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Central America, South America, and Spain.**

**The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic**



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by Dr. James Green

Most people are familiar with bars of soap and probably use them every day without thinking about them. Soap is one of the mundane objects that form part of our everyday lives. Generally, a normal bar of soap will cost between fifty pence to about three pounds depending on where you shop and is made from a mixture of fat or lard, oil, lye and chemicals that make it smell nice. It's main function is to wash grease and dirt away from the surface of the body. Or so I thought until I was introduced to Magic Soap.

Magic Soaps (commonly known in Spanish as Jabon Esoterico) are bars of soap that are sold at Tiendas Esoterica<sup>1</sup> (stalls that sell items associated with magic) in the inner-city markets of Central and South America and Spain. Unlike regular bars of soap, Magic Soaps draw on the powers of a range of beings (gods, sacred objects, animals, folk saints), which, if applied directly, will make a user's chosen desire come true. They are presented in visually striking packages that are illustrated with pictures that either show the circumstances that led to the Magic Soap being used (e.g. a person being frightened by evil magic), the results the Magic Soap produces (e.g. a woman dominating her wayward husband on page 15), or the being whose powers the Magic Soap calls upon (e.g. a folk saint of Guatemala on page 26). Magic Soap often comes with small prayer cards that provide instructions for the user to ensure best results and some have small charms, talismans or seeds mixed in to them.

Washing with the Gods, held at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, home to one of the World's largest collections of items related to European magic and the occult, exhibits Magic Soaps collected from Ecuador, Colombia, Perú, Chile, Mexico and Spain between 2015 to 2019. The Magic Soaps displayed here form possibly the largest collection of its kind and exhibiting them at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic will reveal new insights into

the links between European and Latin American magic, and how household magic is used today. Even though there is literature that already deals with these subjects, Magic Soaps have been overlooked and this exhibition aims to bring them to the fore and to begin a discussion of how the images on their packages contribute to the history of how ideas of magic from Europe and indigenous groups of Central and South America merged.

The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, founded by English folk magician Cecil Williamson in 1951, provides the setting for a dialogue between European magic and Latin American magic. Housing over 2,000 items associated with European magic, the museum provides a context through which Magic Soap and the migration and mixing of European ideas of magic with those of Latin American magic can be better re-examined. This essay and exhibition examines how the images printed on the Magic Soap packages give the soaps their power, and provides a historical context that discusses the blending of European and Indigenous Central and South American thinking that led to Magic Soaps.

## **Why is Magic Soap magic?**

As we saw above regular soap is made from fat, oil, lye and chemical or natural ingredients that provide an appealing scent. The ingredients listed on the Magic Soap packages are, apart from minor differentiations between brands, essentially the same: so what is it that makes Magic Soap magic?

During my travels in Central and South America I spent a lot of time inside inner-city markets speaking to people who buy and sell Magic Soap, and observing people painstakingly trying to decide what kind of Magic Soap best suits their needs. In August 2017 I spent the day at Mercado 20 de Julio in south east Bogotá Colombia. There, I spent an hour behind the counter of a tienda esoterica looking at the proprietor's shrine with a yellow candle lit to help boost sales and asking him about the magical properties

of Magic Soap. I was sceptical about his certainty that Magic Soap worked, wondering whether this was a pitch to sell more of them to me (I had already bought six bars), when a mother and daughter arrived at the counter. The daughter was looking for a partner and her mother had brought her to the market to buy a soap that would help her to find true love. The proprietor offered them five Magic Soaps that provided help in finding love. The couple spent about twenty minutes pouring over the images on each of the boxes before finally deciding on which one to buy. I was struck by the fact that they did not feel the need to open the boxes to inspect the soap bar contained within. They, and others I have spoken to, clearly believe in the power of Magic Soap.

The power of Magic Soap may lie in the combination sympathetic magic and the placebo effect. Sympathetic magic is a form of magic that is understood to date back to the Palaeolithic era some two and a half million years ago<sup>2</sup>, and uses images and objects to stand in for and represent the real thing. If something is acted upon an image of someone that thing will happen to the person<sup>3</sup>. This may seem superstitious, however when students laugh at the idea of a magical relation between a picture and the thing it represents, Art Historian Tom Cummins asks them to take a photograph of their mother and cut out the eyes <sup>4</sup>.

This sympathetic way of thinking may be part of what activates Magic Soap. People see what will happen if they use the soap correctly in the image printed on the box and project themselves in to that image: a person surrounded by potential lovers or riches (Catch Me Catch Me soap, page 9), a business person surrounded by clients (Call Clientes page 10), or evil spells being deflected from a person (Reject Damage soap, page 14), for example. In the mind of the user, they are the person in the image benefitting from the Magic Soap. This is what I witnessed happening while in the markets; people made their decisions about which Magic Soap to buy based on the images on their boxes.

