

Sonoma County Museum

Educator Guide



Day of the Dead Altar, Liz Camino-Byers, 2012

Day of the Dead Altar
(Día de los Muertos Altar)
Oct. 26, 2013- Dec. 1, 2014

The Sonoma County Museum will present Day of the Dead altars by Liz Camino-Byers, Renata Breth and Laura Larqué in the Upstairs Gallery that dynamically reflect time-honored traditions, colorful cultural symbols and folk art. The Museum will also present a Community Altar and display symbolic and traditional offerings related to the exhibition and Mexican holiday.

The Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos in Spanish) is a traditional holiday originating in Mexico and celebrated in the United States and many Latin American countries. Based on ancient Aztec mingled with Catholic beliefs, the memory of deceased ancestors is celebrated beginning on November 1st though November 2nd. While the dates overlap, it is not connected with Halloween, although it shares some similarities.

The dates and those leading up to them are marked by festive celebrations to honor the dead. Cemeteries are cleaned and decorated, special food and candies cooked, and home altars are designed in homage to one's ancestors. It is a day of joyous remembrance, not of sadness. The foods, toys, figures, decorations, poems, songs and other items created for El Día de Los Muertos reflect this outlook. The holiday is especially popular in Mexico where it is a national holiday.

Though the subject matter may be considered morbid from the Anglo-Saxon perspective, Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead joyfully, and though it occurs after Halloween and on All Saints' Day and All Souls Day, the traditional mood is much brighter with emphasis on honoring the lives of the deceased, rather than fearing evil or malevolent spirits.

According to Aztec tradition, one does not mourn for a departed one, for tears will fall on the path the soul must travel and the soul may slip and fall. Contemporary Mexican culture continues this tradition by associating some festive elements with death. Preparations must be made to welcome the departed visitor.

November 2nd is the official date for Day of the Dead (although it is celebrated between Nov. 1st and November 2nd). These dates correspond with the celebrations of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Today different customs vary within different states in Mexico and even from village to village.

Although this celebration is associated with the dead, it is not portrayed as a morbid or depressing time, but rather a period full of life, happiness, color, food, family, and fun. In many areas, outdoor markets display and sell many symbolic goods, such as special breads, flowers, pottery, baskets, candles, paper puppets and candy skulls. Scenes of skeletons hugging, marching, dancing, and laughing are seen in window displays on the streets. Marigolds are another significant symbol for the Day of the Dead festivity, and are known as the "flower of the dead." Their scent is believed to "attract the souls and draw them back."

People celebrate this holiday in their households, as well as in the cemeteries. In their homes, between Nov. 1st and Nov. 2nd (a time called "Todos Santos"), offerings of food and drink are prepared for the

dead. "Ofrendas" (offerings) are often set up in the home on an altar displaying portraits, personal goods, clothing, favorite foods, and possessions of the deceased family member. Sometimes they are shown at the gravesites as well.

On Nov. 2nd, family members visit the gravesites of their loved ones. They decorate their graves with flowers, enjoy picnics consisting of favorite foods of the deceased, and socially interact with others at the cemetery. This is an important social ritual seen as "a way of recognizing the cycle of life and death that is human existence." In certain areas, an all-night candlelight vigil takes place by the graves of the family members. The whole occasion is festive and people "remember, re-live, and enjoy."

The common foods eaten on this holiday include pan de los muertos ("bread of the dead"), which is flat bread baked in the shape of skulls and crossbones. It is said to be good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each loaf. Candy in the shape of skulls, skeletons, and coffins, and many favorite Mexican dishes (tamales, moles, chiles, enchiladas) are consumed as well.

This holiday is believed to "welcome the souls of the dead." The souls are said to return each year to enjoy the pleasures that they once had in life. They are thought to return to be with their living relatives for a few brief hours each year in this world, but come as spirits who have returned from another world. A widely held belief is that the souls of the children (called angelitos or "little angels") return first on Nov. 1st, and food and gifts appropriate for their age and taste will be set out for them. Everything is in miniature: cups, plates, small breads, etc.

The adult dead are said to return on Nov. 2nd and they are given elaborate foods and drinks the family can afford. It is believed that the candle light, as well as the scents of the marigold flowers and the copal incense, help the returning souls find their way back. Sometimes paths of marigold petals are scattered by the family from the cemetery to the door of the house. The ghosts can find their way by following this yellow path. The ghosts (or spirits) are not usually seen, but their presence is felt.

This holiday festivity is believed to be a time for the departed to join the living in the celebrations of the continuum of life. A common symbol of the holiday is the skull (called calavera), which represents in masks, called calacas (term for skeleton), and foods such as candy skulls, which is said to have the inscription of the name of the recipient or loved one on the forehead.

Liz-Camino Byers Artist Statement

Xantolo*

For the Huasteca people of Mexico, Xantolo refers to the Day of the Dead. The word Xantolo comes from the Spanish word “santo” meaning saint and the Nahuatl term “olo,” which means all. It is also believed that the word is derived from the Latin word “sanctorum,” which means Feast of All Saints. Xantolo is celebrated throughout the Huasteca region in the states of Veracruz, Hidalgo, Puebla, San Luis Potosi, and south of Tamaulipas.

This year’s altar is inspired by the Xantolo celebration and showcases folk art of the region, including particular ceremonial masks worn by townspeople to confuse death. The altar consists of traditional elements including marigolds, sugar skulls, incense, “papel picado” (cut paper doilies), candles, salt and water.

