

# EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS



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## Day of the Dead Educational Activity Guide

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This program is made possible in part with a grant from Humanities  
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Mario Vasquez

# Activity Guide Credits

## Writers

Richard Guerra  
Toni Nelson Herrera

## Design

Jesus Alaniz III  
Pamela Walker

## Translator

Erika Andarza  
*Visit [www.mexic-artemuseum.org](http://www.mexic-artemuseum.org) for the Spanish translation.*

Table of Contents	
Introduction	3
Ritual and Death in the World	4
Mesoamerican Culture	6
Mestizaje	8
Establishing a Mexican National Identity	10
Celebrating The Day of the Dead	12
Reinventing Tradition	14
Day of the Dead Recipes	16
Day of the Dead Art Activities	18



# *Introducing*

# El Día de los Muertos

## *The Day of the Dead*



The Day of the Dead is a Mexican and Mexican American holiday whose intricate history is intertwined with the history of Mexico and Mexican culture. The Day of the Dead is practiced on November 1st and 2nd, during which the graves of loved ones are decorated, special foods like mole and pan de muerto are made, ofrendas are built to honor the dead, and special festivals and processions are held.



"La Muerte" from Roy Lozano's Ballet Folklórico de Texas, The Day of the Dead Event, Paramount Theatre, 1985, black and white photograph, Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection.

The Day of the Dead has its origins in ancient Mesoamerican cultures that blended with those of the Spanish, who arrived in Mexico in the early 1500s. During the early twentieth century, Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada popularized the skeleton images associated with the holiday by his humorous drawings of calaveras, and thereby established a uniquely Mexican style of art. Later, the Chicano Movement embraced the Day of the Dead as a way to recover pre-Hispanic and Mexican identities. Today, the Day of the Dead continues to be celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican Americans across Mexico and the United States every November.

### **A Note on Terminology**

Mexicans and Mexican Americans use many different words to describe themselves. Each word has particular meanings for identity, culture, and politics. "Mexican" may refer to those who are citizens of Mexico, but it is also a word that U.S. born people of Mexican descent claim. "Mexican American" refers to people of Mexican descent who are citizens of the United States. "Hispanic" and "Latino/Latina" are more general terms that refer to people in the United States who have ancestry in a Spanish speaking country.

These terms are ethnic descriptions, not a "race" of people per se, and can be controversial because some view them as government imposed labels. "Chicano/Chicana" is a term for Mexican Americans that became popular during the Mexican American civil rights movement (aka the Chicano/a movement or "El movimiento"). Also, some Mexicans and Mexican Americans prefer to be described by the specific region that they are from. It is always best to ask a person how he or she wants to be identified, and to be aware of this complexity.





# 1. Ritual and Death in the World

## Introduction to Cross Cultural Comparisons

There are many peoples and cultures throughout the world, and each one has its own ways of coping with death and dying. A theme common to many cultures across time is ritualistically honoring the dead. Rituals however, as a living part of culture, also change and adapt. Almost everybody has been a part of some kind of ritual. Your family might celebrate your birthday, or maybe you have been to a wedding or know someone who has graduated from high school or college. These are rituals that mark important parts of life: the day you were born, getting married, or completing your studies. Rituals exist for important moments both big and small, and we can create new ones.

An **ofrenda** is an offering dedicated to a dead loved one. A **ritual** is a repeated ceremony that marks an important moment in life.

### The Many Rituals of Honoring the Dead

All over the world, people have unique beliefs about death and different rituals for honoring their deceased loved ones. Here are a few examples from various cultures:

**The Chinese Ghost Festival** is celebrated during the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. It is thought that ghosts are able to visit from the afterlife during this time. Festival activities include making offerings of food and burning ghost money for the spirits. This festival has origins in Buddhist and Taoist cultures and can be traced to India.

**In the Hindu Tradition**, on the yearly anniversary of a loved one's death, it is customary to offer tarpan to the dead. Tarpan literally means "offering of water to the deceased." This offering, when made with love and devotion, brings contentment to the dead and allows them to continue on to the next cycle of their existence.

**Many Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and others, celebrate the Day of the Dead** during which the souls of the dead can return to the world of the living. It is a joyful holiday with gatherings held in graveyards, ofrendas built for deceased loved ones, and children eating sugar skulls with their names on them.



Photo taken at Ghost Festival in Hong Kong.



Ritual of Tarpan, Photo by Bhaskar Mallick.



Mexic-Arte Museum Day of the Dead Altar Installation, 2008, digital photo.

# Activity One

## Make a Guide to Your Traditions



**You are going to make a guide to your personal and/or family rituals!**

Think about the holidays, observances, and traditions that you have experienced. Choose one and write the name of it here:

---

In order to teach people about your traditions, you will need to think of all of the specific aspects of the holiday, observance, or tradition you have chosen.

What part of the year does it happen? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you have this tradition? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the rituals that you do? \_\_\_\_\_

Will you dress in a special way? If so, how? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any foods that you eat that are significant to your tradition?

---

Do you decorate your home? If so, how?

---

In the space below, draw a picture of you and your loved ones celebrating this holiday:

A large empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for drawing a picture of the student and their loved ones celebrating the chosen holiday.



## 2. Mesoamerican Culture

### Regional Diversity and Beliefs on Death

#### Land of Many Cultures

The Maya, Aztec, Toltec, and Olmec peoples and their societies flourished within Mesoamerica for thousands of years prior to contact with the Spanish. Established communities existed from central Mexico to present day Honduras, composing Mesoamerica. As a region inhabited by millions of people, the area had a great deal of cultural diversity, including several hundred distinct languages. Though there were many different indigenous cultures, the Olmecs are the oldest known Mesoamerican group.

