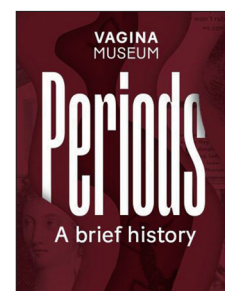
Florence Schechter. "One of the questions that we always get at the Vagina Museum is 'what did people do in the past with their periods?'," she told me. Under the curation of Sarah Creed, the exhibition takes a broad historical sweep, beginning with prehistory and cave art, and moving through the history of medicine to modern activism.

As the exhibition explores, menstrual blood was prescribed as part of medical cures in ancient Egypt, but in the Roman Empire Pliny the Elder wrote in *Naturalis Historia* that "contact with [menstrual blood] turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seed in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees fall off". This oscillation between the positive and negative associations of menstrual blood persisted throughout the middle ages and early modern Europe, although negative framings predominated. Menstrual blood appeared as a cure for leprosy in the 12th century, and yet it was more commonly regarded as toxic, and menstruation was even viewed as a curse: as the physical manifestation of the sin of Eve. Even as a more recognisably modern medical approach developed, many of these ideas persisted in new forms. One panel in this exhibition focuses on how, in 1920 in Vienna, the physician Béla Schick took an experimental approach to the supposed toxicity of menstrual blood. Participants were given bunches of flowers to handle when on their period and Schick reported they wilted and died within 24 h. Despite the flowers having been left out of water, he concluded that menstrual blood was to blame. After follow-up experiments, Schick developed the theory of menotoxin, a poison created within menstrual blood. Scientific studies in the 1940s and 1950s continued to test

the menotoxin theory through experiments on animals, and the exhibition claims that the theory persisted in some quarters until the 1970s.

Historically, the anatomy and physiology of bodies with vaginas have been neglected—for example, the paucity in understanding of endometriosis and the way women's pain has been seen as more likely to have an emotional or psychological cause, a hangover from centuries of theorising about hysteria. This exhibition and the Vagina Museum as a whole aim to redress this lack of attention.

As some countries begin to move from lockdown confinement back into public spaces like museums, there is a tangible appreciation of those spaces. "There is a lot of



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<https://www.vaginamuseum.co.uk/exhibitions/currentexhibition>

For more on the **Vagina Museum** see <https://www.vaginamuseum.co.uk/>



The hidden story of Mary Kenner



In 1956, Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner, a Black American inventor, patented her design for an adjustable sanitary belt, which had a specific inbuilt pad pocket that was absorbent. She had designed the product in the early 1920s, but had to wait almost 30 years to patent her product due to the cost of patents being incredibly high. It was important to her to ensure her product was patented before showing it to commercial companies, as this would stop them from stealing her invention and producing it themselves.

Her belt was revolutionary, as it allowed the user to change their pads with easily whilst on the move, and her product was the first to have an adhesive to keep the pad in place - many believe this is the origin of why sanitary pads have a sticky underside to this day.

Sonn-Nap-Pack were the first company to show interest in developing Kenner's product in the late 1950s, however, when she met with their representative in person they immediately canceled their proposed deal upon finding out she was Black.

Over the next several years, racial prejudice throughout society stopped Kenner from producing her product, as she was continually turned down by large pharmaceutical companies across America and eventually her patent against her product ran out. This allowed commercial companies to launch their own patents against slight variants of Kenner's design and they were manufactured freely.



A reproduction image of Kenner's original design patent

Kenner never made any money from her invention, but became a florist, running several successful floral businesses in Washington DC. She died aged 94, in 2006, with very few ever knowing about her huge influence on the daily lives of millions. She continued to invent products until her old age, including aids for wheelchairs and cleaning devices, but her most successful invention remains the one she is written out of history for, and we hope to change that!

Ali Wright

power in being in a physical space", explains Schechter. "Immersing yourself in a physical space has a lot more of an impact on a person than reading about it, and forgetting a few seconds later", she says. Indeed, work in museum studies has highlighted how objects function as facts that add evidence for stories being told, and at the same time are understood from within a frame of subjectivity. Thus, the same object means different things to different people. Part of this meaning is created through the settings and sensory and emotional aspects of how an object is encountered and experienced. In fact, some argue that it is only in the engagement between subject and object—with the responses, emotions, and ideas that are generated—that subjects and objects come fully into being at

all; the perceiving subject and the perceived object become real to each other in that moment.

Menstruation is a difficult topic to collate museum objects around, but although the exhibition depends heavily on text, objects are also displayed that help create a rich experience and reveal how people who menstruate have dealt with their periods at different times. One of the most striking objects is some dried sphagnum moss, which used to be stuffed into cloth as a menstrual aid in Europe in the middle ages. Alongside period products from throughout the 20th century are replicas of a late-19th century menstrual apron and a sanitary belt from the 1970s displayed on manikins. Having never seen these objects before, encountering them gave me a deeper understanding of what life was like when menstruating before the convenience of tampons and menstrual cups.

The absence of other objects is also telling. One panel tells the story of Mary Kenner, a Black American inventor who designed a revolutionary sanitary belt with changeable pads in the 1920s, but had to wait until 1954 to patent it. Even then, Kenner was confronted by deep racial prejudice and was never able to produce her sanitary belt. Punctuating the display are various artworks: enormous custom-made menstrual cups and tampons, complete with red sequins that glitter as if in defiance of the centuries of negativity; standing in front of them felt like a celebration.

In addition to such encounters with objects, sharing your space with other visitors is another special quality of museums. Other people's presence changes the way we experience something, and Schechter describes how strangers often seem to strike up conversations with one another at the Vagina Museum. Schechter told me how, as a group of teenagers wondered to each other whether

a tampon "really could get lost up there", a woman in her mid-30s stepped in to share some of her wisdom. Perhaps a topic that has been a shame-soaked taboo for so long is bound to have this opening-up effect on people. Whatever the reason, there is clearly a desire to share and talk, which is channelled and facilitated by being in a shared physical space.

Despite the value of this space and its stories and physical collection, the Vagina Museum is now threatened with closure. Dedicated to vaginas, vulvas, and gynaecological anatomy, the Vagina Museum opened in Camden Market in 2019, after having existed as a series of pop-ups since 2017. The museum's first exhibition took on various myths and stigmas around vaginas in popular culture and aimed to educate visitors about anatomy and physiology. Although the museum made it through the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, its lease will not be renewed. They are pursuing leads for new premises. "If we don't get these matters resolved, the Vagina Museum won't exist as a physical space at the end of September", the museum posted on social media. The museum has a strong sense of social purpose and is bold and exuberant in its aim and messaging. The enthusiasm of visitors for the museum was tangible when I saw this exhibition. Having seen what the team did in this display with a small space and limited resources, it would be exciting to see what they would come up with in a larger space and with more backing.

The lockdown confinement has highlighted the importance of physical places like museums. This exhibition is particularly special in its focus on gendered histories, the medical visibility of women's bodies, and the cultural movement against menstrual shame and period poverty.

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