

MATERIALS

- shoe or cereal box
- glue stick
- tacky glue or elmer's
- foil/metallic or patterned paper
- sequins or glitter
- lace, rickrack trim or ribbons
- crepe paper streamers
- found objects
- modeling clay (optional)
- tissue paper
- markers
- paint (optional)
- photographs(s), magazine images or a drawing of the central subject for the *Ofrenda Nicho Box*.

RESOURCES

- Smithsonian Latino Center. Day of the Dead Resources, including lesson plans <http://latino.si.edu/dayofthedead/>
- The Aztecs & the Day of the Dead, Part 1 <http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/home/day-of-the-dead-1>
- The Aztecs & the Day of the Dead, Part 2 <http://www.mexicolore.co.us/aztecs/home/day-of-the-dead-2>

VOCABULARY (Definitions on page 3)

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|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| • Angelitos | • Cempasúchil |
| • Ánimas | • Fiesta |
| • Calaca | • Nicho Box |
| • Calavera | • Ofrenda |
| • Calavera Catrina | • Pan de Muerto |
| • Calavera Zapatista | • Papel Picado |

NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS

STANDARDS

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
- **Presenting:** Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.



Día de los Muertos Community Ofrenda/Altar, photo by Patricia Sigala.

Día de los Muertos ~ Day of the Dead Ofrenda Nicho Box

INTRODUCTION

Birth and death, two of the most transcendental moments of life are celebrated by all cultures according to their particular belief systems, historical development, environment, and evolution within their culturally specific context. Every world culture has coping mechanisms to deal with the loss of life. In Mexico, the belief among its native ethnic groups and within the great majority of its Mestizo (mixed European, Indigenous, African ancestry) population, is that the dead have divine permission to return to the family home for forty-eight hours (November 1st & 2nd) each year to enjoy the pleasures they knew in life, and that it is the duty and responsibility of the surviving family members to welcome their deceased loved ones and ancestors for a brief reunion on their yearly visit. *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrates a communion between the living and the dead in a colorful festival of ritual and life.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the history and evolution of *Día de los Muertos*, a Mexican tradition, and how *ofrendas* are central to that tradition (historical and cultural understanding).
- To explore and discuss the variety of materials that are used to create *ofrendas* for *Día de los Muertos* and discover how they are constructed using layering/level building techniques (perceiving, analyzing and responding).
- To create a personal *Ofrenda Nicho Box* for *Día de los Muertos* using mixed media (creating and performing).

MOTIVATION

- Share that in México *Día de los Muertos* is an important celebration for families and communities to honor and remember their dead. Explain that the students will be creating their own *Ofrenda Nicho Box* to celebrate the Day of the Dead and commemorate a person, event (like COVID-19), or a pet that has died. The only limits are the variety of available materials and imaginations of the students.
- What do the students know about *Día de los Muertos*? Do they observe Day of the Dead or know people that do? What national holidays remember/acknowledge people who have died? Are there practices in their culture that commemorates the dead?

PROCEDURE

1. Decorate the interior and exterior of the shoe/cereal box with patterned or metallic/foil papers using a glue stick to attach. (Paint is optional.)
2. Attach a personal photograph, magazine image, or drawing to the inside central wall (bowl) and layer with sequins, glitter, or drawn on messages using markers.
3. Staple lace or rickrack to the outside rim of the box or use tacky glue for crepe paper edging.
4. Make simple cut & twist tissue paper flowers to glue in the interior.
5. Finish off with a ribbon border around the central image or add to other design elements using tacky glue.



Student work, photo by Patricia Sigala.



Ofrenda Nicho Box ~ Jade Dog, photo by Patricia Sigala.

EVALUATION

- Have students write labels for their work, reflecting and describing who/what event it was made for and other contextual details. Ask students to share their labels and *Ofrenda Nicho Box* with their classmates.
- In student journals or notebooks, ask students to express how they felt during the process of creating their *Ofrenda Nicho Box* and reflect on the impact it had on their understanding of *Día de los Muertos*.

