

Milagros

A Miracle that can fit in the palm of your hand

The Spanish word **Milagro** literally means miracle or surprise. Milagro also refers to an ancient aspect of Hispanic folk culture: small silver or gold votive offerings in the shape of arms, legs, eyes and other body parts; animals, foods, etc. These milagros are often attached to statues of saints or to the walls of certain New Mexican churches-and now are also found as components in necklaces, earrings, and other jewelry.



From the earliest of times, humankind has wanted to communicate with a higher power. We have been giving thanks and making wishes in the form of offerings to gods for thousands of years. The early Sumerians (near Iran), Persians, Minoan (Greece), and Egyptians gave votive gifts depicting animals & people. The use of milagros is an ancient custom in the Hispanic world, traceable to the coastal regions of Spain between the fifth and first centuries before Christ. Tiny bronze milagros, nearly identical to contemporary ones, can be seen in Spain's archaeological museums. Milagros as offerings accompanied the Spanish into the New World; their use has been documented in nearly all of the Hispanic Americas. The invaders destroyed holy sites throughout the Americas and punished the indigenous peoples for practicing their own religion; many traditions of worship have been lost. However, the newly Christianized people of these places took up milagros and their use has continued to endure.

Local customs vary in those parts of Latin America where milagros are still being used. In Brazil, where African influence is strong, milagros are primarily used as talismans, worn about the neck or wrist; they are also used to intercede with the saints. In coastal Peru, milagros of fish & fishing boats once filled chapels to help fishermen obtain good catches & return home safely from sea. In Guatemala certain bird and animal talisman in a woman's chachale (chain necklaces) refer to her nahual—the animal reflective of her personal spirit.

In Latin America and in some areas of the US where there is a large Hispanic population, offerings are even today a common sight. In Mexico, entire altars are coated with tiny silver milagros, and statues of the saints are literally festooned with them. Milagros come in an endlessly imaginative variety of shapes, sizes and materials. The most widely used shapes for milagros are those that represent body parts such as feet, heart, hand, head, and mouths - all those nooks and crannies of the body where ailments settle in and stay.

Milagros can be flat, 3-D, tiny or large. They can be of gold, silver, wood, lead, tin, bone, wax, or whatever the petitioner desires. They can be elaborately carved, bejeweled, or humble, too. Quality has no correlation to sincerity or outcome. Any act of devotion, no matter how small, is worthy. Those most commonly offered for sale in Mexico and New Mexico are the thumbnail-sized, silver-washed, flat milagros. Sometimes they have been tacked onto a cross made of old wood, or a wooden shoe last. It is unlikely these are historical pieces; the crosses and lasts are decorative yet meaningful ways of displaying a collection of milagros.

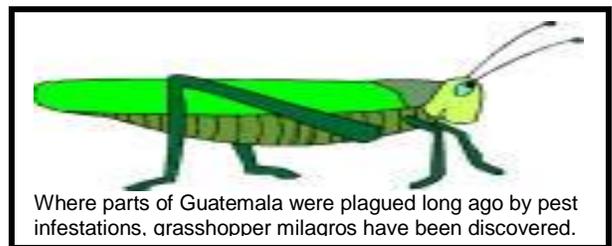
In addition to a decorative use, milagros as symbols have new meanings these days. If a friend is about to have an eye operation, the gift of an eye milagro helps to say, "I wish you well". A pair of lungs can say, "I hope your cold gets better." An ear milagro can suggest someone should be a better listener. An axe might suggest that a relationship should end.

We live today in a world that seems short of miracles, a world where the miracles that do happen may go unremarked. As charming folk art, milagros are talismans against illness, trouble, and pain. But they are more than just a quaint remedy for problems. They are symbolic of a promise between a believer and a higher spirit, tangible testimony of a wish being made or that a promise has been fulfilled. That milagros still hold power to affect our troubles testifies to the endurance of a belief system that has eluded repression and destruction to survive for centuries.

Give your own milagro personal and private meaning when making it yourself. Find a pattern or symbol-such as a heart, or a flower, the sun, or an animal -that holds particular meaning for you.

Votive: Offered, dedicated, performed, in accordance with a vow, often as an act of worship or gratitude for a favor granted.

Talisman: an object engraved with figures supposed to possess supernatural powers, worn as a charm.



Where parts of Guatemala were plagued long ago by pest infestations, grasshopper milagros have been discovered.



Anne of Austria-showed her gratitude for giving birth to an heir to the French throne with a small, winged, silver representation of the infant.



"Hernan Cortes", conqueror of Mexico, is believed to have presented a gold scorpion emblazoned with emeralds, rubies, and pearls at the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe to show his indebtedness for having been saved from a scorpion bite.

TYPICAL MILAGROS
- COMMONLY FOUND – and
THEIR POTENTIAL MEANINGS
(ALWAYS UP FOR INDIVIDUAL
INTERPRETATION):

Hearts, sacred hearts, hearts with

swords: These can represent the human heart, and it might be connected with cares of worries over a heart condition, or the love that one person feels for another.

Eyes, double eyes, glasses: The milagro of the eyes is often connected with the popular Mexican saint Santa Lucia, who is depicted with a tray with two eyes on it. The eyes can also represent the concept of watching. One practice is to attach the milagro to the frame of the image of a deceased person, in the belief that this might represent the concept that the spirit of that person is watching over us, and helping to defend us from spirits from the land of the dead, or pleading our case before the saints and the angels.

