

# Sonoma County Museum

## *Day of the Dead Altars*

*September 23, 2012 – November 4, 2012*



## **Educator Guide**

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For more information on education and tours at the  
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## EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

*Day of the Dead Altars* offers many opportunities for student learning.

As an art exhibit, the show offers curricular tie-ins for the Visual Arts, including the following **California State Content Standards**:

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 2.0 Creative Expression
- 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

Activities connected with this exhibit can also be aligned with the following **National Standards for Arts Education**:

- Visual Arts Standard 2: Using knowledge of structures and functions
- Visual Arts Standard 3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas
- Visual Arts Standard 4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
- Visual Arts Standard 5: Reflecting on and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

In addition, teachers may find the following themes useful in finding curriculum overlaps for the exhibit, and planning their visit:

### **SOCIAL STUDIES**

- Community and Family
- Culture
- Holidays
- History: The Age of Exploration
- Latin American History



## DAY OF THE DEAD ALTARS

### DAY OF THE DEAD

El Día de Los Muertos, or 'Day of the Dead' in English, is a holiday that is celebrated in Mexico, many Central and South American countries, and within the United States. A joyous remembrance of the lives of family members and loved ones who have died, the holiday is a celebration of the cycle of life. Traditionally, it is said, the souls of the dead return to visit the living for a few brief hours during the Day of the Dead celebrations.

Day of the Dead is celebrated November 1 and 2. These days are marked by festive celebrations to honor the deceased. Cemeteries are cleaned and decorated, special food and candies cooked, and home altars are designed with offerings (ofrendas) to the dead of the things they enjoyed most in life, including food, drink, and even music.

Day of the Dead is a melding of traditions, Catholic and indigenous. In part, the festival is based upon Roman Catholic traditions, specifically All Saints' and All Souls' Day. However, Day of the Dead also has many indigenous, pre-colonial elements, and can be viewed as an expression of cultural persistence. Mexico's indigenous people preserved their traditions by imbedding them in the accepted, Catholic practices of the colonial authority, sustaining them through the generations. What has been preserved across time is the message that death is a part of life, and the belief that the dead live on through our rituals of remembrance.

The particulars of how to celebrate Dia de los Muertos vary greatly from country to country, region to region, even household to household. However, as a whole Dia de los Muertos represents an important tradition of remembrance, honoring the deceased and celebrating life.

### IN THIS EXHIBIT: ALTARS AND OFFERINGS

Today, people celebrate Día de los Muertos by creating *ofrendas* or offerings to the dead in the form of colorful and elaborate altars. These gifts usually consist of items that the deceased loved one enjoyed in life; their favorite food or drink, clothing, photographs and objects from their life. Other traditional Día de los Muertos offerings are Marigold flowers, candles, sugar skulls and colorful paper banners called *papel picado*.

Family members hope that the souls of their loved ones will enjoy the ofrendas of food, personal objects, and decorations when they return to the earth for Dia de Los Muertos. These offerings and altars are made in the home but are also often displayed on gravesites in cemeteries. On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, many families visit the gravesites of their loved ones to decorate the graves, enjoy picnics, and socially interact with others as a way to celebrate the cycle of life and death.

The exhibit's altars were created by Liz Camino-Byers. Sharing her Mexican roots and her passion for Mexican culture, Camino-Byers creates these Day of the Dead altars as an expression of the authentic and vibrant tradition of celebrating life after death.

## SYMBOLS AND ELEMENTS

The following is a list of items that are typically placed on Day of the Dead altars in honor of the deceased. While some of them are left out for the pleasure of the deceased, like food and drink, other objects are placed in remembrance of the loved one, or with symbolic recognition of the cycle of life and death.