**Mesoamerica** refers to both the many cultures, and a vast region, that existed long before the Spanish arrived.

**Indigenous** means the people who are originally from a certain place. For example, the Aztecs are indigenous to Mexico.



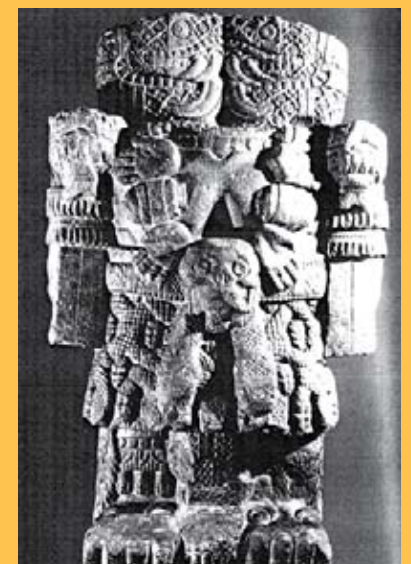
An important commonality amongst Mesoamerican peoples was the belief about death. These societies did not have graveyards in the modern sense, but instead they buried the dead directly under their homes. This practice kept the dead close and allowed for their veneration. Because tombs were not sealed, Mesoamerican people often visited the dead and regularly made offerings to them.

The lack of separation between the realms of life and death relates a distinct Mesoamerican view of people's place in the world. They had a great deal of respect for the dead, who were seen as intermediaries between realms. These rituals and practices, mixing with elements of Catholicism during the colonization period, became Day of the Dead, a tradition which has continually changed over time.

#### Aztec Religious Beliefs on Life and Death

The Aztecs believed that life and death were the forces of the earth and a natural part of the cycle of regeneration. Because eating required killing the animal or plant that was to be consumed, death was taken into their bodies, carried inside them, and gave them life. The earth itself was a force of death to the Aztecs, constantly demanding to be fed by human life.

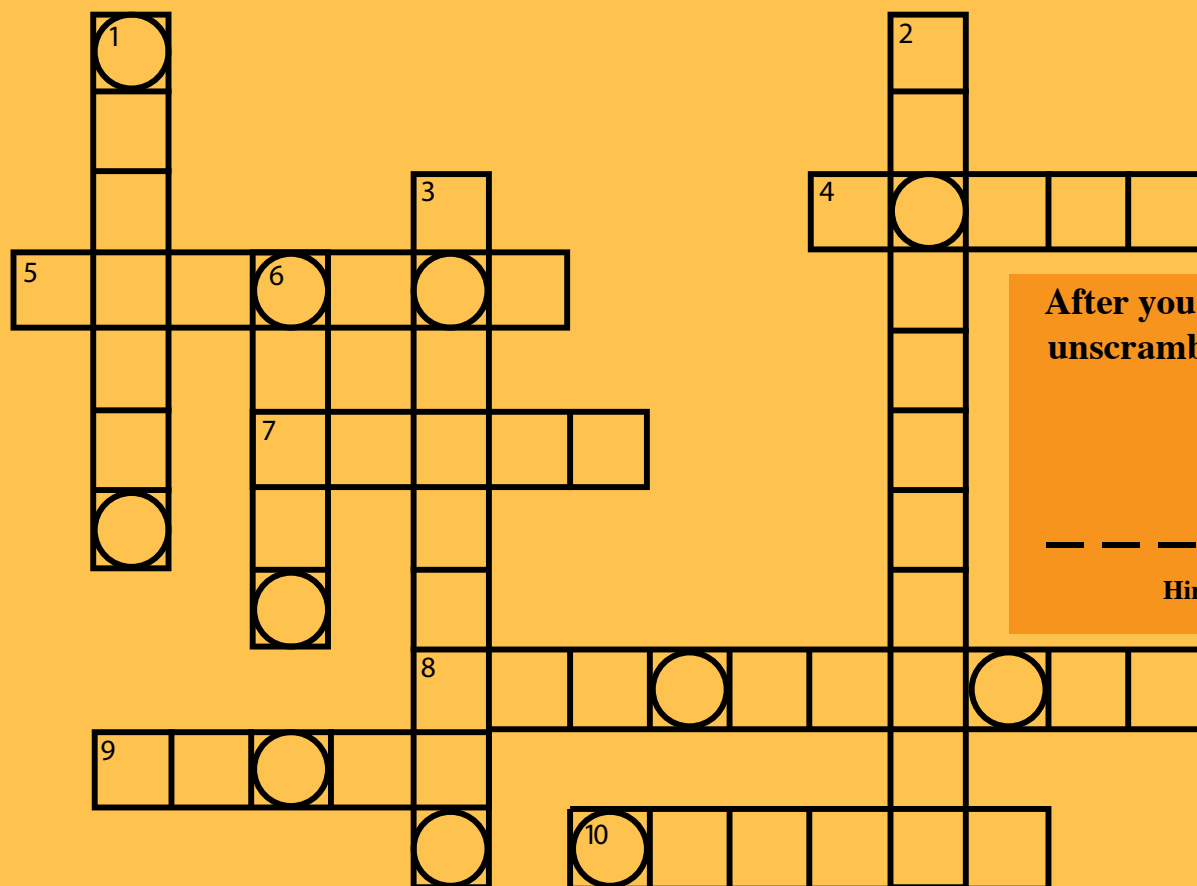
The Aztecs also believed that a person had three souls. Each one could go to an afterlife, become a divine force, or could even stay behind and give strength to its family. Bodies would die and go back to being part of the earth. A person's three souls, however, could exist in multiple planes at once. Part of a soul could go to an afterlife and part of it could stay behind to watch over loved ones. The Aztecs developed many rituals to honor the souls of the dead who stayed behind. Many of these rituals, such as leaving food for a dead relative, burning incense, and making an ofrenda/offering, are still a part of Day of the Dead today.



