

onesofakind

# holy ghost shell

Even if you're not religious, the resemblance of the markings on the outside of a fossilized sand dollar to familiar Christian symbols is uncanny.

BY DAVID FEDERMAN  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The unique pattern found on the Holy Ghost shell fossilized sand dollar is said to resemble the Easter lily and the five-pointed star of Bethlehem. All photos by Jim Lawson.

onesofakind

# holy ghost shell

Seeking the perfect Easter gem? The fossilized sand dollar is your best bet. Why? Some Christian scholars say the standard patterns on the outside (exoskeleton) of every one of these Pleistocene marine animals tell the complete story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's why this gem is also known as the Holy Ghost shell. If you're looking for a gem with Lenten season story lines all over it, look no further.

Sand dollars are a common sight on Pacific beaches from Mexico all the way up the West Coast to Washington State. Known as the *Dendraster excentricus*, the sand dollar is a marine invertebrate that lives in dense beds on the sandy bottoms of sheltered bays and coasts. It's classified as an echinoderm because this is the phylum for sea creatures with hard, spiny (echino) coverings (derms), and radial bodies whose most famous member is the starfish.

You have a choice in sand dollars. You can buy modern ones from Baja, California, or prehistoric ones from Chiapas, Mexico.

The later, which are featured here, are found along with other ancient "gemified" sea creatures such as ammonite. Whether new or old, a fresh-found sand dollar has a distinctive poinsettia flower pattern that stands out in bold relief. After polishing, it leaves a colored tracing of itself.

In their finished form, fossilized sand dollars usually have parchment- to mayonnaise-white exteriors with café-au-lait brown flower-petal patterns that extend from an identically colored center shaped like a five-pointed star. Legend has it that the flower

is meant to resemble the Easter lily and the center pentangle the five-pointed star of Bethlehem. Is that reading too much into a mummified relative of the sea urchin that predates the birth of Christ by several million years?

Not if you're someone who believes the world is only 6,000 years old and studded with portents of Christ's coming. Some Christian scholars read religious symbolism into every part of the sand dollar-seeing; for example, the four breathing holes in the center are seen as symbols of the crucifixion.

John Bajoras, owner of the four-store Village Silversmiths chain in Roxbury and Gloucester, Massachusetts, mines fossilized sand dollars in the oil shale of Mexico and sells them set as cabochons in silver pendants retailing for \$25 to \$150 through a subsidiary, Sierra Madre Mining Company. Most of his customers buy these pieces as fossilized sand dollar pendants. However, he keeps a fact-sheet handy that tells gift- and lore-hungry shoppers about the fossilized sand dollar's double life as a natural religious relic. That's why about 25 percent of his sand dollar pendants sell as Holy Ghost shell jewelry. "The fossilized sand dollar serves as both a scenic and a story gem," Bajoras says. "How many other gems can you think of with so much built-in narrative power?" ☉

John Bajoras of Village Silversmith uses Holy Ghost shells to create stunning jewelry in the form of pendants, bracelets, and rings as well as other pieces.

