

Milagro Cross: Symbolism and Meaning

Taylor-Mesilla Historic Property



Essential Question

What are Milagros and what do they represent?

This lesson will introduce students to the traditional uses of Milagros in devotional art and the concept of using symbolism to represent complex ideas.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students in grades 6-12 will be able to:

1. Recognize the significance of symbolism in daily life.
2. Identify what a Milagro is and how it is used.
3. Create a symbol of their own.

Background

Countries throughout the world utilize symbols in everyday life. Advertising images, political slogans, religious icons, and works of art incorporate symbolic meanings into their imagery. Wedding rings, national flags, crosses, colors of traffic lights, black for mourning, a red rose, and many other objects and images are linked to complex cultural traditions. Even our computers utilize symbols.

Almost anything can be called a symbol but over generations most cultures establish well-defined meanings for the

symbols that are most important to them. Researchers have looked at the psychological basis for various symbolic associations and have recognized the universality of some images and their meanings. However, there is often no consistent meaning when it comes to symbols. Not every dragon in every culture is an enemy. A heart does not always stand for love. These meanings are not just constructed by society but also by the individuals who use them.

The use of some symbols can have negative consequences. Symbols can also be manipulated by people to instill in others a desired response or action. They represent a complex effort by individuals to represent their understanding of the world in images.

Symbolic images can help us feel comfortable when the world seems out of control. Challenging times are a common experience for all humans, and all of us choose how to make sense of them and how to find the strength and hope to move forward.

People who lived in the past were very much like us today. They created beautiful objects for their homes and churches that reflected their love, hope, and faith. In the artifact collections at the Taylor-Mesilla Historic Property, there is a beautiful Milagro Cross. The use of Milagros is an ancient custom and was brought here by the Spanish when they settled in New Mexico.

Milagros are small metal charms of devotional art. Most of the ones you see in the photo and video are about a half inch and are made up of many different objects depicting body parts, farm animals, people, and more. Milagros are typically pinned on wooden crosses, statues of saints, the clothing of saints, and other sacred objects.

This cross was a gift to J. Paul Taylor from Juan and Josephina Brito. The cross is made from wood and the Milagros are tin. It was purchased in Guadalajara, Mexico. The artist name is Leonardo Gabriel Brito Gutierrez.

Milagros are charms used for requests, for protection, and as a source of good luck. The word Milagro in Spanish means “miracle” or “surprise” and people in the past and present use them as symbols to wish others good luck, good health, and hope for the future. Initially, Milagros were made to order by the town’s silversmith. Today Milagros can be found in artisan shops and are sometimes carved by hand, stamped, hand cut from sheet metal or steel, or cast in wax molds. Some Milagros are custom made and are produced with precious metals.

There is no universal interpretation for the objects (symbols) depicted in Milagros, interpretations are based on how each individual uses of them. Legs and feet can mean that you are asking for healing from a specific condition in the legs like an injury or arthritis. A heart can be included for healing a heart condition or for help with a romance. Arms can symbolize the need for help with an arm injury or strength. A praying man or woman symbolizes religious devotion, prayer, or a saint. Men’s and woman’s heads might represent the mind or spirt, or healing for a headache. Cars might represent a request for safe travel. Cows and bulls might represent strength, stamina, or simply a food source. Horses and mules symbolize hard work or a journey. Dogs, as you might expect, can represent loyalty and protection. Body parts such as lungs, eyes, kidneys often represent a request for healing of a specific ailment in the body, for example there is an ear on this cross and this could represent a request to cure an earache or for better hearing. Eyes represent the concept that someone from beyond the grave is watching you and protecting you from harm. Eyes can also symbolize creativity, intuition, and insight. Horseshoes represent good luck, protection, and fortune. The symbols that are used seem endless.

In Mexico, Milagros are often accompanied by a *manda*. This is when a person asks a saint for a favor. To repay the favor he or she must make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the saint they prayed to and leave the Milagro there. This is a form of gratitude once the prayer was answered. Milagros are pinned on objects of devotion to that saint and sometimes an extra thank you is included on a piece of written paper. In New Mexico, this is also common. One example is the San Miguel Chapel in Santa Fe where visitors leave Milagros on or near the 650-year-old bell.

The integration of religious images and symbolism have been part of daily life in New Mexico for many generations. Native Americans also utilize their own devotional images and symbols for protection and prayers. Today, Milagros are more than just religious art. They have become symbols that are used to wish people a happy and healthy future. They remind us that it’s never too late to bring people special gifts of devotion and love.

Hands-On Activity

5th-8th grade: Students will create a collage of images that express what’s important to them.

9th-12th grade: Students will create their own Milagros that express what is important to them and what communicates their best wishes and hopes for themselves or others.

New Mexico Content Standards

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/instructional-materials/new-mexico-content-standards/>

5th – 8th Grade Standards

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

5-8 Benchmark I-A—New Mexico: Explore and explain how people and events have influenced the development of New Mexico up to the present day.

9th – 12th Grade Standards

STRAND: History

Content Standard I: Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

9-12 Benchmark I-A—New Mexico: Analyze how people and events of New Mexico have influenced United States and world history since statehood.

New Mexico Core Arts Standards K-12

Anchor Standard #1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #3. Refine and complete artistic work.

Anchor Standard #4. Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #5. Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Additional Resources and Resources Used

Hans Biedermann. *Dictionary of Symbolism*. New York. Meridian Books, 1994

My Poppet Makes: Mexican Tin Heart Folk Art. www.MyPoppet.com.au

Tucson.com: Milagros are beautiful, devotional charms. https://tucson.com/milagros-are-beautiful-devotional-charms/article_6bf28246-435a-5716-91c3-55db247221b8.html

Zinnia Folk Art <https://zinniafolkarts.com/blogs/news/36153281-what-do-milagros-mean>

Zanzibar Trading Company <https://www.zanzibartrading.com/MexicanMilagros.htm>