Coatlicue Aztec Goddess of Life, Death and Rebirth, Photo: National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico.

# Activity Two

## Mesoamerican World Crossword



After you finish the crossword puzzle,  
unscramble the circled letters to spell  
out a word:

Hint: The Spanish arrived here.

### DOWN

- 1 These are done to honor the souls of the dead.
- 2 This word means “before the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica.”
- 3 Aztecs captured their enemies for \_\_\_\_\_.
- 6 Tenochtitlán was the capital for which Mesoamerican group?

### ACROSS

- 4 What was central to the Aztec religion?
- 5 The Mayas lived in the \_\_\_\_\_ peninsula.
- 7 According to the Aztec religion, a person has how many souls?
- 8 Another word for people who are from a certain place.
- 9 The oldest Mesoamerican civilization.
- 10 The Aztecs and Mayas influenced the culture of this country.



Arturo García Bustos, *La Vida y la Muerte*, linocut with cutout, Gift of the artist, Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection.

(puzzle solutions on page 16)





# 3. Mestizaje

## The Lasting Results of Spanish Conquest

**Mestizaje** is the blending of Indigenous and European cultures and traditions.

### Worlds Collide

With the arrival of Spanish conquistadors in the Mesoamerican world in the early 1500s came the first interactions between Indigenous and Spanish cultures. The Spanish were also a diverse people whose regionally distinct cultures were influenced by the Islamic Empire that ruled most of Spain for nearly 800 years. Many of Spain's technological and scientific advances in fact were inherited from Arabs. Navigational tools that allowed Spaniards to cross the Atlantic ocean and reach Mesoamerica were developed in the Islamic world.



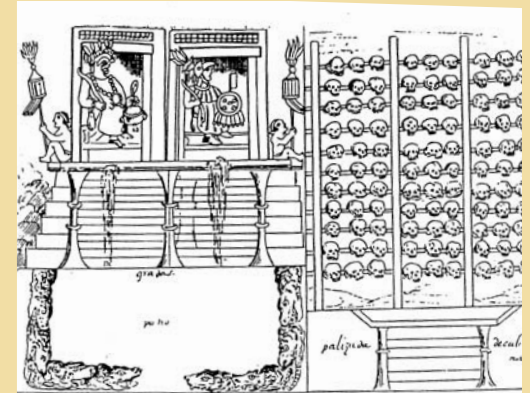
Mexico and Spain

### The March through Mexico

When the Spanish arrived in the lands that would later be named Mexico, they saw the expansive Aztec empire. Its capital Tenochtitlán was one of the largest cities in the world at this time and is the site of present day Mexico City. By joining forces with the rebellious nations surrounding the capital, the Spanish took control of the territory, but the cultures of the region continued. Later, the Spanish waged a series of wars against the Mayas over the course of many years extending their authority. In 1810 Mexico gained its independence from Spain after nearly 300 years.

### Mestizaje

The Day of the Dead originated through the mixture of Mesoamerican and Catholic religious practices and imagery. The Mesoamerican people, who used skulls to represent death, were introduced to Spanish religious art, which often depicted the popular *Danza Macabra*, the Dance of Death, in which Death (depicted as a skeleton) danced with various people. The Spanish also encouraged the indigenous cultures to practice their rituals for honoring the dead on the Catholic holidays All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, celebrated on November 1st and 2nd. This mixture of religious traditions developed into the various rituals and imagery used to celebrate Day of the Dead.



Alberto Beltrán, *Aztec Skull Rack*.



Engravings of the *Danza Macabra*, Heidelberg.



# Activity Three

## Mesoamerican, Spanish, or Both?



**The Day of the Dead combines the customs of the Mesoamerican and Spanish peoples. Read about each Day of the Dead custom below and then circle whether you think it is Mesoamerican, Spanish, or both.**

1. Holding a festival to honor the dead is a custom that can be traced back to the indigenous Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, Maya, and Aztec people. On the Aztec calendar, the festival for the dead was celebrated for an entire month. It was dedicated to the goddess of death Mictecacihuatl, who ruled over the underworld with her husband, Mictlantecuhtli.

**Holding a festival to honor the dead is:**

Mesoamerican                      Both                      Spanish

2. Before the Spanish reached Mesoamerica, there were many periods of the year when the dead would be remembered and honored. When the Spanish arrived, they introduced many of their religious holidays, including All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, which take place on November 1st and 2nd. Today, Day of the Dead is celebrated on the same days as All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

**Celebrating Day of the Dead on November 1st and 2nd is:**

Mesoamerican                      Both                      Spanish

3. Many Day of the Dead ofrendas are often decorated with crosses and pictures or images of Catholic saints. The Spanish brought Catholicism to Mexico, which includes many of the symbols that have now become a part of the Day of the Dead tradition.

**Placing crosses and saints on an ofrenda is:**

Mesoamerican                      Both                      Spanish

4. Skulls were often used in Mesoamerican culture to represent death. When the Spanish arrived, they brought images of Danza Macabra depicting skeletons dancing and playing instruments. Contemporary Day of the Dead calavera imagery depicts skeletons doing many things from dancing to day-to-day activities.

**Calaveras are:**

Mesoamerican                      Both                      Spanish

# 4. Establishing a Mexican National Identity

## The Day of the Dead and Mexican Art

**Calavera** is Spanish for skeleton. It can be used to describe an image of a skeleton used during Day of the Dead, or a humorous poem.