The altar is presented in what used to be the original Santa Rosa Post Office’s IRS vault (located on the second floor of the Museum). It is topped by a floral arch, “arco floral” in Spanish, which indicates that the enclosure is dressed for a celebration. In addition to the altar, cartoneria sculptures created by members of the Linares family are on display. Cartoneria, similar to paper mache, has been the primary art form of the Linares family for 3 generations. The genre started with Don Pedro, who created the alebrije art form in 1936. These pieces are featured in the book [En Calavera](#) by Susan Masuoka, and are now part of the Camino-Byers Collection of Fine Mexican Folk Art.

*Pronounced “shan-tow-low”

Renta Breth Artist Statement

“Growing up in Vienna, Austria, here is an early childhood memory of ‘All Souls Day’: no school, somber music on the radio, a very simple altar in my grandmother’s house - some flowers, candles and photographs of deceased family members and friends and the obligatory visit to the cemetery.

I have visited and photographed cemeteries in many countries, yet my encounter with the celebration of “Dia de los Muertos” in Oaxaca, Mexico has been especially inspirational to me; there, death is not an end but a beginning. It is not a topic to whisper about, but due to its close relationship to life one can even poke fun at it. During my time in Oaxaca I spent a unique night at a cemetery in Xoxo. All the villagers were playfully drinking, eating, singing and talking and yet it was a highly spiritual event.

Since 1983 I have built altars of different sizes in different locations: museums, galleries and outdoor places dedicated to people I wanted to honor.

This year's altar is dedicated to Aaron Swartz, computer programmer, writer, political organizer and Internet activist. He was the founder of Demand Progress, which launched the campaign against the Internet censorship bills (SOPA/PIPA). He died (he had hung himself) on January 11, 2013. In June 2013, Swartz was posthumously inducted into the Internet Hall of Fame."

Laura Larqué Artist Statement

Laura Larqué, builds a traditional and ceremonial altar for Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The altar will include indigenous elements and iconography, such as authentic indigenous food, flowers that are native to Mexico and used specifically during this time of the year. The incense utilized is originally from Mexico; and the incense burner is traditional to the Indigenous people of Mexico. These and other essential items are on display in the altar and only used during this occasion.

Laura Larqué is a history professor at Santa Rosa Junior College. Larqué thrives to build a Day of the Dead altar according to how the indigenous people of Mexico have built the altars for thousands of years. Her altar is ceremonial and traditional.

The **Community Altar** is an invitation to everyone in the community to remember and celebrate those they have lost, in the spirit of Día de los Muertos.

- ❖ Please use the papers to write a note or draw a picture to those you have lost, and place it on the altar.
- ❖ All are also invited to bring in pictures or small mementos of deceased loved ones to contribute. (*Please note: all items brought to the altar cannot be returned by the Museum.*)

Symbolic Colors:

The colors used in altars and during the Día de los Muertos celebrations are symbolic. **Purple** represents suffering, mourning and grief. **Pink** symbolizes celebration; **white** symbolizes purity and hope; and **red** symbolizes the blood of life. **Black** represents the pre-Columbian religions and land of the dead. **Yellow**, symbolizes sunlight in the darkness.

Day of the Dead Vocabulary



Spanish

Los cempasúchiles

English

The marigolds



Las calaveras/ calacas

The skulls/skeletons

Calaveras de azúcar

Suger skulls



Los retratos

The portraits



Los dulces

Sweets



Las velas

The candles



Los juguetes

The toys



Pan de muerto

Bread of the dead

* **Los retratos** portrait: George Henry Hall - Portrait of a Spanish Woman with a Lace Shawl and Rose, 1866

Additional Resources and Craft Ideas

Thematic Units:

- Lori Langer de Ramirez, creator of MisCositas. Geared for third year (intermediate) Spanish students. This is a comprehensive unit with 63 pages of activities, vocabulary, and more:
<http://www.miscositas.com/units.html>
- [AZCentral.com](#) Teacher Packet. The packet is probably better suited for younger children, as it includes more coloring pages, and some simpler activities.
- [Day of the Dead Mini-Unit](#)- A simpler lesson plan that includes a short description and example of “Calavera” Poems.
- [Remembrance Lesson Plan](#) - An original lesson to show children how the lives of people can be celebrated by remembering the lives of people that have died.
- [Lesson Planet](#) has 26 lessons related to Dia de los Muertos that you can scroll through. Each description includes the grade level and a rating. (You have to create an account, but you can get a free trial period for 10 days.)
- [Dia de los Muertos ISP](#) - Detailed and serious lesson plan for second graders. For teachers searching for content-rich lessons.
- [Mini Unit: Day of the Dead](#) by Holly McCarty was created for 5th graders divided it into 4 lessons, each centered around a different aspect of the holiday.
- [El Alma de la Raza Project](#) This unit lesson is designed for high school students (grades 9-12) and covers a variety of subjects (math, geography, reading, writing, art, and history).
- **MommyMaestra** - articles with a list of resources, including a [brief history](#) .

Websites:

- MisCositas.com also has a [virtual webquest](#). [Virtual picture book](#): *Mi abuela ya no está: Un cuento acerca de la celebración del Día de los Muertos en México*
- [Art of Mexico](#) has a short section on Día de los Muertos.
- Author/Illustrator Yuyi Morales also has [a few activities](#) that can be used in conjunction with one of her Trickster books, and a downloadable [Teacher's Guide](#).
- [Inside Mexico](#) has a great list of articles on a variety of subjects.

Credit for list of resources (with edits):

<http://www.mommymaestra.com/2010/10/dia-de-los-muertos-lesson-plans-and.html>