As well as sympathetic thinking, Magic Soaps are activated by the power of repetitive positivity to create a placebo effect<sup>5</sup>. Most Magic Soaps come with a piece of paper that have prayers, instructions and details about the magical properties contained in the ingredients of each soap (even though we have already seen that the soaps are made of the same ingredients that regular household soap is made of). For example:

“To use the soap, you must unify [the soap] with the sachet’s magnetic oil and make the sign of the cross on the forehead, chest, and palm, then soap your whole body. (The soap should be used by one person only) ... I have faith and I’m doing very well (repeat this frequently)”

This set of instructions is taken from the Take Out Salt Magic Soap (page 18) and indicates how the soaps power is activated by the ritualization of washing through the symbolism of the sign of the cross and the repetition of a positive message to self. If people are inclined to buy Magic Soap by the gratifying images on their boxes as we saw in Bogotá, then repeating the phrase “I have faith” will continue to solidify the user’s belief in the efficacy of the Magic Soap they have washed with.

## **Ritual Washing**

Take Out Salt Magic Soap is one of the many explicit examples in which ritualistic washing, sympathetic thinking and repetitive positivity activates the power of the soap. The Seven Elephants Magic Soap (Page13) is another good example, instructing its user to make a bath using the soap while burning a fistful of incense and making a petition to Lord Krishna and Arjuna, central figures in the Indian epic Mahabharata<sup>6</sup>. This Magic Soap has seven green elephants printed on its box – elephants that are sacred to Hindus.

Washing and anointing are important ritualistic practices in Catholic religion and were also important ways of appeasing the

gods of Aztec and Inca society<sup>7</sup>. After the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of Central and South America in the 1500's many of the diverse indigenous beliefs and practices were forced to syncretize with Catholicism<sup>8</sup>. Syncretism is the fusion of different ideas to create something that is similar to the original ideas but slightly different. The conquistadors also brought ideas of European magic with them along with those of Africa arriving in the slave ships. Before this time, natives worshipped a pantheon of gods who could be both beneficial and malignant depending on the quality and quantity of the offerings being made, and shamans practiced both good and bad magic depending on their customers needs<sup>9</sup>. The European idea of polemic good versus evil – God as good, Satan as Evil, or witches performing evil black magic by summoning demons while priests perform exorcisms with the aid of God, for example – was totally alien to the natives before the conquests<sup>10</sup>. From this point on European ideas were enforced while indigenous ideas were either syncretized with Catholicism or were suppressed as evil and Satanic – particularly indigenous magic<sup>11</sup>.

The Magic Soaps displayed here reflect the merging of European and Central and South American ideas around magic since the conquest to the present day, as Iris Gareis said, "Techniques, spells, and incantations used in Spanish America were almost identical to those employed in Spain ..." <sup>12</sup>. The Magic Soap boxes also attest to this sharing and mixing of ideas; they reference European figures such as Jesus Christ and Catholic saints and European folk saints, as well as drawing on the power Central and South American figures and foods such as Guinea Pig, and Mexican, Bolivian and Guatemalan folk saints. Seven Powers Magic Soap shows Jesus hanging from the cross with someone with their arms upstretched in prayer, they are surrounded by seven vignettes of important Catholic figures (page 17). Hunchback Magic Soap shows a well-dressed hunchbacked man walking down the street with a big smile on his face, referencing Gobbo the Italian good luck charm that could banish malignant forces (page 16). Santa Muerte Magic

Soap shows the female skeleton Saint Death who is a popular folk saint of the working classes of Mexico and Los Angeles<sup>13</sup> (Page 12). In this example she wears a red cloak indicating that the user will find true love. Another Mexican folk saint is Jesús Malverde who is particularly popular amongst drug dealers and traffickers in Sinaloa and the United States<sup>14</sup> (page 20). Jesús Malverde Magic Soap shows the 'Generous Bandit' wearing fine clothes in front of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Ekeko Magic Soap shows Ekeko, the Bolivian god of plenty, covered in money, pan pipes, a small house, grain, seeds, and other things to provide the good life (page 21).

As well as these figures, we see images of idealized states of being; Don Dinero Magic Soap shows a man wearing a tuxedo playing roulette while lighting a cigar from a fist full of cash – he blows out smoke in the shape of a dollar sign (page 24). On the Take Out Salt Magic Soap box a man in peak physical condition bathes himself while being watched longingly by bikini clad women. Calm Down Handsome Magic Soap has an image of an annoyed woman imagining herself threatening her husband with a giant rolling pin while he cleans the house in a frilly pinafore (page 19).

This exhibition of Magic Soap compliments the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic's permanent collection of items associated with European magic, adding to the knowledge of how magic developed between Europe and Central and South America and also of how magic is used by people today.