During the early 1900s, nearly a hundred years after Mexico won its independence from Spain, the Mexican government began to encourage the celebration of the Day of the Dead as an official holiday. This was done as a way to unite a nation that was unsatisfied with its political leadership. Even though it did create a sense of Mexican identity amongst the people, towns and cities continued to celebrate the Day of the Dead with their own specific and varying customs.

### Posada and his Calaveras

José Guadalupe Posada worked as an illustrator for various newspapers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing skeletal imagery from Day of the Dead, he created powerful calavera representations of people rich and poor, famous and infamous, young and old. He also used his art to make fun of many politicians. Posada's calaveras became widely popular across Mexico. He drew his inspiration from a tradition unique to Mexican culture. His humorous calaveras appealed to many people's dissatisfaction with the government while at the same time touching upon the universal idea of death. The popularization of this unique form of art in combination with Day of the Dead established the holiday as an integral part of the Mexican identity.



Alfredo Zalce, *Posada surrounded by his Admirers (Calavera of Rivera, Orozco, Mendez, and Dr. Atl)*, November 1948, linocut (proof for wrap-around cover of *Mexico en el Arte*). From Taller de la Gráfica Popular Collection, Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection.

### What is Political Satire?

Satire is the use of clever or humorous text, pictures, or performance to criticize aspects of society. It often focuses on leaders and government in order to point out shortcomings or hypocrisy. This artistic and literary device is an important and effective tool for the public to show their disapproval or outright anger over injustices. Posada's calaveras were a highly popular form of political satire for their time.

### The Importance of the Day of the Dead

Today, the Day of the Dead is a unique holiday whose complexities are parallel to the varied identities of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans who celebrate it. The holiday - with its roots in ancient Mesoamerican culture, its blending with Spanish-European religion, and its inspiration of a distinctively Mexican style of art - projects a healthy, humorous, and celebratory view of life and death as unique as the history from which it came.



José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera of President Madero*.

# Activity Four

## Write a Calavera Poem



José Guadalupe Posada, Calaveras, *Zalameas de las Coquetas Meseras*, broadside, Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection.

A calavera poem is a form of satire. It is an imaginary obituary in which someone or something still living is poked fun at. They were very popular during the Mexican Revolution as a way to criticize the government. Calaveras deal with death in a humorous manner.

### Here is an example of one:

*The neighbor's dog has chased me home,  
Every day this Autumn.  
I run away when I'm all-alone,  
So it doesn't bite my bottom.  
Go ahead little dog and gnash your teeth,  
But some day you will be buried beneath.*

*El perro del vecino me ha perseguido a la casa,  
Todos los días del otoño.  
Yo corro lejos cuando estoy solo,  
Para que él no me muerda el trasero.  
Adelante pues perrito y rechina tus dientes,  
Pero algún día tú vas a ser enterrado abajo.*

**Now it's your turn! In the space below, write your own calavera poem:**

Imagine something that you want to make fun of.

What qualities about it are humorous?

Write the poem as if you are remembering a person after he or she has died. Use the form to poke fun at the person.





## 5. Celebrating the Day of the Dead

### Contemporary Practices

Today Mexicans, Mexican Americans and others annually celebrate Day of the Dead. This holiday is part of the common cultural heritage of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that is not bound by the borders of nations, but moves with the human flow of people and their cultures. As a modern living tradition, Day of the Dead has many practices that vary depending on where in Mexico, the United States, and increasingly in places across the world such as Canada, it is taking place.

### Common Practices for Day of the Dead

Day of the Dead is annually celebrated on November 1st and 2nd. The first day, called “Día de los Angelitos” (Day of the little angels), is dedicated to the souls of deceased children, while November 2nd is set aside for the souls of adults. Before these days, families may clean their homes to prepare for the arrival of the souls of their loved ones. Many also visit cemeteries to decorate the graves of the dead with their favorite items and flowers.

Graves and ofrendas are decorated with papel picado, photographs, cherished objects, marigolds (cempasúchitl), and skeletons made of paper or clay. Food and drink are placed on the ofrendas for the dead. It is believed the dead enjoy the tastes and smells of the food.

There are many important foods associated with Day of the Dead. In particular the main dish is mole, which is meat (usually chicken or pork) cooked with a sauce made from chilies, chocolate, peanuts, and other ingredients that vary by region. Pumpkin candies, rice pudding, and tamales may also be offered. Bakeries produce special bread called pan de muerto in the shape of people or bones and decorated with pink sugar. Stores also sell skulls made of sugar or chocolate, adorned with names, for children and adults to eat.

### The Ofrenda in Puebla, Mexico

For Mexic-Arte Museum’s celebration of Day of the Dead this year, we are learning the traditions that are unique to the region of Puebla, Mexico. In Puebla, Day of the Dead ofrendas have distinct characteristics (see image on opposite page). They are rectangular in shape, with an arch decorated with flowers. Foods are offered to the dead, including fruits hung from a rope on the wall. An image of the most important saint of the house is often placed at the center of the ofrenda. Marigold petals are scattered on the floor in a path leading from the front door of the home to the ofrenda. This is meant to guide the dead so that they can easily find their offerings.



**Papel picado** is brightly colored tissue paper cut in patterns.

**Pan de muerto** is Spanish for bread of the dead.



*Image of Ofrenda from the Day of the Dead Celebration in Tzinacapan, Puebla, Mexico, Photo by Jesse Herrera.*

# Activity Five

## Make an Ofrenda



To build an ofrenda, first you must decide whom you want to remember.

