Dia De los Muertos
*Educator’s Packet*

Mennello Museum of American Art
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[www.mennellomuseum.com](http://www.mennellomuseum.com)

Admission
- Adults: $4
- Seniors: $3
- Students: $1
- Children under 12: Free
Dia de los Muertos: Lesson and Project

Description of Class:
This lesson is designed to be adapted for students ranging of all ages. The project consists of various elements that may be included or disregarded based on the age/skill level of the students.

Topic:
Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), with a focus on altars and ofrendas.

Objective:
Students will be able to demonstrate knowledge about the Mexican traditions involved in Dia de los Muertos. They will also become acquainted with the basic elements of a Day of the Dead altar, including Spanish terms and definitions.

Teacher Aims:
The instructor will teach students about Hispanic culture and faith by exploring the celebration of Dia de los Muertos.

Student Aims:
The student will build a traditional Mexican Dia de los Muertos altar and become familiar with its basic elements. The students should also learn Spanish terms associated with the celebration.
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Introduction

November 1: All Saints Day – Children who have died are honored
November 2: All Souls Day – All others who have passed are honored

_Dia de los Muertos_ is a two day Mexican celebration at the beginning of November. Many Mexicans believe that on these days the souls of the dead return to visit their families. Altars (in Spanish, _altars_) are built to welcome the souls, and decorated with _ofrendas_, or offerings, such as candles, flowers, incense, food, and small figurines. A glass of water is also placed on the _altar_ because water is a source of life and it quenches the thirst of the spirits.

Food is very important in this holiday because it is the only night of the year when souls can eat. Some people will even hang up baskets of food outside so that souls who don’t have anyone to visit can still enjoy a snack and return to the afterlife happy. It is believed that spirits consume the scents and the essence of the food.

During the time leading up to _Dia de los Muertos_, graves are repaired and decorated to welcome the spirits of adults who have passed. Late November 1, families converge in the cemeteries, where they light candles and prepare to greet the spirits of their relatives. Children are hosted at home altars the day before.

This project is designed to take place over a period of one week. Each day the students will complete one activity, and by the end of the week they will have completed decorating the altar. There are more than five activities (and one that takes two days – Activity 3) of varying difficulties, so you may pick and choose your favorites. Also included are Spanish vocabulary words.

Setting Up Your Classroom Altar

_Supplies:_
- Medium sized table or two spare desks
- Cork board
- Table cloth (optional)
- Candles
- Glass of water

Place the table/desks in front of the corkboard. Cover with the tablecloth and arrange the candles and water glass however you see fit. You may want to look at some examples for inspiration.

Additional Resources
- [www.houstonculture.org/mexico](http://www.houstonculture.org/mexico)
- _Altars and Icons: Sacred Spaces in Everyday Life_, Jean McMann. ISBN-10: 0811818160
- _The Days of the Dead/Los Dias de Muertos_, John Greenleigh and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler. ISBN-10: 0764906194
Activity 1 – Paper Marigolds
All Ages

*Flores* (flowers) represent the brief life of man, and are thus used to decorate *altars* (altars) and graves. Yellow marigolds, known as “the flower of the dead,” are the traditional flower used during *Dia de los Muertos* celebrations, but other fragrant flowers can also be used. They may be arranged in wreathes, or they may be simply placed in vases or laid as an *ofrenda* (offering) on an *altar* or grave’s surface. Sometimes, the petals will be scattered on the ground to create a path to the *altar* so that spirits can find their way home.

In this project, the students will create marigolds from tissue paper and pipe cleaners to decorate the class *altar*.

**Supplies:**
- Green pipe cleaners
- Yellow and orange tissue paper
- Scissors

**Procedure:**
1. Layer 4 or 5 sheets of tissue paper, alternating colors.
2. Cut tissue paper into a square, approx. 5 x 5”. (For younger students, it may be helpful to pre-cut the tissue paper.)
3. Fold the paper in an accordion fold.
4. Wrap a pipe cleaner around the center and twist.
5. Separate the tissue and fluff up to create the petals of your marigold.
6. Wrap one end of the pipe cleaner around the base of the flower to hold the petals together. The other end will be the stem.
7. Decorate your *altar*!

