

Día de los Muertos



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Gallery Guide

Sept. 11-Nov. 1, 2015

Dia de los Muertos

The Day of the Dead, or *Día de los Muertos*, honors departed souls of loved ones who are welcomed back for a few intimate hours on November 1 and 2. At burial sites or intricately built altars, photos of loved ones are centered on skeleton figurines, bright decorations, candles, candy and other offerings such as the favorite foods of the departed. The holiday is celebrated in Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil and parts of Ecuador. More and more the holiday has also become a fixture in parts of the United States. Not only are US-born Latinos adopting Day of the Dead, but various non-Latino groups have begun to mark the holiday.

Leading up to the day, bakers make sugar skulls and sweet bread of the dead (*pan de muerto*), and artists create elaborate paper cut-out designs (*papel picado*) that can be hung on altars. Some families keep private night-long vigils at burial sites.

In North America, decorations often center on images of La Calavera Catrina – a skeleton of an upper-class woman whose image was made popular by the late-Mexican printmaker, Jose Guadalupe Posada. She is typically seen on photos or as papier-mache statues alongside other skeletal figures in everyday situations like playing soccer, dancing or getting married. La Catrina is the most popular recreated figure related to the holiday.

Pre-Columbian in origin, many of the themes and rituals now are mixtures of indigenous practices and Roman Catholicism. The Aztecs held ceremonies in their summer month of *Miccailhuitontli* focused on the celebration of the dead. These were held under the supernatural direction of the goddess *Mictecacihuatl*, Lady of the Dead. Both children and dead ancestors were remembered and celebrated. When the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century, they brought the Christian Holiday of All Souls Day with them. Spanish priests were quick to see a correlation between the Aztec and Christian celebrations so they moved the Aztec festival from summer to fall so that it coincided with All Souls day. This was done in the hopes that the Aztec holiday would be transformed into a Christian holiday, but Day of the Dead continues to retain many of its indigenous roots even as it continues to evolve over time.

This exhibition was created and supported, in part, by La Puente, Raizes Collective, Oaxaca Tierra del Sol, Peter Perez, Mario Uribe, Guadalupe Garcia Aguillar, and George Viramontes.

TRADITIONAL OFFERINGS on DAY OF THE DEAD ALTARS

Copal Incense:

A traditional incense from Mexico, copal is a crucial element of Day of the Dead altars. It is said that the scent of the copal, when lit, helps deceased spirits find their way home.

Papel Picado:

The art of paper cutting, or *papel picado*, is a traditional craft in Mexico. Still cut by hand by local artisans, long strands or huge altar cloths of *papel picado* are used at many celebrations, including *Día de los Muertos*.

Water:

A basic necessity for altars, water is placed in a glass for the soul to quench its thirst after the long journey to the altar. Water is so thought to be used by the spirits for purposes of purification.

Marigold Flowers:

A symbol of death dating back to Aztec times, the scent of marigolds is said to guide returning spirits to the homes of their relatives on the Day of the Dead. For Aztecs, the yellow and orange marigolds also represented the sun's rays. The sun, as the center of existence, symbolizes that the dead spirit has not lost their place in the universe.

Candles:

The light from the candles on *Día de los Muertos* altars is meant to guide returning spirits home. Traditionally, it is believed that the candles can only be snuffed out with the marigolds on the altar, rather than blown out.

Maize, Beans:

Maize (corn) and beans are two of the most basic foods in Mexican culture. They are a traditional feature of altars during Day of the Dead celebrations, symbolizing Mexican crops, the earth, and sustenance.

Salt:

Salt is one of the most basic symbols for *Día de los Muertos* altars. It is needed to season the food for the spirit, as well as for purification. Salt is also a symbol for the vitality of ongoing life.

