Driven by dark and powerful emotions, such as hatred, jealousy, and anger, people in Ancient Greece sometimes appealed to chthonic gods and demonic powers to avenge those who had wronged them. In “A World of Emotions: Ancient Greece, 700 BC-200 AD,” closing on June 24, you will find, among much else, artifacts used to curse an enemy and make him suffer in the way portrayed by his lead effigy. To ensure that such objects would reach the powers of the Underworld, the ill-wishers deposited them in the graves of people who had died young or violently, believing that their restless spirits were still lingering in the grave.

For more positive invocations of the supernatural, the Greeks also visited famous oracles, such as those of Delphi and Dodona, and posed questions to deities through oracular tablets, also featured in our exhibition. In one of them, from the late 5th century BC, two parents ask: “About the child: will it learn to talk?”

It is with these strange yet familiar objects in mind that we explore today’s Off Center topic: Oracles and Curses.
While best known as a filmmaker and actor, Orson Welles was also an accomplished magician. As he explains in this interview on late-night TV, he at one point taught himself to deliver psychic cold readings, a task at which he became quite adept. In fact, he almost began to believe in his own powers:

“It’s the occupational disease of fraudulent fortune tellers, and they have a name for it, it’s called becoming a shut eye. And a shut eye, in the argot of these crooks, is the fellow who begins to believe himself.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjPsnfysrp8
In the words of author Siri Hustvedt, art critic Robert Hughes “was a large, ruddy, passionate man with a mordant, propulsive prose style, an acid sense of humor and a keen appreciation for the ridiculous in American culture.” All of these qualities are on full display in “The Curse of Mona Lisa,” a documentary in which Hughes rages against the effect of market forces on contemporary art--an effect that, from his vantage, amounts to a kind of curse:

“From the 60s on, the belief in art as a way of making money began as a trickle, turned into a stream, and finally became a great, brown, roaring flood. And what resurfaces after this deluge? Art, stripped of everything but its market value.”

https://vimeo.com/62973616
The bible is filled with prophetic visions of the future, though none are quite as vivid or enduring as those in the Book of Revelation. Written 60 years after the death of Jesus, it paints an action-packed picture of the end times. As Princeton Professor Elaine Pagels explains in this interview with PBS, while the man who wrote Revelations was addressing the political conflicts of his time, Christians have consistently grafted their current realities onto that same set of images.

“This book is really about what we hope and what we fear, and it’s as though you take all of your nightmares about plague or destruction or war or torture or natural catastrophe, and you just wrap it into a huge single nightmare, you get the Book of Revelation. But it comes out with hope at the end, so it’s very appealing to people who live in times of huge turmoil.”

In 2018, NASA hopes to launch the James Webb Space Telescope. One hundred times more powerful than the Hubble, it will reveal unimaginable vistas of the cosmos. *Into the Unknown*, a documentary by Oscar-nominee Nathaniel Kahn, introduces us to the scientists who work on this telescope—a telescope that in its way will serve as an oracle, answering our questions about the future, about the past, and perhaps even about the existence of life on other planets.

“We don’t know what we’re going to see, because we’ve never observed in this region before, to this depth before, and every time we’ve done this as a species, we’ve discovered new things.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnpZzPAsz1U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnpZzPAsz1U)
Oracle bones, common throughout China’s Shang dynasty, constitute the earliest known writings in East Asia. As Peter Hessler explains in this wide-ranging essay for the *New Yorker*--an essay that also chronicles Mao’s aborted effort to modernize Chinese writing--the bones would be placed under heat until they cracked. The crack would then be interpreted as the voice of the dead:

"Excavated bones reveal that the Shang inquired about everything from warfare to childbirth, from weather to illness. They asked about the meaning of dreams. They negotiated with the dead: on one bone, an inscription proposes sacrificing three human prisoners to an ancestor, and then, presumably after an unsatisfactory crack, the next inscription offers up five prisoners. Sometimes the Shang sacrificed hundreds of people at once."
In her short story “The Headstrong Historian,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie narrates the experience of a Nigerian family across three generations, as they confront the influx of western missionaries and colonizers at the end of the 19th century. At several key moments the family's matriarch visits an oracle, which in the context of the story comes to stand for the traditional cultural practices upended by colonialism:

“Nwamgba, who still found it difficult to remember that Michael was Anikwenwa, went to the oracle herself, and afterward thought it ludicrous how even the gods had changed and no longer asked for palm wine but for gin. Had they converted, too?”

http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/16/oracle-bones

http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/23/the-headstrong-historian
In this essay for *Lapham’s Quarterly*, South African artist William Kentridge recalls his childhood reaction to the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa. The story begins with a visit by King Acrisius of Argos to an oracle, who tells the monarch that he will be killed by his grandson. Acrisius subsequently does everything in his power to avoid this fate, only to finally meet it through a series of unlikely plot twists:

“How could so many chance events, so many unlikely elements—the discus, the disguise, the date of the athletic competition—conspire to make the predicted inevitability? Maybe every step I took, or didn’t take, was the wrong one. Maybe every decision that seemed unimportant would lead to consequences so much greater. Every decision was the wrong decision.”

[http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/luck/gorgons-head](http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/luck/gorgons-head)
In his short story “Funes, the Memorious,” Jorge Luis Borges imagines the life of a man condemned to remember every last thing he’s ever seen, in all its infinite detail. This affliction ends up as a curse, trapping the hero in a cycle of endless recollection:

“With no effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese and Latin. I suspect, however, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence.”

http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/spaceshotsairheads/borges-funes.pdf

LISTEN
For over a thousand years, from 800 BC to 400 AD, the ancients would make pilgrimages to Delphi in central Greece, in the hopes of gleaning answers from that city’s famous oracle. These pilgrims—sometimes individuals, sometimes representatives of entire city-states—would ask a question to the Delphic Oracle, and receive their replies from a priestess called the Pythia. Her answers, it was believed, were direct transmissions from the god Apollo. In this episode of BBC’s “In Our Time,” Professors Paul Cartledge, Edith Hall, and Nick Lowe introduce us to the most famous oracle of the ancient world:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00txj8d