- **Marigold flowers:** A symbol of death dating back to the Aztec times, the scent of marigolds is said to guide the spirits to the homes of their relatives. For Aztecs, the marigold also represented the sun's rays. The sun, the center of the universe, symbolizes that the dead spirit has not lost their place in the universe.
- **Candles:** In addition to the scent of the marigolds, the light given off by candles is supposed to guide the spirits home.
- **Monarch butterflies:** Monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico in the autumn after their summer up North. The butterflies are believed to be carrying the spirits of the deceased home to Mexico.
- **"Pan de Muertos" or "Bread of the Dead":** A sweet bread baked for the Day of the Dead holiday. The baker hides a small trinket in the bread, which is said to bring luck to the one who bites into it.
- **"Calaveras de azucar" or "Sugar Skulls":** Stemming from the pre-Columbian belief that the skull is a symbol of life, not death, these candy skulls represent the joy and celebration that comes with honoring the lives of the deceased.
- **"Calacas" or "Skeletons":** Similarly to the "calaveras," or "skulls," these skeletons are used as vibrant decoration. They are often depicted as whimsical characters, shown engaging in happy activities such as dancing or eating, in order to symbolize the connection between life and death.
- **Salt:** Salt is laid out on altars as a symbol of the vitality of life.
- **Soap and Water:** Soap and water are placed on altars to freshen up the spirits after their long trip home.
- **Food and Drink:** The deceased loved ones' favorite foods and drinks are placed on the altars as refreshments for their return home.

- **“Papel Picado”**: Literally meaning “Perforated Paper,” these elaborate lacy paper cutouts often feature traditional Day of the Dead symbols such as a calavera, and are used to decorate altars and homes.

# LESSON PLAN: HONORING LOVED ONES

Objects in our possession (no matter how small or inexpensive) can say something about who we are. The deceased are honored during Day of the Dead by having an altar dedicated to them, complete with things that they had enjoyed in life. Students will gain an understanding of how objects hold importance and how the dead can be personally honored in many ways.

**Ages:** Adaptable for Grade Levels 1-12 (writing handout for Grade Levels K-3)

**CA Curriculum content:** English Language Arts (Writing, Written and Oral English Language Conventions, Listening and Speaking) and History/Social Sciences (Chronological and Spatial Thinking, Research, Evidence, and Point of View, Historical Interpretation)

**Suggested connections to Common Core Standards:** Text Types and Purposes (K-5 and 6-12): Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

## **Materials:**

- Writing materials (writing hand-out for primary grades, lined paper for older grades)
- Décor (craft paper, sequins, tissue paper, etc.) and chosen elements for the collage (photographs, magazine clippings)

**Introduction:** There are a variety of options on length of each project. Each activity can be turned into an assignment of varying complexity—ranging from an in-class discussion, a quick writing exercise, or an extended paper.

1. Students bring in three objects that represent something personal about them. Bringing them to the rug or out on their desks, the class holds a discussion about what these objects say about them (interests, age, gender, etc). Does that give us an idea of what he/she enjoys or what is important to him/her? Students should strive to answer how an object can be a symbol of a person.

**Time required:** One class period (50-60 minutes)

2. Students complete a writing exercise about someone they have lost. This can be a relative, a friend or even a pet. Younger students can complete the attached handout on page 8 of this guide, whereas older students might be encouraged to free-write about the deceased.

**Time required:** One class period (50-60 minutes) or can be given as an overnight assignment.

3. Using their writing from the previous activity as a guide, students work in partnerships to brainstorm words and images that might represent their loved one. Students cut out words and images from magazines, and create a collage that honors the deceased individual. They can then use art materials, including sequins and paper flowers, to decorate the collage.
4. Students hang their collages around the room and hold a gallery walk. After the gallery walk, hold a closing discussion about making art to honor the dead. Was this new for them? How does their family remember passed loved ones? Discuss how different cultures deal with death differently in preparation for visiting the Day of the Dead exhibit at the Sonoma County Museum.