I have been helped with this project by a lot of people to whom I owe a huge amount of thanks. Susana Oviedo introduced me to Magic Soaps when I visited Quito and started something that has become a very rewarding field of research. Cardiff Metropolitan University and Cardiff School of Art & Design where I lecture have supported me in my research and my students have provided great feedback and insights on my growing collection of Magic Soaps (such as suggesting new problems that Magic Soap could alleviate; a soap to counteract slow Wi-Fi for example). Cath Davies and Debbie Savage gave me generous feedback on the introductory essay. Nick Finch gave me help with the design of this catalogue. Santander bank have provided me with funding through the Santander Scholarship to travel repeatedly to Central and South America to conduct the research that has resulted in this exhibition, and Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Universidad de Guadalajara, Universidad and Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú have hosted me while in the field. Jenny Lopez Ratekie and Abril Villa Romero collected and talked about Magic Soap with me and introduced me to Jorge Soltero and Abril Vélez Córdoba who looked after me well while I was in Guadalajara. Thanks to my parents for the usual support. Finally, Simon Costin and Dr. Peter Hewitt at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic for allowing the opportunity, time, and space to exhibit and further my research in to Magic Soaps.

1 Chesnut R. A. 2012: 9

2 Clottes J. and Lewis-Williams D. 1996, 16-17.

3 Durkheim E. in Otto B. & Stausberg M. (Ed) 2013: 118-119, Greenwood S.2009: 46-47 and Mauss M. 1950 (2001 translation): 174 – 175.

