Dia de los Muertos

La Catrina, Día de los Muertos mascot

The "Day of the Dead" or All Souls Day is an official holiday of the Catholic calendar founded to honor and assist the dearly departed. It is celebrated worldwide on November 2, following All Saints Day. Though modern practices of the Day of the Dead were shaped by Catholic beliefs, pre-hispanic groups including the Aztecs also played an important role in their development.

The Catholic church, largely based on works, asserts that believers who die in a "state of grace" are promised "heavenly rewards" after paying for their sins in purgatorial flames. Living members of the church believe that they can help their deceased loved ones through this process by praying and making special ritual offerings. In Mexico, priests conduct three Requiem Masses to facilitate the soul's transition from Purgatory to Heaven and members then proceed to the cemetery to clean, visit, bless and decorate the graves. Many also eat the holiday meal graveside, with their beloved dead.

Aztecs believed that the terms of a person's death were just as important as how a person lived. They believed that after dying, one's soul traveled through as many as nine levels of the underworld, eventually arriving in Mictlán—the place of the dead. How a person died determined the level in which their personal journey began and what kind of trials they would have to endure along the way. According to Aztec mythology, the process took four years and might include crossing a mountain range where the slopes crashed into each other, a field with wind that blew flesh-scraping knives, and a river of blood with fearsome jaguars. Some Aztecs—such as those who had been struck by lightning, died during childbirth or valiantly given their lives in battle—were thought to go directly to Mictlán.

The Spanish Conquest of 1521 brought about the fusion of Catholic and indigenous beliefs. So, many Day of the Dead rituals derive from a combination of Pre-hispanic, native beliefs and doctrines of the Catholic church.

OFRENDAS

Mexicans erect large and elaborate altars in the home with offerings of food upon them for the holiday. The dead partake of the food in spirit and the living partake of it later in body. These "ofrendas" are beautifully arranged with marigolds or *zempasuchitl*—the traditional Aztec flower of the dead. Candles are also placed on the altars for each dead soul along with mementos, photos, and other remembrances of those who have passed on. Sugar skulls are a popular confection and decoration on the typical ofrenda, although their origin is still a mystery. There are historical references to them being sold during Day of the Dead festivities in the mid 1700s, but some claim that their use began much earlier. They may have to do with the human skulls that were kept as trophies after ritual human sacrifices or put up in honor of a particular deity in pre-hispanic celebrations. Mexicans also wear special masks that indicate how sorrowful and tormented they are or how happy they are unable to feel underneath the covering.

CALAVERAS

Although "calavera" is the word for "skull" in Spanish, it also refers to a popular Day of the Dead tradition—the humorous and poetic obituary written and published in the local newspaper for a person who is still alive. A calavera can also be a caricature, such as the one at right that mocks Don Quixote. All are jovial and satirical but applaud a person's character or contributions to community. Since heavenly bliss and the honor of reaching Mictlán are both the apex of human existence to those who celebrate Day of the Dead, there can be no greater distinction than to read one's own obituary in the paper.

DECORATIONS

A popular type of decoration used to celebrate the Day of the Dead in Mexico is the "Papel Picado" or "Papel de China" tissue banner. At first these were made using scissors, but since the 1940's they have been cut with tiny chisels or "fierritos." Today, skilled artisans use more than 50 different chisels to make various cuts in scores of sheets of tissue paper at a time. Popular patterns used in the banners include angels, birds, chalices, crosses, skulls and skeletons. The most famous papel picado artisans live in the "mestizo" village of San Salvador Huixcolotla, where they have been making banners for over 90 years. Papier maché and cardboard coffins from which a skeleton can be made to jump out are also popular.

FOODS

Food is considered a necessary part of the holiday. What is offered in the memorial depends on the wishes and social status of the deceased. Bread, fruits, vegetables, and sweets are typical. Other delicacies available are candied fruit, pumpkins, tamales and maize cakes as well as enchiladas and chalupas. Water, coffee, beer, tequila, and atole—a traditional hot drink made with corn starch—are also placed on the memorial altar along with the deceased person's favorite cigarettes or chewing gum.

The custom of having a loaf of bread or "Pan de Muerto" relates to the early custom in Spain of begging for souls. The Zapotec Indians also listed bread among their death offerings for departed souls. This bread is formed into different shapes and covered with a glaze or sprinkling of powdered sugar. The most common sold in the Mexico City bakeries is round and decorated with a cross to mimic a skull and crossed bones. Bread of the dead is found on every altar and not removed until the traditional cemetery visit occurs.