Monarch Butterflies:

Every autumn, monarch butterflies, which have summered up north in the United States and Canada, migrate back to Mexico for the winter protection of the *oyamel* fir trees. Mexicans welcome the returning butterflies, which are believed to be carrying the spirits of the deceased home. The return of the butterflies marks the return of the spirits, who are coming to enjoy the altars their loved ones have created for them.

Pan de Muertos:

'Bread of the dead' is sweet bread baked specifically for the Day of the Dead holiday. It is enjoyed by the families of the deceased as well as placed on the altar. Traditionally, the baker hides a small trinket in the bread, which is said to bring luck to the one who bites into it.

Cinnamon Sticks, Dried Chiles:

These typical ingredients in Mexican cooking are put onto altars to symbolize the earth and sustenance. Both altar elements are thought to feed the souls of the dead, and some believe that the spirits are fed by the aroma of food.

Soap and Water:

A bar of soap, towel, bowl of water, and other grooming items are traditionally left at the altar so that the dead can refresh themselves after their long journey from the afterworld.

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, finally, symbolizes sunlight in the darkness.

Sugar Skulls:

Sugar skulls are used to decorate altars. The tradition stems from the pre-Columbian belief that skulls represent life, not death: these candy skulls symbolize the joy and celebration that comes in honoring the lives of the deceased. Each skull generally stands for a departed soul. Sometimes the name of the deceased is written on the forehead of the skull, and it is placed on the altar or gravestone to honor the return of that particular spirit.

Calacas:

Calaca is a colloquial Mexican-Spanish name for skeleton. Similarly to *calaveras* or 'skulls,' these skeletons are used as vibrant decoration during *Día de los Muertos*. Historically, the Aztec often depicted *calacas* with marigold flowers and foliage. During Day of the Dead celebrations, they are shown as whimsical characters, engaging in happy activities such as dancing or eating, in order to symbolize the connection between life and death.

Altar By

Oaxaca Tierra del Sol

Our motto: "In respect and preservation of our culture: The Guelaguetza"

Oaxaca Tierra del Sol is an organization that was founded with a commitment to promote, preserve, and nurture the indigenous traditions from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, a state that is home to sixteen ethnolinguistic groups that live in eight unique regions.

We celebrate the most representative event of the ancient traditions of the people of Oaxaca, The Guelaguetza. This unique festival is a blend of pre-Columbian and post-Columbian cultures and takes place in Sonoma County every summer in the month of July.

Altar Statement:

Many people, including those in Oaxaca, use the term "ofrendas" more often than "altares" to describe the altars that are built for *Día de los Muertos*. *Ofrendas* are very personal offerings made to our loved ones. It provides them nourishment as the veil between two worlds becomes thinner and they dead pay the living a visit so that the two may break bread. We provided Mezcal, a medicinal and recreational alcoholic beverage that our loved ones love to drink.

In Oaxaca you often find *ofrendas* with seven steps. There are different meanings attributed to each step in different regions. An image or effigy of a deity is placed on the top level. We chose to honor de Virgen de Juquila, who is venerated across many parts of Oaxaca. Food is placed in the mid levels, with sweets for the passing children and mole, cigars, and any favorite snack or dish for the elders. Usually a cross made of lime powder or flowers is placed at the lowest level.

Beverage earthenware cups are provided to quench the dead's thirst as they travel a long journey. It is customary to let the dead eat and then for the living to eat the food after they have passed.

Altar By

Students From Puente Project, Santa Rosa Junior College

Puente (Spanish for "bridge") Project is a national, award-winning program that has prepared thousands of students for success in university studies.

The Puente Project's mission is to increase the number of educationally underserved students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn college degrees, and return to the community as mentors and leaders to future generations.

Altar Statement:

Gun violence is very tragic. In this piece, the Puente students from Santa Rosa Junior College painted toy guns white to represent the youth that have passed away from gun violence.

The toy soldiers represent that idea that most of the Puente students were born right before 9/11 and have grown up with the concept of war through the media. The colors represent the many facets of war. Black: Oil Yellow: conquest Red: Blood Orange: Naive optimism.