**Time required:** Two class periods (50-60 minutes)

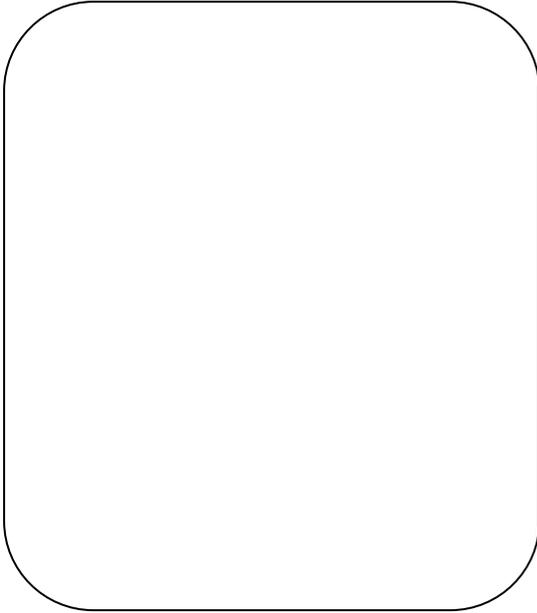
Lesson adapted from Jennifer Atkinson's 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Scholastic Teacher Blog:  
[http://blogs.scholastic.com/1\\_2/2008/10/day-of-the-dead.html](http://blogs.scholastic.com/1_2/2008/10/day-of-the-dead.html)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Honoring Loved Ones

My loved one's name was \_\_\_\_\_



He/she looked like:

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He/She liked to eat:

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A portrait of my loved one

Things my loved one enjoyed doing/seeing:

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What I miss the most about my loved one:

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## FOLLOW THE BUTTERFLIES ACTIVITY

During the Día De Los Muertos celebration, monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico from the USA and Canada. The butterflies return in search of warmer climate and shelter. Their timely arrival to Mexico has become a symbol for the souls of the dead returning to the earth.

**Ages:** Adaptable for Grade Levels 1-8

**CA Curriculum content:** Science (Life Sciences, Investigation and Experimentation) and History/Social Sciences (Chronological and Spatial Thinking, Research, Evidence, and Point of View, Historical Interpretation) and Visual Arts.

**Time Required:** 1-2 class periods (60-90 minutes)

### Materials:

- Classroom world map and one 11 X 7 photocopy of North America for each student
- A cut-out butterfly template
- White or colored construction paper for butterflies
- Crayons/markers to decorate, scissors, and tape
- A tree on which to affix the butterflies (an image on the wall or a real tree)

**Introduction:** This is an exercise in understanding the concepts of human and animal migration. Students will be able understand what immigration is through their own family's history and in turn reflect on the concept of migration in general.

1. Trace human migration patterns on the classroom world map by having students identify where their families came from.
2. On the classroom world map, show students where Día de los Muertos is celebrated (Latin America & USA). Explain how people have migrated from Latin America to the USA and brought the holiday of Dia de los Muertos to this country.
3. Show students where the butterflies migrate and talk about why. Compare and contrast the reasons humans migrate and resettle.
4. Have students trace the migrations on their own worksheets.
5. Explain to students that the butterfly has become a symbol of the souls returning to earth during El Dia de los Muertos
6. Students cut out a butterfly shape from paper, decorate, and dedicate to a passed loved one
7. Students hang the butterflies on the tree in the classroom or outside

# CALACAS ACTIVITY

Sugar skulls have been made as part of the Day of the Dead for centuries, although their exact origin remains a mystery. In Mexico, these skulls are sold in markets and made in homes in the weeks preceding the celebration. Many students may be used to skulls being spooky, but for this holiday, skulls are bright, colorful, and celebratory.

**Ages:** Adaptable for Grade Levels K-12

**Time Required:** 2-3 class periods (including overnight drying of skulls)

**CA Curriculum content:** Mathematics standards (Number Sense, Measurement and Geometry, Statistics, Data Analysis, and Probability) and Visual Arts (Artistic Perception, Creative Expression, Historical and Cultural Context)

## **Materials:**

- Ingredients for sugar skulls
  - Ingredients for frosting or other décor (recipe on page 12)
  - Measuring cups, spoons, etc
  - Mixing bowls
  - Spoons
  - Electric Mixer (optional)
1. Review measurement units. Review how to measure liquids and powders. Review fractions in relation to measuring cups.
  2. Invite students to participate in mixing the ingredients using standard units of measurement.
  3. Students shape sugar dough into skulls. Have image of skulls handy to reference as students are shaping. Provide assistance as needed.
  4. After skulls have dried, begin decorating with icing (see recipe in appendix), paints or gluing sequins, feathers, etc.
  5. Review mixing secondary colors with food dye or paint. How do we make green, purple, and orange? Students mix their own secondary colors from primary colors and learn the terminology.
  6. Students can dedicate their sugar skull to a deceased loved one by writing a name on the skull.
  7. Students can contribute these skulls to a classroom Dia de los Muertos Altar. After making skulls, review their place in the Dia de los Muertos celebration.