SUMMARY

El Dia de los Muertos began long ago in the valley of Southern Mexico where Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec and Aztec people honored the dead with elaborate ceremonies, dances, and rituals. When Hernán Cortez conquered Mexico and introduced Catholicism, the celebration of All Saints Day and All Souls Day merged with indigenous practices to produce altars covered with food, art, candles, flowers and pictures of deceased common people alongside saints.

On November 1, the spirits of deceased children come back to visit their families, followed by the souls of adults on November 2nd. Families light firecrackers to help the children find their way back. In some villages, shining yellow petals of marigolds mark a bright path from the graveyard. The smell of incense and song carried by the wind also guide the dead home, where their loved ones eagerly wait.

The Day of the Dead helps people understand that death is not an end but a natural link in the continuous chain of existence. Gathering flowers, baking bread and building altars remind us that the dead persevere with the living as long as we choose to remember them.

Altar

We suffer three deaths.
The first one is when we die.
The second is when we are buried.
And the third, and most dreadful, is when we are forgotten.
I build my altars so that I won't forget.

—Ofelia Esparza

LA OFRENDA : A FAMILY AFFAIR

Creating an Altar

One of the key elements of Dia De Los Muertos is Las Ofrendas, or offerings which are created through a visual display of altar-making and grave decorating. A focal point of the observance, ofrendas echo love for and dedication to the dearly departed. Altars can be created with a wide spectrum of dedications, but should includes the four main elements of nature—earth, wind, water and fire.

Earth is represented by the crop: various earthly aromas of fruit or favorite family dishes on the altar feed the soul. Wind is represented by a moving object: paper banners are commonly used to represent the echoes of the wind. Water rests on the altar to quench the soul's thirst after its long journey. Water is also a means of purification. Fire is represented by candles, each lit to represents a loving soul, and an extra for the forgotten soul.

There are other important traditional components of an ofrenda. Copal—incense—is burned on the altar to commemorate ancient history and long held traditions. The zempasuchitl—the bright yellow marigold and flower of the dead—blossoms in the valleys of Mexico during October and November and is central to altar decoration. Pictures are widely used to identify and honor the dead. The skull, a common symbol of the holiday represented in decorative masks or calacas, also adorn the ofrenda. Sugar skulls are tastefully created and inscribed with the names of both the dead and living recipients on the forehead to remind us of our mortality. Death closes the gates of time and opens the windows of eternity.

—Capuchin-Friars

La Familia Trujillo

During the last few weeks of October, we start to prepare for Dia de los Muertos. Our family goes to the banks of the river that flows through the city. We cut down several large reeds with a heavy knife called a machete.

When we get home with the reeds, our father ties them together to make the arch over the altar. Its shape represents a sacred opening. It frames the ofrenda that we make. We decorate the arch with real flowers and with blossoms made from bright-colored tissue paper.

Next we bring up the boxes from the basement that hold the holiday decorations we have been collecting over the years. We unwrap brightly painted masks, sparkling cut-glass bottles, the delicate feathered wing of a hawk, whistles, drum and other musical instruments, paper flowers, and much more. We have fun finding the treasures in the boxes. It is a little like unpacking the ornaments for our Christmas tree.

Each year we make something new to put on the altar. This year we made little cherubs, or angels, out of papier-mâché. We painted each angel in bright colors to go on the wall above the altar.

When it comes to making new things for the ofrenda, we are lucky that our father is a professional artist and teacher. He shows us how to create many special objects, like skeleton masks, toys, and even T-shirts. Although he makes things in the traditional way, using techniques he learned from his mother and other Mexican artists, he sometimes uses modern materials and methods as well.

This year, as we worked on making our ofrenda, we thought about our cousin. He died in April. We miss him very much. He was only thirty-two years old and a special part of our family. We put his picture on our altar. Before he died, he gave our mother a small leather pouch called a "medicine bag." She put it on the altar in his memory.

Our mother says that the ofrenda is a serious space. "It is a remembering space," she tells us, "and a good place to do artwork." Our whole family works to make the ofrenda as beautiful and creative as possible. When it is finished, we are very proud.

La Familia Martínez

The celebration of the Day of the Dead begins at home. Our whole family works together to create an altar in one corner of the dining room. The altar is a place of honor for the departed souls of our relatives. When they return for their yearly visit, they will find things on the altar that they remember—a photograph, a well-loved article of clothing, a hat, or perhaps a favorite shawl. We call this altar an ofrenda or offering. We offer food, fruits, flowers, clothing, and photographs in honor of the dead during their brief visit with us on earth.