Most Puente students at Santa Rosa Junior College have been influenced by human migration. Students felt the need to represent the importance of water in the roll of survival and death. The red water represents the blood of the 2,500 people that have lost their lives this year trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The same water also represent the necessity of water for survival as many immigrants cross the desert into the United States.

Altar By

Raizes Art Collective

www.raizescollective.org

Raizes Collective is a non-profit organization seeking to empower our community through art, culture, and environmental education.

In this Altar we honor and celebrate our ancestors: To our Mexican ancestors represented by the Aztec Calendar, to our Tibetan Buddhist ancestors represented by the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine, to our African ancestors represented by the carved wooden statue made in West Africa, and to our First Nations Ancestors represented by the Dream Catchers made by a member of the Wintun Tribe in Northern California. Death is universal and every culture has its own rituals in dealing with death. Learning about other cultures including our own helps to understand our commonalities. These items were contributed by members of our community from different races, national origins and religions. This nontraditional altar not only serves to honor the life of our loved and our ancestors that have made the journey to the spiritual world but it also represents a changing diverse community willing to share cultural beliefs and values in order to build stronger alliances to promote a more fair and just society.

Altar By

Peter Perez

Peter Perez was born into a large Mexican family just north of the border in Southern California. Recognized as a talented artist from a young age, one of his best friend's parents took him into her home so he could complete high school. He went on to attend the Pasadena School of Design. After graduation he worked as a graphic artist in New York City, to become the first Mexican to work on Madison Avenue. He moved to Sonoma County to work for Avalon Organics. He met Margie Helm, the founder of Petaluma's Day of the Dead celebrations. From that random encounter, he has gone on to reconnect with his parents' native Mexican traditions surrounding Day of the Dead.

Assembled and arranged by Museum Volunteers China Gage and Tiana Raihn

"Senor San Jose", holding Christ Child

Artist and date unknown

Oil on tin painting

Gift of Anthony White

Votive paintings in Mexico go by several names in Spanish such as "ex voto," "retablo" or "lamina," which refer to their purpose, place often found, or material from which they

are traditionally made. The painting of religious images to give thanks for a miracle or favor is part of a long tradition in Mexico. The form of most votive paintings, from the colonial period to the present, came to Mexico from Spain. As in Europe, votive paintings began as static images of saints or other religious figures donated to a church. Later, narrative images, telling the personal story of a miracle or favor received appeared. These paintings were first produced by the wealthy and often on canvas; however, as sheets of tin became affordable, lower classes began to have these painted on this medium.

Narrative votive paintings can be found by the thousands in many locations in Mexico. Certain shrines and sanctuaries such as that of the Virgin of Guadalupe and in Chalma attract a very large number of these. Due to their proliferation, especially in the 18th and 19th century, many older votive paintings have left the places they were deposited and found their way into public and private collections.

Skeleton by Mario Uribe

Mexican-American artist Mario Uribe is a well-known local artist who has worked closely with the Museums of Sonoma County on many projects and exhibitions, such as the Art and Storytelling Body Maps workshops and the North-South program: Art as a Tool to Mediate Political and Social Conflict. Uribe had worked on numerous large-scale public commissions throughout California. He served as Creative Director of ArtStart, a nonprofit educational arts organization providing arts-based job training and mentoring for youth for fourteen years. He recently worked with students to complete a Farm Worker Mural project (2006-2012) that engaged labor leaders and community activists in Sonoma County.

Ceramic Figures by Guadalupe Garcia

Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, Garcia worked by her mother's side for 20 years, beginning when she was a small child, learning to make clay figurines, many for el *Día de los Muertos*. She stopped when she came to the United States 7 years ago, but started again in order to show her daughter how to make them. These figurines are the first she has made in the United States. For her, this has been a learning experience to transfer her skills to different materials and equipment.

Red Chair and Boots by George Viramontes

In memory of his wife, Julie Gleason