



Roads Scholar Educational Adventures in Our Own Backyard

By Kathleen Williams
CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Marketplace

Milagros

Little Miracles at San Xavier

The “White Dove of the Desert,” as it is often called, San Xavier del Bac rises gracefully from the desert floor, a brilliant white with rounded parapets and lofty spires. The present church was built between 1783 and 1797, and some claim it is the finest example of mission architecture in the United States. Following a six-plus year restoration effort, this local treasure has regained much of its original glory. But San Xavier is special in another way too. It is one of the only places in the United States (the Santuario de Chimayó in northern New Mexico is another) where you will find the small devotional charms known as *milagros* in traditional use.

In Spanish, *milagro* literally means “miracle” or “surprise.” However, *milagro* also refers to a metal pendant that symbolizes a request, prayer, or wish. The shape of the *milagro* is based on the concern or problem it is intended to solve. It might be an animal, a person, or a part of the body. Some *milagros* take the form of vegetables or pieces of fruit. Traditionally, the *milagro* charms are offered to a favorite saint to ask that a need or request be granted, or in thanksgiving for an answered prayer. For example, if someone has a broken arm, a small metal arm is hung on or near a favorite saint. An ear of corn can be used to request a good harvest.

Milagros may be made of brass, silver, gold, tin, or mixed metals. Most are cast in molds by the artisans, however, some are individually hand-crafted by silversmiths as specific and unique works for a particular occasion or request. *Milagros* can be flat or three-dimensional; they may be tiny or large. In Mexico, ready-made *milagros* in a wide variety of shapes and forms can be purchased from vendors outside many churches.

The use of *milagros* is an ancient tradition, dating back to the Iberians who lived along the coastal regions of Spain between the fifth and first centuries BCE. Spain’s archaeological museums display tiny bronze *milagros* that are nearly identical to contemporary ones. *Milagros* came to the New World with the Spanish and their use spread throughout Latin America. The Spanish custom of offering *milagros* to the saints in Catholicism fit in well with Native Americans’ existing practices of offering gifts to the gods and was readily accepted. Ancient *milagros* were sometimes made of materials such as iron, stone, clay, wax, and wood. Although they may be called by different names, *milagros* are found in many other countries around the world as well, including Greece, India, Tibet, Morocco, and Iran.

Today *milagros* are particularly popular in Mexico, where entire altars are often covered with them. The use of *milagros* in Arizona and New Mexico is a fairly recent tradition, believed to have been brought north by Mexican immigrants. *Milagro* folk art has become popular; wooden crosses, hearts and other shapes encrusted with *milagros* are common. The unique metal charms are also being incorporated into pieces of jewelry. But the original use of *milagros* has not been lost or forgotten. Many continue the tradition of using a *milagro* when asking a patron saint for intercession on their behalf.

At San Xavier, that saint is Saint Francis. San Xavier is considered a Kino mission, one of many established by the tireless and revered Jesuit missionary, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino. Kino first visited the area in 1692 and laid the foundations of the first church eight years later in 1700 at a site two miles north of the present church. He named it San Xavier in honor of his chosen patron, St. Francis Xavier. Nearly a century later, after a tumultuous history, the Franciscans built the current church and the name was retained.

Pilgrims, both locals and tourists, visit San Xavier every day. They come to Saint Francis with needs, requests, and thanksgiving for answered prayers. Many times, they bring a *milagro* with them and pin it to the blanket that covers the saint. When they do, they are following an ancient custom, one that has brought hope to the faithful for centuries.

Tune Up Your Mind

Look for these books and related resources

Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros Along the Border by Eileen Okteivec (University of New Mexico Press, 1995)

Milagros: A Book of Miracles by Helen Thompson (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998)

Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas by Martha Egan (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1991)

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories by Sandra Cisneros (Vintage Books, 1991)

In addition to the gift shop at San Xavier, *milagros* and/or *milagro* art can be found at the following:

CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Education Marketplace

1642 N. Alvernon Way

323-8555

www.crizmac.com

Kaibab Shops

2837-41 N. Campbell

795-6905

Picante Designs

2932 E. Broadway Blvd.

320-5699



Details

What: San Xavier del Bac Mission

Where: 1950 W. San Xavier Road, San Xavier District of the Tohono O'odham nation (9 miles south of Tucson)

When: Daily, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

San Xavier is a fully functioning church that primarily serves the Tohono O'odham, but is open to all. Visitors should be respectful, and not enter the church during services except as communicants.

Admission: Free (donations always appreciated)

Information: 294-2624 or www.sanxaviermission.org

Discovery Detours

If you go...

Look carefully at the examples of *milagros* in the museum. If there is not a church service in session, go into the church also and look at the *milagros* pinned on Saint Francis (near the front, on the left hand side). What do you think each represents?

Make Your Own Milagro

Materials:

- Scrap paper
 - Scissors
 - Pencil
 - Lightweight cardboard or heavy paper
 - Cardboard square to use as the base for the *milagro*
 - White glue
 - Black tissue paper
 - Metallic crayons
 - Brayer or rolling pin (optional)
 - Wax paper (optional)
1. Consider what you would like your *milagro* to represent. What symbol or symbols can you use? Sketch your design on scrap paper. When you are ready to create your design, you will not be drawing it. Instead, you will use scissors to cut a variety of shapes that will be overlapped to create your design in relief. However, sketching the design beforehand provides an opportunity to experiment with different ideas before you begin to cut your shapes.
 2. Cut large, medium, and small shapes to form your symbol. Overlap them to create a relief surface. You will need to use at least three layers to create a successful relief.
 3. Once you have determined how to assemble your shapes, glue them in place on top of the cardboard square.
 4. When your relief is completely dry, spread a thin layer of glue over the entire surface. Pat a sheet of black tissue paper carefully down over the glue and roll gently with a brayer or rolling pin (or just use your fingers to very carefully press down) so that the relief surface shows through and your design is obvious. Turn the edges of the tissue paper to the back side of the cardboard and glue in place.
 5. Set the relief aside to dry, preferably under wax paper and a weight (such as a book) to insure the paper dries smoothly.
 6. When the relief is completely dry, rub the straight edge of a metallic crayon over the relief surface to highlight the design.

Think Tank

Discussion questions for the whole family to consider:

If *milagros* are not a part of your culture, do you have other ways of giving thanks? Are there things you do in hopes of having a prayer or wish granted? What are they?

Fuel for Thought

Did you know...

Milagros and *milagro*-encrusted items such as crosses, hearts, and other shapes have become popular pieces of folk art, and are often given as gifts. *Milagros* are now used as valentines, thanks-yous, and housewarming gifts. In contemporary culture, some of the symbols have taken on new uses and meanings. For instance, while a *milagro* in the form of an leg might traditionally have been used to wish a speedy recovery for a friend with a broken leg, these days you might also give it to someone who is in a play as a way to say “break a leg!” A pair of eyes might mean, “I only have eyes for you.” Keeping in mind that *milagros* can be found in many different shapes, including a variety of animals and body parts, as well as houses and other items, brainstorm some new and creative uses for them.

For the Mouse-bound

www.sanxaviermission.org

www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa052.shtml

www.colonialarts.com/milagros.htm

Wheels Are Turning

Parents and Caregivers: These activities can help your child meet Arizona’s educational standards. The standards addressed here include:

1AV-R2. REcognize that hte visual arts are a form of communication (K)

1AV-F2. Select and use subjects, themes, and symbols in works of art. (Grades 1-3)

1AV-E1. Choose the most appropriate media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of one’s own ideas and experiences. (Grades 4-8)