We prepare traditional Mexican foods for the ofrenda. We like to make tamales, a mixture of meat, spices, and cornmeal wrapped up in corn husks, and mole, a spicy sauce made from chocolate, nuts, and tomatoes. We offer a special drink made of corn called atole.

To complete the celebration, people from the community go to the cemetery on November 1 to clean and fix up the graves of departed relatives. They place new flowers on the tombstones and light candles. In some parts of Mexico, a vigil is kept that lasts the whole night long. People feast near the graves of their loved ones, burning candles to light the darkness.

In Mexico, people save a part of their salary all year so they will have enough money to prepare a lavish feast and make a beautiful ofrenda. It is also traditional for people to buy or make new clothes for this festival.

Here, as in other parts of the United States, Mexican-American communities have found their own way of celebrating. We form a procession through the cemetery, and afterward, there is a Catholic Church service and a Mexican Indian ceremony.

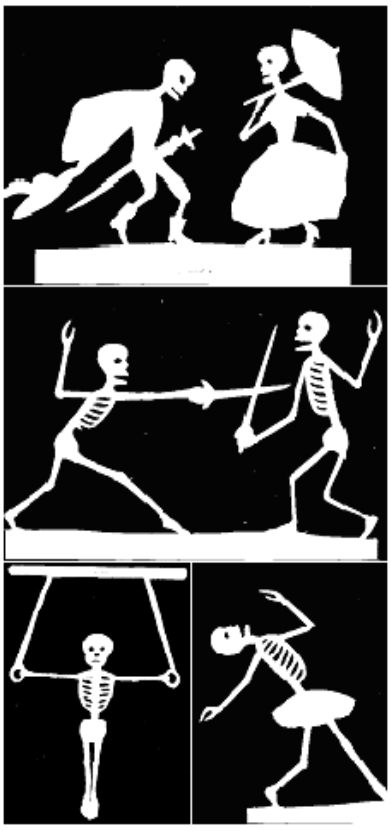
PAPER MAKING

Papermaking is an ancient craft in Mexico. In pre-Columbian times deerskin, tree bark, and agave or maguey fibers were fashioned into forms of paper used for painting codices, or pictorial manuscripts, for religious or historical purposes. The library has examples of these codices dating from the post-Conquest period.

Some of these papermaking skills have survived today and are to be seen in popular art as well as in healing rituals. Paper called amate from the bark of mulberry and fig trees is made in the area where the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, and Veracruz meet, most notably in the town of San Pablito, Puebla. The mulberry produces a whitish paper, while the paper from the fig is dark. Men of the village peel the bark from the trees, but the women actually make the paper. The bark is washed, boiled in a large pot for several hours with ashes or lime, then rinsed and laid in lines on a wooden board. The fibers are next beaten with a stone until they fuse together into paper and are left to dry in the sun. The high demand for amate paper has resulted in the over-stripping of trees and even the poaching of bark.

Much of the amate paper goes to villages in the state of Guerrero where artisans who once decorated pottery, now paint imaginative scenes of everyday life, fanciful birds, animals, and flowers on this special paper. Such paintings of varying quality are produced in abundance for the tourist trade. Some works are signed, and occasionally a gifted artist may gain considerable recognition for his work.

In San Pablito amate paper is used by shamans for making cutouts of spirit beings associated with the sky, the earth, the underworld, and water for curing and fertility ceremonies. The shaman will bring them to life by breathing unto their mouths, holding them in the smoke of incense, or sprinkling them with alcohol. A vast number of seed spirits of fruits and vegetables are used to encourage good crops. These cutout figures in dark and light shades of amate are sometimes mounted and sold to tourists and collectors or even made into accordion-type books that explain the mystical ceremonies. Besides amate paper, ordinary tissue paper-cutouts of the spirits are also employed in rituals and books and provide an accent of color.



Tissue paper is the basis for another art form, the papel picado, in which multilayered sheets of colored paper are cut out from a pattern to make banners. These popular banners are ordered for local festivals, birthdays, or home decorations, and may depict flowers, leaves, birds, angels, crosses, names, or anything specified. Increasingly the banners, such as those in this exhibit, are made to represent skeletons in an infinite variety of activities and are sold for the Day of the Dead on November 2. Originally the papel picados were laboriously cut out with scissors, but now the artisans use sharp chisels to cut through as many as 50 sheets of tissue paper from a basic pattern, with the flexibility of changing their designs from day to day.

