

Día de Muertos Day of the Dead

CLACS Resource Packet for Educators

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History of Día de Muertos

Día de muertos is a holiday that combines Indigenous and European traditions. The Mexica spoke Nahuatl and established the Aztec empire in the Valley of Mexico. They were also known as Aztecs and lived in the Mexican and central American region in pre-columbian times.

The Mexica believed that death was an integral part of life. When a person died, they traveled to Chicunamictlán or Mictlán, the land of the Dead. The journey takes 4 years which corresponds to the time it takes a body to decompose. As part of the journey, they confront tests of the strength of their spirit until the soul reaches the gates of Mictlán, the final resting place.

According to the Florentine Codex (pictured to the right), a 16th-century ethnographic manuscript of early colonial Mexico by the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún, Mictlán had nine levels which corresponded to how a person died.



There were separate destinations for deceased children who were nurtured until the moment of rebirth. A different realm was for people whose deaths were related to water. The sun god oversaw a different place for warriors, sacrificial victims and women who died giving birth.



The gods of the dead, Mictecacihuātl and Mictlantecuhtli, required that souls successfully pass 9 obstacles to earn eternal rest at Mictlán. Living relatives could assist the deceased with rituals and offerings to help them cross and reach Mictlán.

If people mistreated dogs in their life, they will not make it past the first level and will wander around with barking dogs for eternity.

The challenges involved physical ones such as not getting crushed by colliding mountains, enduring powerful winds, perpetual snow, the absence of gravity, not getting hit by arrows or having one's heart eaten from one's chest.

A few have physical challenges to allow for releasing sorrows and reflecting on one's life decisions





Journey to Mictlan: The Origin of Día de Muertos



The levels of Mictlán include:

1. Itzcuintlán, place where the dog lives
2. Tepectli monamictlan, place where the mountains meet
3. Iztepetl, obsidian mountain
4. Itzehecayan, place with much snow
5. Paniecatacoyan, place where one turns like a flag
6. Timiminaloayan, place where arrows are shot
7. Teocoyohuehualoyan, place where the heart is eaten
8. Izmictlan Apochcalolca, place where water must be crossed
9. Chicunamictlan, place with nine waters

Mexican rituals to honor the dead were traditionally held around the end of July and early August. This was also around harvest time and families provided food, water and tools to help the deceased in the difficult journey.



Another tradition was a spiritual holiday to celebrate Mictecacihuātl who was Queen of the underworld or Mictlán. She was the protector of the bones of past lives which were believed to be used to create new life in the land of the living. Each year she visited the land of the living to ensure that bones were properly cared for. Celebrations of dance and food thanked her for her protection and welcomed her to the land of the living.

The Spanish tried to stop the practice of these traditions because they weren't Catholic. The date was changed and fused the indigenous traditions with the Catholic holidays All Saints and All Souls days. At that time in Spain, families would decorate graves, bring flowers and food to grave sites and light the way for the dead to return to their families.





Today, Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a two day holiday celebrated across Mexico on November 1st and 2nd. It is for remembering the dead, but with a more joyful connotation that US or Western cultures typically view death. It is meant to celebrate and fondly remember those who have passed. Many Latin American cultures, including Mexican, view death as a natural part of a person's life. They believe the deceased continue to have a connection with their loved ones through holidays such as Día de Muertos. The first day is often considered to be for remembering children and the second day for adults.

Key traditions for Día de Muertos include creating altars known as ofrendas, visiting the graves of loved ones, decorating sugar skulls, and writing calaveras literarias.