# Recipe: CALAVERAS DE AZUCAR/ SUGAR SKULLS

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 ½ cups powdered sugar
- 1 egg white
- 1 Tbs. corn syrup
- 1/2 Tsp. Vanilla
- 1/2-cup cornstarch
- Colored sprinkles
- Food coloring
- Fine paintbrush

Sift powdered sugar in large mixing bowl.

In another bowl, mix the egg white, corn syrup, and vanilla. Slowly pour the liquid into the sugar. Mix with your hands until sandy dough forms. The dough should be the consistency of damp sand—just moist enough to hold together. Form a small ball. At this point, you can continue or refrigerate dough for later use.

Dust with cornstarch on board and on your hands. Keep on kneading until smooth. Shape dough into a skull. Lightly press colored sprinkles into the soft candy. Let candy dry overnight.

When candy is dry, use a paintbrush with food coloring to decorate the skulls. You can also use frosting applied with a fine tip created by snipping a small corner of a plastic food storage bag and filling with frosting.

## FROSTING

- 15 egg whites
- 5 pounds powdered sugar
- 2 ½ teaspoons of cream of tartar

Using electric mixer, add cream of tartar to egg whites and mix until icing peaks. Fold in powdered sugar. Option: add drops of food coloring. Keep in a tightly covered container until used.

## TIPS

The skulls may not dry completely on a humid or rainy day. If candy does not dry completely, place in a 125 degree oven until dry.

If you use molds, use the manufacturer's instructions, as some molds work best with certain recipes.

## SPANISH TO ENGLISH VOCABULARY

**Flores**- flowers

**Ofrenda**- offering

**Dulces**- candies

**Calavera**- skull

**Calaveras de azúcar**- sugar skulls

**Mezclar**- to mix

**Pan de muertos**- Bread of the Dead

**Cultura**- culture

**Vela**- candle

**Fotografía**- photograph

**Comida**- food

**Recetas**- Recipes

**Bebida**- drink

**Recordar**- remember

**Mariposa**- butterfly

**Emigración**- migration

**Arbol**- tree

**Altar**- altar

**Historia**- history

**Celebración**- celebration

**Parientes**- relatives

**Amigos**- friends

# RESOURCES

## Written, English

The Skeleton at the Feast—The Day of the Dead in Mexico by Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 1992.

Customs and Holidays Around the World by Lavinia Dobler, 1981.

Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures by Richard A. Kalish, 1980.

Halloween Through Twenty Centuries by Ralph Linton, 1950.

## Written, Spanish

Día de los Muertos en México-Oaxaca by Mary J. Andrade, 1998.

La Velación de los Angelitos (Día de los Muertos en México) by Mary J. Andrade and Jose Murguía, 2001.

## Books for young readers, English

Maria Molina and the Days of the Dead by Kathleen Krull, 1994.

Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book by Jeanette Winter, 2004.

Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead by George Ancona (Ages 4-8), 1993.

Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith and Lawrence Migdale (ages 9-12), 1994.

## Books for young readers, Spanish

Felipe y el Día de Los Muertos by Birte Muller, 2005.

Pablo Recuerda la Fiesta del Día de los Muertos por Jorge Ancona Diaz, 1993.

## Books for young readers, English and Spanish:

The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story/El Espiritu de Tio Fernando: Una Historia del Día de los Muertos by Janice Levy, 1995.

I Remember Abuelito/ Yo Recuerdo Abuelito: A Day of the Dead Story/ Un Cuento del Día de los Muertos by Janice Levy, Loretta Lopez y Miguel Arisa, 2007.

Festival of Bones/ El Festival de las Calaveras: The Little-Bitty Book for the Day of the Dead por Luis San Vicente, 2002.

**Web**, English

<http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/>

<http://www.dayofthedead.com/>

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/feature/daydeadindex.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/feature/daydeadindex.html)