PAPEL PICADO

Artistic expression using colored tissue paper has long been a Mexican tradition. One of the common names for the material, Papel de China, or Chinese paper, gives us a clue about its origin. Paper was among the imports that poured in from the Orient on the annual Pacific treasure fleet that plied its way between the Far East and Acapulco, laden with exotic goods like silver, ivory, spices, and porcelain. Once in Mexico, tissue paper became the basis for many important folk art forms.

There are examples of papel picado dating back to the early 20th century. Cut to simulate lace, papel picado can be seen hanging from Day of the Dead altars and around graves during November. During Christmas and other celebrations, papel picado is used to decorates for indoor and outdoor festivities. The craft has been handed down from generation to generation. Templates are used on stacks of paper to make many cuts-outs at once from a single pattern.

Papel Picado or "punched paper" is a Mexican folk art that has produced countless colorful and intricate decorations for tables, windows, ceilings, altars, and even banners for outdoor festivals. It depicts flowers, birds, angels, names, crosses, and skeletons in everyday activities. During the Day of the Dead, they remind us that our beloved dead strive with us and that death is not to be feared but accepted as a natural part of our existence.

LA COMIDA DE LOS MUERTOS
Judy Walker, The Arizona Republic

“Culture is a really flexible thing,” says Tempe resident and cultural anthropologist Linda McAllister. At a Dia de Los Muertos observance in Guadalupe a few years ago, she saw a Big Gulp as a grave offering.

"The biggest one," she said. Beverages are a common offering on ofrendas, altars constructed in homes and cemeteries across Mexico for the festival that is The Day of the Dead -- the day that departed souls return to earth.

Locally, the Heard Museum has raised awareness of this holiday through its seven years of the Valley's largest celebration, which this year will be held from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Celebrations will be held at other locations, too, and a complete list is in tomorrow's edition of The Rep.

The Heard's Educational Services Manager, Gina Laczko, wrote a 1995 English-Spanish book on The Day of the Dead published by the museum. McAllister was a consultant for some segments.

McAllister, who holds a master's degree in art history, specializes in Mexican folk art and looks at food as an extension of folk traditions. She has lectured on food as ritual and ephermeral art. And she will be teaching a cooking class on Days of the Dead on Oct. 29 at 6:30 p.m. at What's Cooking, 7002 E. Main St. in Scottsdale (call 941-0355 to reserve a spot; the cost of the class is $35), as one of several Mexican festival cooking classes this season.

Dia de Los Muertos traditions "vary from town to town because Mexico is not culturally monolithic," McAllister said. "Things are very different from Yucatan to Central Mexico to the northwest to Northern Mexico."

Day of the Dead is a family event to remember ancestors, whose spirits visit the earth once a year. This concept of the cycle or circle of life is a strong tradition with many native and indigenous peoples worldwide, Laczko said.
"To me, it's a very interesting and in so many ways a very healthy view of death, which Americans find so difficult. Americans don't even want to talk about aging, let alone death.

"In agricultural societies, as in many traditions aorund the world, if you have life, you have death. It's considered a passage from one type of living to another, and that's something that was believed in pre-conquest Mexico," Laczko said.

This cyclic view fused with Catholicism's All Souls Day on Nov. 1 and All Saints Day on Nov. 2 to become Day (or Days) of the Dead, Laczo explained. In a society without written family trees, celebrants tell stories to their children, "and it's not just the landmark things about your parents or great-grandparents," she added. "You remember a lot of anecdotal things, such as that was her favorite food, or that time he got me with that good practical joke."

Although many Americans see the prototypical dancing skeletons and celebration of death as macabre or related to Halloween, it's not, Laczko and others emphasize. As harvest festivals both fall at the same time of the year, but El Dia de Los Muertos is not scary. It's reflective, but not sad.

What relates it to Halloween in many minds are images of cavorting skeletons. Laczo notes that these are a direct result of the work of Mexican press artist Jose Guadalupe Posada, who died in 1913. Posada inspired muralist Diego Rivera and others with his caricatures of the rich and political, all depicted as skeletons. Catrina, a skeletal figure in a plumed hat and dress, has become the instant visual signal of El Dia de Los Muertos.