*Ask yourself these important questions:*

Has anyone you have known passed away?

Or is there anybody who you admire  
that you would want to celebrate?

Once you decide whom you want to honor, it is time to build your ofrenda. Remember that it is special to you and to the person or thing that you are honoring. You can be as creative as you like.

1. Find something to use as the base for your ofrenda, like a table. (You can use smaller boxes to make more levels.)
2. Place a photo or drawing of whom you are remembering.
3. Decorate your ofrenda with colorful paper and pictures or drawings. Skeletons are popular decorations, but your ofrenda is special to you. You can make whatever decorations you like.
4. Now decorate your ofrenda with flowers. Marigolds (cempasúchitl) are traditional, but you can use flowers that are special to you or the person you are honoring.
5. You may set out some favorite foods of the person you are honoring.
6. If you have a particular religion, you can include some special items on your ofrenda that help to honor and recall your loved one.
7. Finally, with adult help, you may want to place candles and incense on your ofrenda.

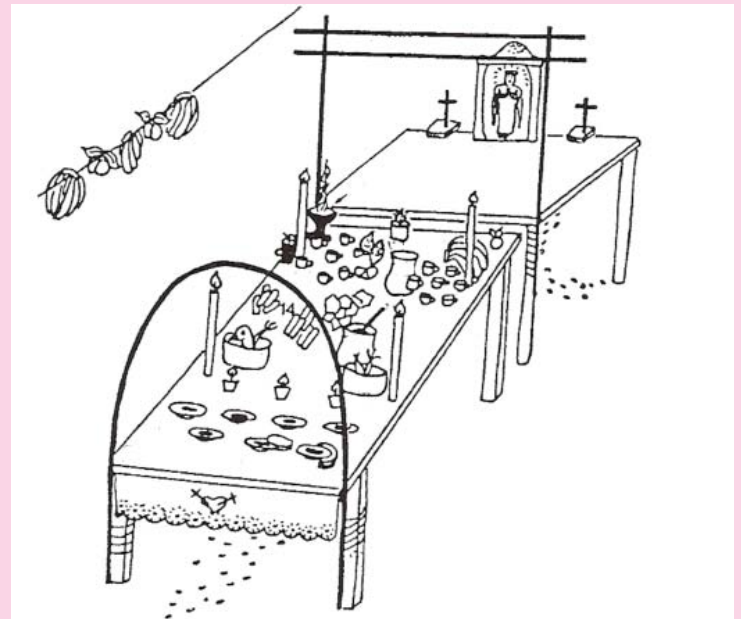


Diagram of a Nahua altar in Tzinacapan, Puebla (Rosanna Lok, 1991).  
*La Festividad Indígena Dedicada a Los Muertos en México*. CONACULTA, 2003.

**Now you have made  
an ofrenda for  
the Day of the Dead!**

See page 19 for the components of an ofrenda.



## 6. Reinventing Tradition

### Culture Crossing Boundaries



Día de los Muertos Logo, Mexic-Arte Museum, 2009.

Culture is more complex and dynamic than we are often taught to recognize in our daily lives and experiences. It is shared within and beyond communities of people regardless of the national boundaries that are drawn between them.

### Reconnecting with History

During the Chicano Movement many activists and artists turned to Mexican history and tradition to regain a connection to their past. They also worked to recover their history and create artistic traditions within the United States. Education that respectfully reflected the history of people of Mexican descent was a major concern of the movement, and this was often expressed in artistic practices.

The reclamation and reinvention of Day of the Dead by Chicanos and Mexicans within the United States is an important way to share in the creation of living cultural traditions.

The **Chicano Movement** was the movement for Mexican American civil rights.

### Bringing the Day of the Dead to Austin, Texas

While on a college scholarship in Mexico City to study art in the 1970s, Mexic-Arte Museum co-founder Sylvia Orozco became interested in Día de los Muertos. Though it was not something she had personally seen practiced while growing up in Cuero, Texas, other people of Mexican descent in Texas did follow these practices.

For the three artists who later founded Mexic-Arte Museum in 1984, Día de los Muertos provided a means to share the rich cultural and artistic traditions of Mexico with the entire community in Austin, Texas. Bringing Day of the Dead to Austin, and making it a part of public life, encourages Mexican Americans to learn about their rich and interesting heritage, and allows community-wide participation.

Reinterpreting and creating Day of the Dead as a community festival in downtown Austin inspires people of many different cultures to participate and learn about Mexican and Mexican American culture. It connects people in the present with long held practices that bring the past to life, making it part of the present.



The Day of the Dead Celebration 2007, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas.



# Activity Six

## How to Create a Papier-mâché Skull



Here is a project that uses mostly recycled materials. Creating a papier-mâché skull will take you a few days to make, so plan ahead if you want one in time for Day of the Dead.

### You Will Need:

- Cardboard boxes (two or more)
- Scissors
- Old newspapers
- Papier-mâché (see the recipe)
- Masking tape
- Acrylic paints (white and black paints, and any other colors you might like)
- Sunlight (for faster drying)