EXTENSIONS & CONNECTIONS

- Organize a student *Ofrenda Nicho Box* display for the class and invite the rest of the school community and family members to view it.
- Students can display their *Ofrenda Nicho Box* on their own home altar~ofrenda display for *Día de los Muertos*.
- Have students research the ways that other cultures handle the topic of death. What are other international celebrations or observances like? How do different cultures express their attitudes about death and dying? The students can report on their findings.

VOCABULARY

1. **Angelitos** - (ahng'-hel-lee-tohs), m. Souls of the little children, literally "little angels."
2. **Ánimas** - (ah'-nee-mahs), f. Souls. Figures representing souls of the dead.
3. **Calaca** - (kah-lah'-kah), m. Slang for skull or death.
4. **Calavera** - (kah-lah-beh'-rah), f. Skull and/or satiric poetry or verses, and mock obituaries published for day of the dead.
5. **Calavera Catrina** - kah-lah-beh'-rah kah-tree'nah), f. The name of the most famous skeletal image designed by José Guadalupe Posada. A catrina is a stylish woman.
6. **Calavera Zapatista** - (kah-lah-beh'-rah zah-pah-tees'-tah), m. José Guadalupe Posada imaged named after Emiliano Zapata.
7. **Cempasúchil** - (sem-pah-soo'-cheel), f. Marigold flowers - "flower of the dead."
8. **Fiesta** - (fee-ess'-tah), f. Feast, entertainment, or festival.
9. **Nicho Box** - A three-dimensional or recessed display box.
10. **Ofrenda** - (oh-fren'-dah), f. Altar or offering.
11. **Pan de Muerto** - (pahn-theh-mwehr'-toh), m. Sweet bread prepared for the Day of the Dead.
12. **Papel Picado** - (pah-pel pee-kah'-tho), m. Cut tissue paper or foil banners; literally, "perforated paper."



La Calavera Catrina, photo by Patricia Sigala.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



BACKGROUND

PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO

Within the cycle of Mexican festivals, *Día de los Muertos* festivities are among the most important. Anthropologists believe the Day of the Dead to be the oldest surviving celebration in the Americas, with roots deep in Pre-Columbian world of Mesoamérica and intertwined with European beliefs and traditions brought over by the Spanish conquerors in 1519. Death is not regarded as a termination, but a culmination of the life cycle and as an entrance into another realm in which earthly aspects are recreated. Life and death, or paired oppositions - duality, is one of the basic structural religious principles of Mesoamerican religious thought.

Dating back more than 3,000 years, various Mesoamerican cultures held similar beliefs towards death and the afterlife. They also practiced similar funerary and commemorative rituals for their dead. Foremost, they conceived death as an integral part of life. The duality of creation and the universe was the central axis of their belief system. Everything was inexorably tied to its opposite, thus, life was seen as death and death as life. As a matter of fact, life was viewed mostly as a dream and it was believed that death brought the awakening from that dream. In a flowery poem written in the late 1400s, Netzhuualcoyotl, the ruler of the ancient Mexican city-state of Texcoco, explores this metaphor:

“We come only to sleep, only to dream It is not true,
it is not true that we come to live on this earth We become as Spring weeds,
we grow green and open the petals of our hearts Our body is a plant in flower,
it gives flower and dies away. . .”

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



Day of the Dead Altar, Mexico. Foto de, Paola Ricaurte Quijano. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

As one awoke from the dream of life, the dwelling place of one's afterlife was not determined by one's conduct on earth, but, by the manner in which one died. One's destiny after death was a matter for the gods to determine, not the individual. For example, Eagle and Jaguar Warriors who died in battle, as sacrificial victims to *Tonatiuh* (tohnah-tiyoo), the Sun God, or women who died in childbirth were destined to join *Tonatiuh* on his daily trajectory across the sky. *Tlaloc* (tlah'-lohk), the Rain God, called those whose death involved water (drowning, pneumonia, etc.) to dwell in *Tlalocan* (tlah'loh-kahn), the paradise of *Tlaloc*. Children under the age of three went to a paradise where the trees nursed them like their own mothers. Aside from those described above, the great majority of the dead traveled a road sometimes thought to be the Milky Way, to *Mictlan* (meek'tlan), the land of the dead, which was thought to have nine levels.