Body parts (lungs, ears, kidneys, etc.): Various body parts, such as kidneys, livers, lungs, ears, noses, breasts, lips/mouth as well as the better known arms and legs are usually used when asking for help with a particular ailment of the identified part.

Praying female or male figures: This popular milagro can represent a man or woman, such as a mother, wife, father, husband, or any other man or woman who is perceived as being faithful and fervent, or it might represent the prayers of a man or woman. It can also represent any female or male saint.

Woman or man's head: A milagro of the head might represent the man or woman's mind, spirit, or a condition such a headache.

Young girls or boys: This milagro might represent a male or female child, or a niece or nephew, a grandchild, or any other child. It might also represent the childlike qualities in anyone.

Arms: The milagro of the arm might represent an arm itself, and some condition associated with it. It could also represent one's strength, one's ability to work. It might represent an embrace, and physical demonstrations of affection that involve embracing.

Legs and feet: This might represent one's leg and some condition associated with it, such as an injury, or arthritic condition. It might also represent one's strength, and the concept of travel, such as, not only walking, but a journey, or

even the idea that one might be safe driving back and forth from work every day.

Houses represent, normally, one's own home, and the blessings that might be made on it, and on the family that dwells there. It can also represent the hope of having one's home, or it can represent someone else's home. It might also represent one's workplace, or school. When traveling, it can be a charm to insure that one will arrive safely home again, or it can establish a connection between the traveler and the loved ones at home.

Hens, roosters and chickens: The hen is actually a very powerful symbol, as are all of the animal milagros. This one might represent one's own hen, seeking blessings so that she might always lay good eggs. Or, it might symbolize human qualities like those of a mother hen - the concept of mothering.

Bulls, cows: The bull might symbolize strength, husbanding, protection, stamina, endurance. Horses: The horse might symbolize the qualities of a man in being a workhorse, or travel, and be involved in a prayer about a journey.

Mules, like the horse, might symbolize the qualities of a man in being a workhorse - being able to "work like a mule" - or it might symbolize travel, and be involved in a prayer about a journey. It might also be involved in a prayer or a charm to overcome stubbornness, in either in oneself or in another.

Sheep, lambs, goats: The sheep could symbolize any of the Bible verses about sheep. It could also symbolize the concept of togetherness, the fealty one feels for one's groups, or family. It might also be used a charm to try and erase the effects of behavior that is typically described in a negative way as being like that of a sheep - such as giving into peer pressure with negative results, or, say, the concern of a parent that her child may be involved with a harmful cult or some other group that one does not approve of.

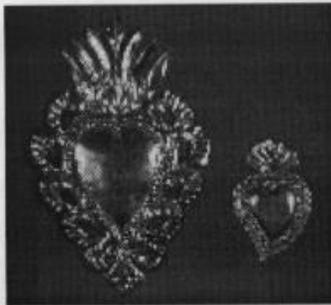
Dogs: The family dog milagros could symbolize loyalty. It could also symbolize protection, such as what a sheep dog affords the herd.

Pigs: The pig could symbolize nourishment - "bringing home the bacon". It might also be used a charm to try and erase the effects of behavior that is typically described in a negative way as being like that of a pig, such as perceived lack of control in ones eating habits.

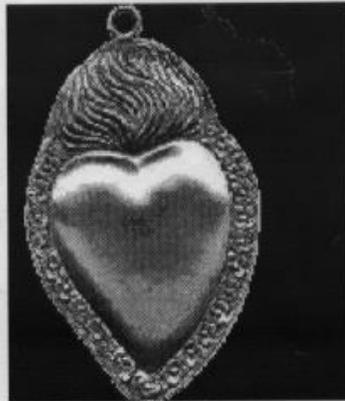
Milagros from Mexico



Body Parts



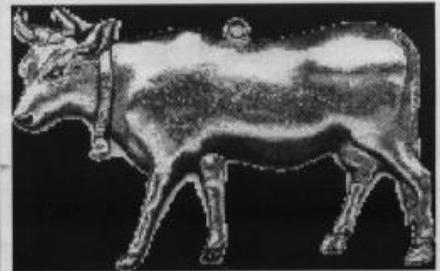
Hearts



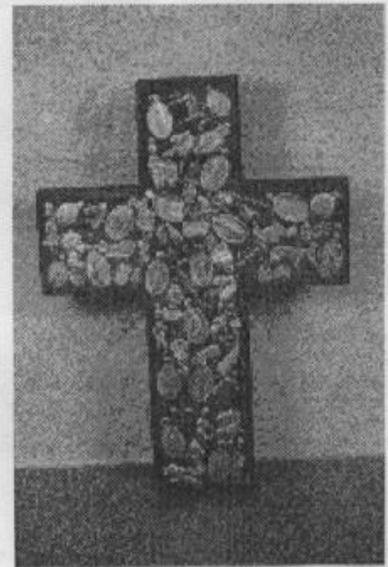
Praying Figures



Animals



Attached to a Cross



Amulets and Talsimans From Around the World

Amulets from Italy

Manocurnuto



Manofico



Hamsa Hand, Arabic



Tiger Bell, Bangkok



Tiger Bell, India



Cord Necklace for Child, India