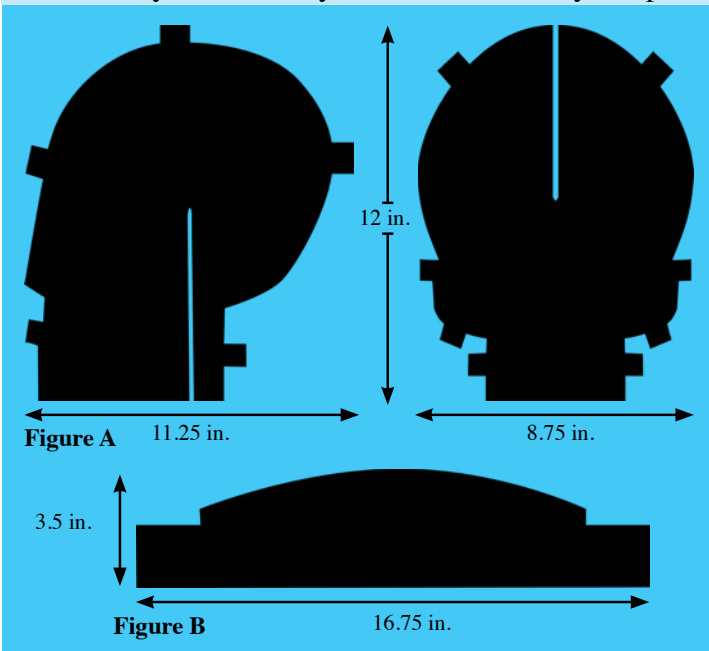
### Recipe for Papier-mâché

#### Materials Needed:

- Flour
- Water

#### Instructions:

To make Papier-mâché paste, simply mix together 1 part flour to 2 parts water. You will want it to be the consistency of thick glue, but you also want it to be runny and not thick like paste. Add more water or flour as necessary. Mix well by hand to remove any lumps.



Download and print these shapes at:  
[www.mexic-artemuseum.org/education/calavera.pdf](http://www.mexic-artemuseum.org/education/calavera.pdf)

### Making the Skull Shape

1. Draw and cut out a front and side view of your skull from the cardboard using the patterns (See *Figure A and Figure B*).
2. Cut a slit into the cutouts (See *Figure A*). Cut a slit going up midway from the top into the front cutout of the skull.
3. Using the cut slits, slide one piece of cardboard into the other (See *Figure C*); use tape along the seams to make it sturdy.
4. Cut out the mouth of the skull and wrap it around the bottom.
5. Cut the rest of your cardboard into 1 1/2" wide strips to wrap around skull.
6. Tape the strips from the front cutout to the side cutout all around the skull. The more strips you use, the more sturdy and round your skull will be (See *Figure D*).
7. Now cut your newspaper into 2" strips, dip it into the papier-mâché paste, and apply the strips in a crisscross pattern all over your skull (See *Figure E*).
8. Let it dry in the sun for a day.

### Making the Eyes and Cheeks

1. Roll up the newspaper into a ring shape for the eyes and nose and tape them to the skull.
2. Crunch newspaper up and put it beneath the eyes for cheeks.
3. Dip your newspaper strips in the papier-mâché paste and crisscross them over the eyes and cheeks.
4. Let it dry in the sun for another day.

### Painting Your Skull

1. Now paint your skull with white paint as a base coat and let it dry. You might want to put another layer of paint on it after the first layer dries.
2. Paint the inside of the eyes black.
3. Paint teeth on your skull.
4. Once everything dries, you can decorate your skull however you like! (See *Figure F*.)



Figure C



Figure D



Figure E



Figure F

# Day of the Dead Recipes

# Pan de Muerto Recipe


Also known as death bread or bread of the dead, pan de muerto is a soft sweet bread shaped into a round bun with bone shapes on top.

## Ingredients

- 1/4 cup margarine
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1/4 cup warm water
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/4 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons anise seed
- 1/4 cup white sugar
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 teaspoons orange zest
- 1/4 cup white sugar
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- 2 tablespoons white sugar

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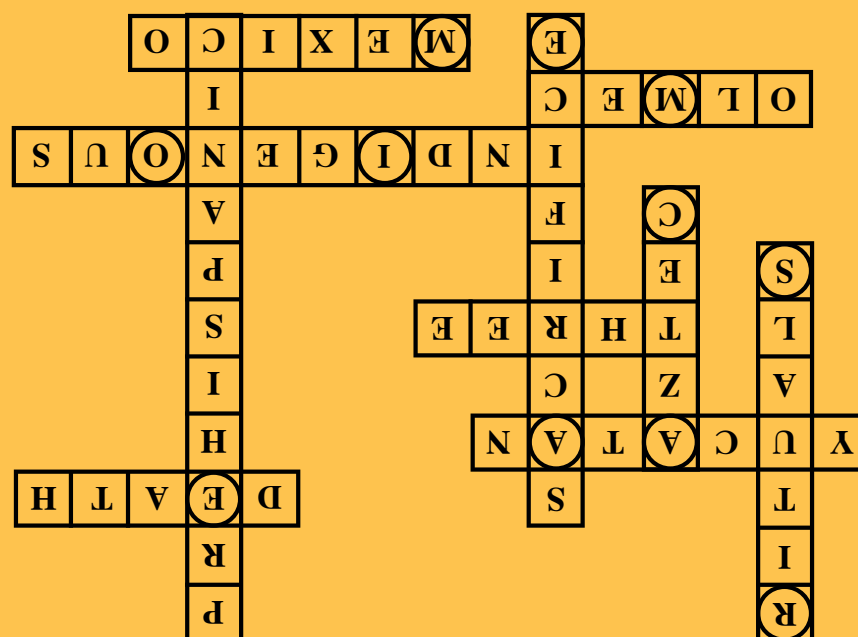
## Directions