As each level was reached, the dead met dangerous challenges which they had to negotiate and overcome in order to reach the end of their difficult journey, where they were thought to be greeted by *Mictlantecuhtli* (meek-tlan'teh-kootlee), the Lord of the Dead, and his consort.

All in all, the honoring of the dead as well as a cult of death played a prominent role throughout Mesoamérica. The rituals and ceremonies associated with death can be divided into three general categories:

1. The worship of the gods of death and all of those associated with the underworld
2. Ancestor worship with specific rituals
3. Elaborate funerary rituals and yearly ceremonies honoring the dead. The Mexica or Aztecs honored the dead and ancestors during two consecutive months: July 24 - August 12, *Miccailhuitontli* (meeka-ee-wee-tohn-tee), Festival of the Dead, and August 13 - September 1, *Hueymiccailhuitl* (waymeeka-eel-weetl), Great Festival of the Dead.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



MEDIEVAL EUROPE

The Christian evangelization of non-Christian Europe took about 1,000 years. In the process, all rites, rituals and ceremonies associated with death and the dead were nearly eradicated. Prior to the evangelization, it was common to honor the dead around the growing cycles held during the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes where large bonfires were built around the gravesides, offerings of food and wine were brought and consumed, and singing and dancing lasted through the night. The Roman Catholic Church, having its roots as an underground religion, had held celebratory masses in the catacombs around the graves of saints and martyrs and in the seventh century, Pope Boniface IV established All Saints Day to be celebrated in May. In the following century, Pope Gregory III moved this feast day to November 1st, and in the tenth century, the Abbot of Cluny decreed that all Cluniac monasteries celebrate the dead who had died as baptized Christians in the same manner as the saints and martyrs. By the eleventh century, November 2nd was incorporated into the liturgical calendar as All Souls Day by Pope Urban II. Unofficially, at the time, the church made other concessions to incorporate rites and ceremonies of non-Christian Europe into the newly established traditions of All Souls Day.

One of these traditions in Northern Spain was prepared bread, *pan de ánimas*, or soul bread, that was distributed to the poor during the month of November. Another tradition was the use of lit oil lamps outside the home in order to help the souls find their way back to their earthly homes. In some cases, people set fresh linen on the beds and did not sleep on them all through the night, with the belief that loved ones used them to rest before undertaking the long journey back to paradise.



Images by José Guadalupe Posada
La Calavera Catrina (The Skeleton of a Fashionable Lady)
& Calavera Maderista (Skeleton of a follower of President
Madero), 1913, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
144.5.130.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



Día de los Muertos Altar, Museum of International Folk Art, 2017.

SPANISH CONQUEST OF MEXICO

The Aztec capital of Mexico-Tenochtitlan fell on August 13, 1521 and the systematic destruction, sacking, exploitation, and extermination of the indigenous population began in earnest. With the divine permission of the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown, the evangelizing clergy proceeded to erase all vestiges of the belief systems of the natives. Pyramids, temples, *codices* (picture books) were destroyed and desecrated. Eventually many of the Spanish beliefs came to co-exist with the indigenous beliefs, as the numerous Catholic Saints joined the hierarchy of the gods.

After the conquest, the mass conversion of the Mexica-Aztecs and other native peoples to Catholicism was facilitated by combining the sites and ceremonies of indigenous culture with European traditions.