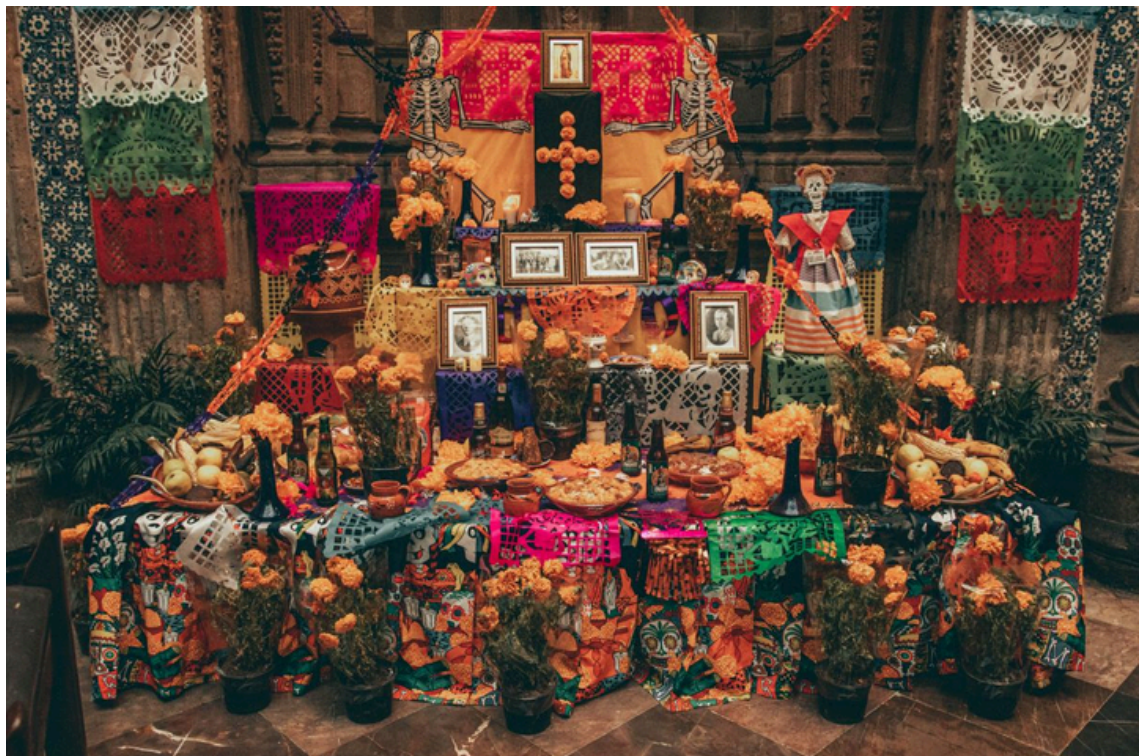


Ofrendas

Central to the holiday, this tradition involves making an altar to honor and remember loved ones. There are many components:

- Table or some type of platform
- Colorful tablecloth
- Picture of the friends and family and knick knacks or physical representations of items important to the deceased such as things related to hobbies or professions.
- Calaveras or sugar skulls to help remember loved ones. Skulls were a common part of Aztec rituals

More about
ofrendas



Because spirits of loved ones travel back to be with family and friends, ofrendas include things they may need:

Elements of the earth

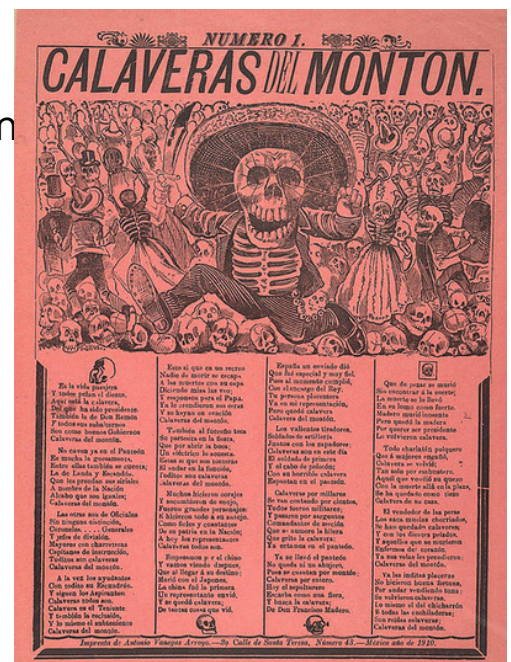
- Marigolds - color and aroma help guide the souls home. Legend has it that after a woman's lover died at war she went to the sun to pray. The sun was so moved by her sadness that it turned her lost lover into a cempoalxochitl or marigold and her into a hummingbird.
- Salt - purification, for the spirit to season the food being offered
- Water or some beverage to refresh the spirit after their journey
- Earth - represented by family foods that reflect the crops - corn, chocolate/mole, fruit
- Fire - candles for the cardinal directions and lighted path back to this world
- Wind - papel picado to know when the deceased has returned.
 - Black for death,
 - Purple for grieving,
 - Pink for celebration,
 - White for hope
 - Yellow for the sun