1. Heat the milk and the butter together in a medium saucepan, until the butter melts. Remove from the heat and add warm water. The mixture should be around 110 degrees F (43 degrees C).
  2. In a large bowl combine 1 cup of the flour, yeast, salt, anise seed and 1/4 cup of the sugar. Beat in the warm milk mixture; then add the eggs and orange zest and beat until well combined. Stir in 1/2 cup of flour and continue adding more flour until the dough is soft.
  3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic.
  4. Place the dough into a lightly greased bowl, cover with plastic wrap, let rise in warm place til doubled in size (about 1 to 2 hours). Punch the dough down, shape into large round loaf. Reserve enough dough to shape round knob and bone shapes on top. Place onto a baking sheet loosely cover with plastic wrap. Let rise in warm place for about 1 hour or until about doubled in size.
  5. Bake in a preheated 350 degrees F (175 degrees C) oven for about 35 to 45 minutes. Remove from oven let cool slightly then brush with glaze.
  6. To make glaze: In a small saucepan combine the 1/4 cup sugar, orange juice and orange zest. Bring to a boil over medium heat and boil for 2 minutes. Brush over top of bread while still warm. Sprinkle glazed bread with white sugar.
- 
- A round loaf of bread, likely the 'Orange Anise Seed Bread' mentioned in the text. The bread is golden-brown and has a decorative shape on top, which appears to be a round knob and two bone-like shapes, as described in step 4. The bread is resting on a light-colored surface.



Cleofas Ramírez Celestino, Celebration of *Día de los Muertos* in Xalitla, Guerrero (detail), 2001, acrylic painting on bark paper, Mexic-Arte Museum Permanent Collection.

**MESOAMERICA**



# Sugar Skulls Recipe

Molded from a sugar paste, sugar skulls (also known as calaveritas) are made for Day of the Dead and used to decorate ofrendas. Often they are decorated with the name of whoever receives one, and are eaten as treats.

## Ingredients

- 2 1/2 cups sugar
- 1 egg white from an extra large egg, or 2 from small eggs
- 1 teaspoon light corn syrup
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Cornstarch, about a half cup, for powdering surface
- Colored sprinkles
- Food coloring
- Fine paint brush
- Colored icing



Day of the Dead Sugar Skulls at the market.

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Recipe by Chelsie Kenyon, [www.about.com](http://www.about.com)

## Directions

1. Sift sugar into a large mixing bowl.
2. In another bowl, mix the egg whites, corn syrup and vanilla.
3. Slowly pour the liquid into the powdered sugar. Mix with your hands until a sandy dough forms.
4. Form dough into a ball. At this point you can continue or you can refrigerate dough for later use.
5. Lightly dust surface with cornstarch as well as your hands. Pinch off a heaping tablespoon of dough and shape it into a skull.
6. If you're using them, lightly press colored sprinkles into the soft candy.
7. Let the candy dry overnight.
8. When candy is dry, use the paint brush with food coloring to decorate the skulls. Or you can use frosting (one that will dry hard) with a fine tip to decorate them.
9. Hand them out as is, or wrap in a small cellophane bag tied closed with a small ribbon.

## Tips:

- The skulls may not dry completely on a humid or rainy day.
- If you use the molds, you should follow each manufacturer's instructions as some molds only work with certain recipes.
- The "dough" should be the consistency of damp sand - just moist enough to hold together. If "dough" is too dry and crumbly, add 1 teaspoon of water at a time to moisten.
- If "dough" is too moist, add sugar one tablespoon at a time until "dough" is the right consistency.
- If the candy has trouble drying completely, place in a 125 degree warm oven until dry.



# Day of the Dead Art Activity



## Papel Picado

*The first colored papers reached Mexico via Spain from Asia in the 17th or 18th century. Since then Mexican artisans have found dozens of ways to use paper for decorations and objects. Papel picado is a form of folk art, which means that it is a popular traditional art form handed down from generation to generation. These delicate strings of paper can be seen hanging as banners in the streets during Day of the Dead and many other festivals.*

### Materials Needed:

- Three 8 1/2" by 11" sheets of colored tissue paper
- Thicker paper (loose-leaf or copy paper)
- Scissors
- A yard of string
- Glue stick
- Straight pins

### Directions

1. Photocopy pattern on the righthand side of a sheet of paper (8 1/2" x 11"). (*Image 1*)
2. Cut page in half (5 1/2" x 8 1/2"). (*Image 2*)
3. Cut three sheets of tissue paper to 8 1/2" x 11".
4. Fold the three sheets of tissue paper in half lengthwise (5 1/2" x 8 1/2") and pin the pattern on top. (*Image 3 and 4*)
5. Carefully cut out your design. Make sure to leave a little space (about an inch) on the top of your design so that you can attach a string there. (*Image 5*)
6. Now remove the pins and unfold your paper carefully and lay the tissue paper out horizontally next to each other, 1" apart.
7. Lay your string horizontally across the top of the paper. (*Image 6*)
8. Fold the top of the paper over the string and glue it down so that it stays. (*Image 7*)
9. Lift up your banner by either end of the string and find a place to hang it! (*Image 8*)