COLONIAL MEXICO

One example of this cultural merging is the apparition of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, now the patron saint of Mexico and a powerful icon in Hispanic culture. Ten years after the conquest of Mexico in 1531 on the hill of *Tepeyac* where a temple once stood to *Tonantzin* (TOH-Nan-seen), an earth goddess, it is said that the Virgin Mary appeared before a native of a local village and requested a church be built in her honor. Overall, the legend was successful in fusing the brown skinned, *Nahuatl* (Na-watl) speaking earth goddess with the Christian Virgin Mary.

The first celebrations of All Souls Day on November 2nd in Mexico were carried out when the very first relics arrived from Europe in the early 1530s. From that date, during the next 300 years of the Spanish Colony in Mexico, people took relics made of bread or of sugar paste to be blessed on November 2nd seeking protection and blessings for the year. This custom set the stage for the present day tradition of sugar skulls and the addition of little bones made out of dough to the traditional Spanish *pan de ánimas*, now known as *pan de muertos*.

Death was also made into a public spectacle for elaborate and festive funerary rituals and processions in honor of the death of the king, a member of the royal family, the viceroy, or an important member of the clergy. Death as *La Portentosa* or *La Reina Muerte* was seated on top of an elaborate *catafalque* (coffin stand), built especially for the occasion, as she presided over the funerary rituals. Her presence was used as a means to remind all of the imminence of their own death as well as of her powers. No one could ever escape her or her whims. These "official" rites were performed in all of the cities and towns of *La Nueva España* and attendance was mandatory.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



Traditional Day of the Dead altar, Milpa Alta, Mexico. Photo by Eneas de Troys, 2009. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

POST-COLONIAL MEXICO

Towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, *José Guadalupe Posada* (1852-1913), a master printmaker, reanimated the skeletal image of the benign *Portentosa*. He gave her a humorous touch and his *calavera* images have become classic worldwide images associated with the Mexican traditions of *Día de los Muertos*. *Posada* used his *calavera* images as social commentary, political satire, by asserting the egalitarian principles that Mexicans attribute to death itself. He tapped into the hybrid traditions and mindset of Mexico. *Posada* recognized the roots that lay in Pre-Columbian culture as well as in the Spanish obsession with death as a punishment from God. His *calaveras* established the standard of present day *Día de los Muertos* skulls and skeletons, with their grins, cocky attitudes, and ability to portray a great variety of human activities. They reflect the Mexican understanding that death is always imminent, making them embrace her in a satirical and humorous way - not with the European angst.

To make the point that even the rich and powerful must come to terms with the inevitability of death, *Posada* created and personified the elegant Victorian lady *Calavera Catrina* and the mustachioed *Calavera maderista*.

PRESENT DAY CELEBRATIONS

Ultimately, over the last 500 years, through diverse manifestations, the combination of Christian and indigenous beliefs and practices contributed to the evolution of *Día de los Muertos* as we know it today. *Día de los Muertos* is one of the most important annual celebrations in Mexico and in communities in the United States from coast to coast where there are *Méxicanos*, Mexican Americans and Chicanos who identify with their cultural heritage. In Mexico, the building of an altar with its accompanying *ofrenda* is a tradition that is practiced primarily by indigenous groups, and working class *Mestizos*, as well as urban intellectuals and artists who recognize their "Indian" roots and pay homage to that heritage.

Preparation for *Día de los Muertos* festivities begin in mid-October and continue through to the two days of the fiesta, November 1st - All Saint's Day and November 2nd - All Soul's Day. On November 1st, children are honored and adults on November 2nd. For these dates, altars are erected in homes and/or Day of the Dead community events in the United States, and people make special visits or pilgrimages to the cemetery. Often altars are decorated with photographs of the deceased, marigold flowers or *cempasúchil* (sem-pah-soo'-cheel), *petate* mats, candles, personal mementos, *pan de muerto*, *papel picado* (paper cut-outs), miniature toys, food, water, salt, and *kopal* incense (a resinous incense).

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