Catrina and company are in evidence all over Mexico as altars are set up Oct. 30 and 31. In homes, tables are covered with flowers, fruits, vegetables, candles, incense, statues of saints, photos of the deceased. The sky is represented by a sheet or strings of paper cutouts.

Traditionally, the flowers used are marigolds, and the incense used on the altar is copal, the resin from a particular tree. Like moles and chile-laced dishes prepared for some of the ancestors, the flowers are quite aromatic and the copal has a distinctive smell. The aromas are used or consumed by the spirits, which, like the scents, can't be seen. The foods are eaten (or given away) by the living later, after their essence has been consumed, Laczco explained.

So what foods are made? "You would want to provide for (the spirits) the very best things they loved in life, the things made with the most love and the most care," Linda McAllister said. "You would make their favorite dish.

In Mexico, some of the best stuff you would make would be moles, tamales, because those are made for special occasions -- particularly mole because it takes so many ingredients."

It is believed that the souls of children, los angelitos, return first on Oct. 30 and 31. Toys, not-so-spicy foods and candies would be provided on la ofrenda, or separate miniature altars might be made for them with small cups, saucers, and even miniature pan de muerto.

Sweet, egg-rich "bread of the dead" is one of the constants of Dia de Los Muertos, although it varies regionally. McAllister has photos of 200 different kinds of Day of the Dead breads. Bakeries advertise different shapes they would make, McAllister and Laczko said. The most common is round; others might be shapes of human beings, animals, or, particularly, rabbits in profile. Some breads have anise seed. These are purchased from bakeries, which sometimes employ extra bakers to churn out great numbers of loaves to meet the demand.

McAllister said that in rural areas where wheat bread is not part of the diet all year long, residents will walk or ride as far as they must to purchase pan de muerto.

Locally, La Parísima in Glendale makes pan de muerto sprinkled with sugar, with little knobs and strips of dough on top that represent bones and skulls. They make hundreds of loaves for the Heard Museum festival, as well as for regular customers. Juan Arellano is the baker and his wife, Maricela, said he learned the old family recipe for pan de muerto from his father, also a baker. Their son is the fifth generation of bakers. "My father-in-law was from Michocan, and my husband was from Mexico City," Maricela said. The bakery has been in Glendale 14 years. "The shape my husband learned from his dad was that round shape, that and the skulls. His father's bakery was in Juarez, Chihuahua, after being in Michoacan in his youth."

In some places in Mexico, sugar skulls are treats for children during Dia de Los Muertos, sometimes with names written on them. An anology would be chocolate Easter bunnies, Laczko pointed out, or a candy Santa.

"Another thing often on the altar are traditional liquors," she pointed out. Alcoholic mescal and pulque, and atole, a corn drink, are pre-European. A glass of water is also essential, because after the journey here, the souls are thirsty and pretty tired. Atole, a thick beverage Laczko likens to "the original power bar" for its nourishing qualities, is still used in remote communities.

Chocolate also often appears, sometimes in drinks, as does pumpkin candy, made from huge green Mexican pumpkins grown expressly for this purpose. In pre-Hispanic times, according to Patricia Quintana in Mexico's Feasts of Life, candied pumpkin was originally sweetened with honey or the sap extracted from the maguey plant.

Families clean and repaint the graves in cemeteries, which are sometimes in churchyards, sometimes in the countryside. Musicians are often hired to play the favorite songs of the departed.

"Cemeteries are wondrous places in Mexico," Laczo said. "The tombstones are close together, and are often monumental structures, both permanently and, this time of year, temporarily. These extraordinary huge arches of flowers will have pictures of the deceased set into them, and the whole gravesite repainted, and several hundred candles might be set up, and food set up. In the night vigal, whole families sit around the tombstones, and often mariachis or local musicians will go from gravesite to gravesite and play the favorite songs of the person. It's sort of quiet, but people are talking and visiting. The priest is often there, and will go and say prayers with each family.

"At night, it is alive with the flickering of candles, and all this smelling of the copa, the overwhelming scent of the flowers, it's heady, almost. There's so much aroma there," Laczko remembered.

Women spend days working armloads of flowers into breathtakingly elaborate installations, she said. She was afraid she might offend people by taking photographs, so she asked a family for permission, and they were quite flattered. The family at the next gravesite said, "Don't you think ours are beautiful?"

"So there's tremendous pride," Laczko said. "Americans have no idea of how overwhelmingly beautiful this is. And to do all this work, it really is an honoring of that person."