Image 1



Image 5



Image 2



Image 6

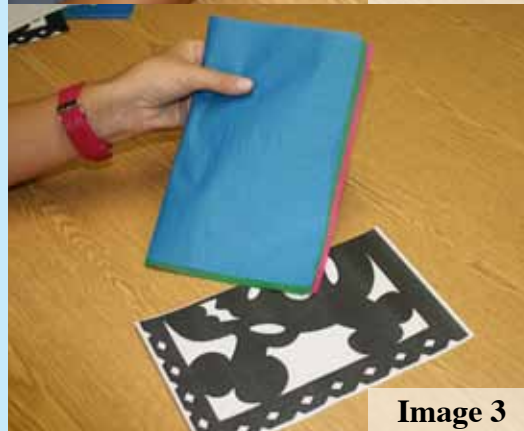


Image 3



Image 7



Image 4



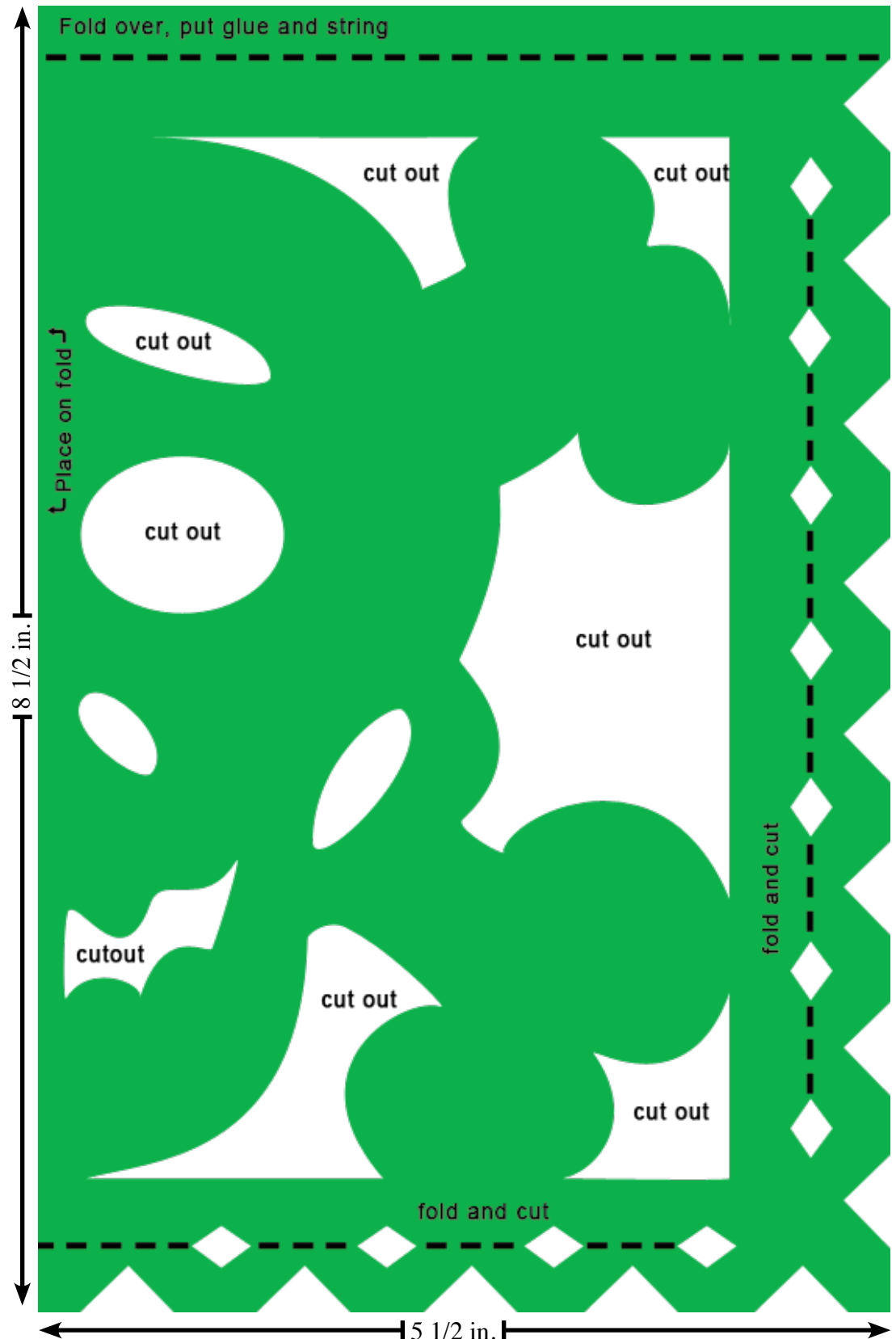
Image 8



## Components of an Ofrenda/Offering

Background: El Día de los Muertos is one of the most important and anticipated events in the Mexican calendar. Starting as early as the summer, preparations for the ofrenda begin and money is set aside to provide for the expenses the celebration requires. In addition to the ofrenda prepared for the individual ancestors, the local cemetery is refreshed with fresh coats of paint and tidying up of the graves. Items are offered out of love and respect, not fear of their family's spirits.

- **Water** which satiates the thirst of the spirit and represents purity and a source of life.
- **Salt** carries purifying elements, also a symbol of wisdom and can act as an invitation to the altar.
- **Calaveras de azucar**, sugar skulls, as sweets; both sugar and salt are to express the bitter and sweet aspects of life shared with those who are deceased.
- **Flowers** represent love and the sun; cempasúchitl or marigolds are the traditional flowers.
- A **petate**, or mat is offered for rest.
- **Toys** for the children, and favorite foods adults enjoyed in life.
- **Pan de muertos**, or bread of the dead, and tamales are laid out as a traveler's provisions.
- **Incense** creates smells that are pleasing to the deceased.
- **Paper banners** help decorate for this special occasion.



**Make your Papel Picado for Day of the Dead. Photocopy this pattern and place on folded tissue paper. See the instructions on page 18.**



**Make your own Day of the Dead Mask! Color, Cut and Wear!**



THE OFFICIAL MEXICAN  
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Mexic-Arte Museum is supported in part by the City of Austin through the Cultural Arts Division and by a grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts, and through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.

419 Congress Ave. • Austin, TX • 78701 • P.O. Box 2273 • Austin, TX 78768

512.480.9373 • [www.mexic-artemuseum.org](http://www.mexic-artemuseum.org) • [info@mexic-artemuseum.org](mailto:info@mexic-artemuseum.org)

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