4 Mitchell, W. T. J. 2009: 9.

5 Ernst E. in Peters D. (Ed) 2001: 18 – 27.

6 Doniger W. 2009: 10.

7 Townsend R. F. 2000: 164 and Carmichael E. & Sayer C. 1991: 38.

8 Bailey G. A. 2005: 78 – 108, Cervantes F. 1994: 62 and Carmichael E. & Sayer C. 1991: 33 & 41.

9 Poma G. in Malpartida M. R. 2017: 92 and Gareis I. in Levack P. B. (Ed) 2013: 417, Cervantes F. 1994: 42 & 47.

10 Gareis I. in Levack P. B. (Ed) 2013: 413 and Cervantes F. 1994: 47.

11 Cervantes F. 1994: 25.

12 Gareis I. in Levack P. B. (Ed) 2013: 420.

13 Chesnut A. 2012: 121.

14 Alexzander J. 2017: 5, Montenegro C. 2012: 63 and Chesnut A. 2012: 56.







Catch Me Catch Me Magic Soap, Ecuador



Call Clients Magic Soap, Ecuador



Guinea Pig Magic Soap, Peru





Saint Death Magic Soap, Mexico



Seven Elephants Magic Soap, Chile



Reject Damage Magic Soap, Ecuador





I Can Do More Than You Magic Soap, Ecuador

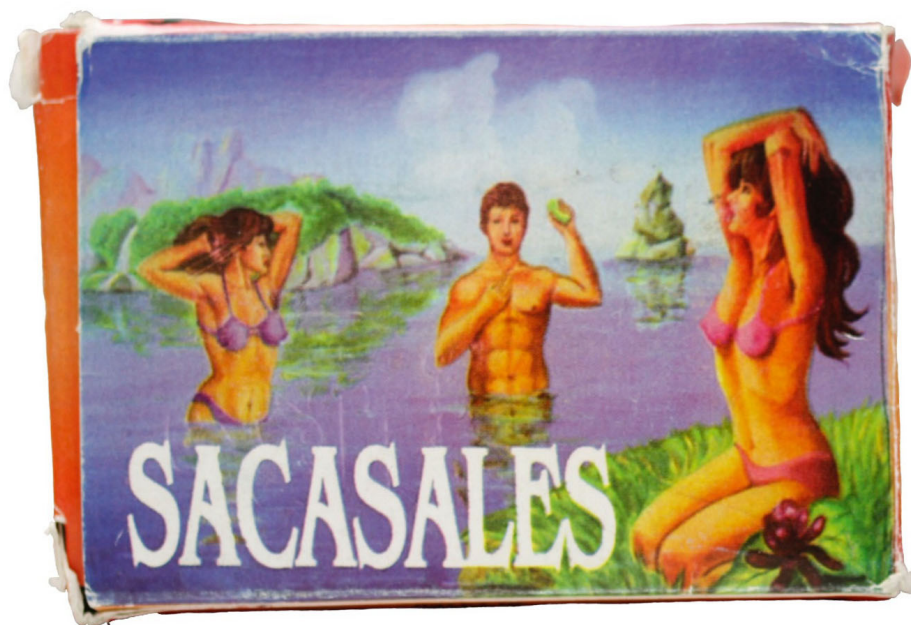


Hunchback Magic Soap, Mexico





Seven Powers Magic Soap, Ecuador

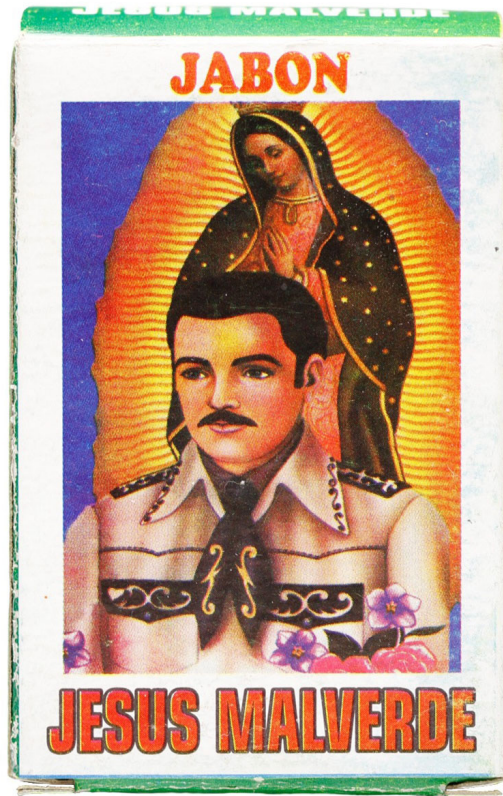


Take Out Salt Magic Soap, Ecuador





Calm Down Handsome Magic Soap, Ecuador



Jesus Malverde Magic Soap, Mexico



The Ekeko Magic Soap, Peru





Pomba Gira Magic Soap, Madrid



Against Envy Magic Soap, Colombia

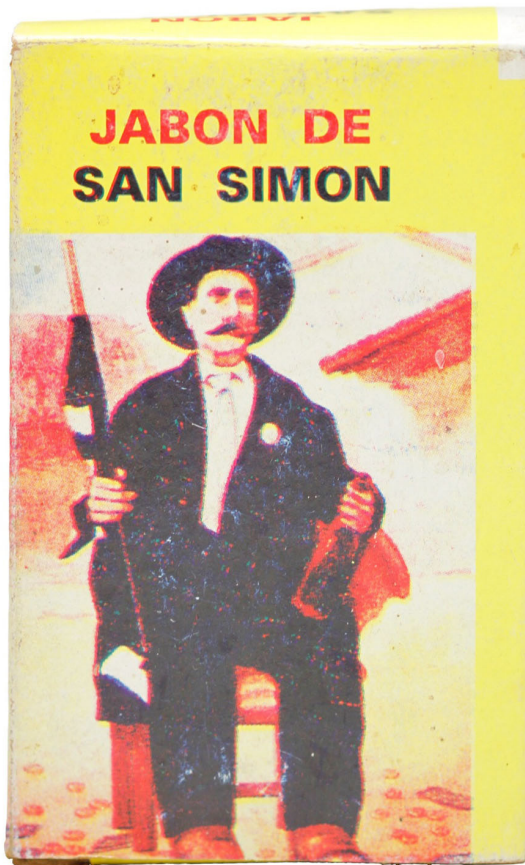


Don Dinero Magic Soap, Ecuador





Seven Swords Magic Soap, Peru

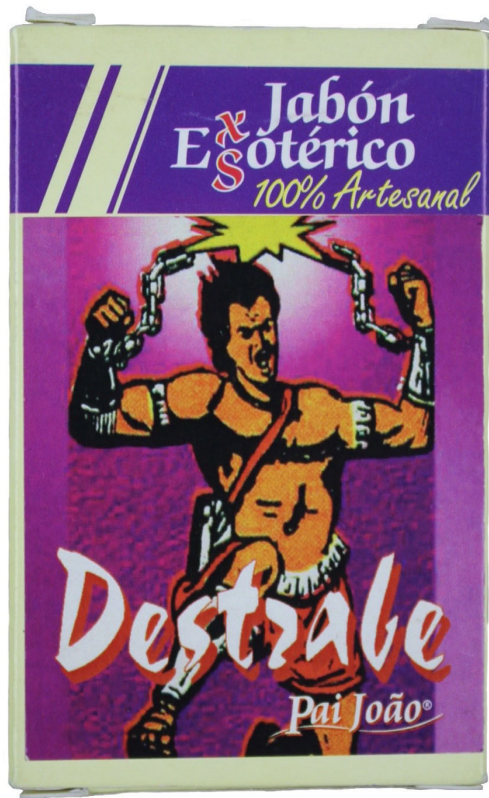


Saint Simon Magic Soap, Mexico



Golden Rain Magic Soap, Colombia





Unlock Magic Soap, Madrid



Saint Martin Magic Soap, Chile



Against Envy Magic Soap, Mexico