History of Calaveras

José Guadalupe Posada (1852 - 1913) was a Mexican printmaker famous for illustrating calaveras (skulls), although he made other works as well. Posada used depictions of skeletons in newspapers, books, magazines, and posters, often in a satirical manner to address social and political issues in Mexico at the time. They might depict political figures to criticize the government or society, similar to political cartoons today. The most famous calavera is named La Calavera Catrina. Catrina is a beautiful female skeleton with an elaborately decorated hat. The image is meant to remind the viewer that no matter how wealthy or famous someone is, we all have death in common.

Posada was not the first Mexican artist to use calaveras in artwork, but he popularized it. Calaveras have since become a national symbol in Mexico, and Posada's work influenced many later artists. Posada's depictions of calaveras and associations with death also later tied them with Día de Muertos, where they continue to be a popular part of the holiday today.



Calaveras Literarias

Calaveras literarias translates to literary skulls, and refers to short poems written in a traditional rhyming verse which are usually light-hearted and mocking. These epitaphs are dedicated to friends, classmates, co-workers, or family members both living and dead, although they can also be for public or historical figures. The poems often make references to death, using imagery of cemeteries, skulls, and the grim reaper, among other things. Posada would write similar verses or rhymes to accompany his images of calaveras. Oftentimes, they criticize the depicted historic or political figure. Calaveras literarias are meant to be humorous, a way to bring levity to the seriousness of death. The poems are a key part of the holiday, and are included in many language classes in Mexican schools.

More About Calaveras:

- [Calaveras YouTube video](#)
- [Library of Congress - Posada's Calaveras](#)
- [Posada Art Foundation](#)
- [Sugar Skulls - Dominican University](#)
- [Denver Art Museum](#)



Calaveras for Día de Muertos



Today, calaveras has come to mean both skull or an entire skeleton, and both are strongly tied to Día de Muertos and is one of the most recognizable artistic elements of the holiday. They can be made from wood, paper mache, sugar paste, clay, or carved bone, and are usually decorated with bright colors.

Calaveritas de Azucar are edible sugar skulls which represent the sweetness of life. They are often placed on ofrendas or given to children as gifts. Another common food for Dia de Muertos is pan de muerto (bread of the dead) a sweet bread that is often shaped and decorated to look like skulls or bones. The tradition of calaveras came about later, inspired by the artworks of Jose Guadalupe Posada, and is not tied to ancient Mesoamerican traditions.

Calaverita can also refer to a small gift of candy or money given to children who visit houses in costumes, similar to the US Halloween tradition of trick or treating.

[Pan de Muerto](#)
[recipe](#)



Alebrijes (ah-le-bree-hehs) are Mexican folk art of mythical creatures credited to paper-mache artist Pedro Linares, and often made of carved wood today. Their origin is separate from Día de los Muertos, although the Disney movie *Coco* conflated the two. Alebrijes is an art form different from spirit animals.

According to the story, Linares was very ill and dreamed about unusual animals who all shouted “Alebrije” to him. When he awoke, he sculpted what he saw in his dream.

They may incorporate features from earth, air and water animals to create new figures. Artists today carry on the tradition of carving Alebrijes, most notably in Oaxaca using a specific wood from Copal trees. Alebrijes are most important in Mexico City and Oaxaca; they are still known and produced outside of these cities, but are less culturally significant.



More about Alebrijes:

- [UK Alebrijes of Oaxaca](#)
- [Wake Forest Create a Colorful Alebrije](#)
- [Building Beautiful Monsters in Mexico](#)



Additional Resources about Día de Muertos

- [Day of the Dead Flavor and Tradition](#)
- [Day of the Dead Fun Facts for Kids](#)
- [Saber Latino](#)
- [National Geographic](#)
- [Día de Muertos History](#)
- [History Channel](#)
- [Towson University](#)
- [MexCulture](#)