**Vocabulario**

*Flores*: n. flowers  
*Altar*: n. altar  
*Día de los Muertos*: Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.  
*Ofrenda*: n. offering  

**Key Point**: Marigolds are the traditional flower of Day of the Dead.

**Additional Resources**
- *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond*, Stanley Brandes. ISBN-10: 1405152486  
Activity 2 – Papel Picado (Paper Cuts)

All ages

Papel picado (paper cuts) are a popular form of decoration used for Dia de los Muertos and other holidays and festivals throughout Mexico. In its simplest form, tissue paper is folded and cut with scissors to form different patterns. The paper is then glued together to form banners that can be hung most anywhere. Skilled craftsmen use tools such as blades, awls, and chisels to create more complicated designs that include animals, skeletons, flowers and much more. These craftsmen often cut through fifty or more sheets of tissue paper at one time. In this project, we will be creating our papercuts using the same technique as paper snowflake making.

Supplies:
- Construction paper
- Scissors
- Glue
- Colorful tissue paper (approx. 8.5” x 11”)
- String

Procedure:
1. Roll the construction paper into a tube, and secure with glue.
2. Fold paper in half as many times as desired.
3. Make decorative cuts in the paper.
4. Unfold and flatten.
5. Glue the papercuts to the construction paper tubes.
6. Once dry, thread the string through the paper tubes to either create a banner or individual hanging paper cuts.
7. Pin to the classroom altar or hang around the classroom.

Vocabulario


Dia de los Muertos: Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.

Key Point: Papel picado is traditionally made of tissue paper and then hung up in a banner.

Additional Resources
- The Days of the Dead/Los Dias de Muertos, John Greenleigh and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler. ISBN-10: 0764906194
Activity 3 – *Calacas/Catrinas de Papel Pegado* (Papier-Mâché)

6th – 12th grade

During the *Dia de los Muertos* celebrations, papel pegado (papier-mâché) skeletons are often made as decorations. These skeletons are not meant to be scary, however. Called *Calacas* or *Catrinas*, these figures show a joyful afterlife in which the dead carry on many of the activities they enjoyed while they were alive, such as driving, selling ice cream, dancing, playing music, or even getting married. A *Calaca* (a colloquial Mexican Spanish term for “skeleton”) is a handmade figure of a skull or a skeleton. *Catrinas* are also handmade skeletal figures, but they are represented as well-dressed females. *Calacas* and *Catrinas* can be made from wood, fired clay, or papier-mâché.

In this activity, we will be creating our own *Calacas* and *Catrinas* using a foil base and homemade papier-mâché. This is the most advanced activity in the packet as it involves both painting and sculpting as well as a certain amount of patience. This is an appropriate undertaking with middle school through high school students.

This project takes two days.

**Supplies:**
- Foil
- Scissors
- Masking tape
- Newspaper
- Papier-mâché paste (1 part flour, 2 part water and a pinch of salt stirred together. Your paste should have the consistency of slightly runny glue. Store covered in the refrigerator.)
- Wax paper or plastic plates
- Paint
- Paint brushes
- Toothpicks

**Procedure:**

**DAY 1**

1. Set out wax paper or paper plates to work on.
2. Make a human shape using foil. You may need to use the scissors to cut arms and legs. Use the masking tape to attach appendages.
3. Tear the newspaper into very small, thin strips.
4. Dip a strip of newspaper in the papier-mâché paste, applying a coat of the mixture over the entire strip. TIP: To keep the strip from getting too “gloppy,” hold the strip between your first and second finger and squeeze out excess paste.
5. Wrap the paper strip around the figure.

**Vocabulario**

**Papel Pegado:** n. papier-mâché

**Dia de los Muertos:** Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.

**Calaca:** n. Handmade skeleton figures. Colloquial Mexican Spanish term for “skeleton.”

**Catrinas:** handmade, well-dressed, female skeleton figurines

**Key Point:** *Calacas* and *Catrinas* are not scary, they show a joyful afterlife.
6. Repeat until the entire figure is covered with paper strips. 2 – 3 layers of paper are ideal.

7. Let dry overnight on wax paper or plates

DAY 2

1. Check to make sure the figures are completely dry.

2. Paint the figures to resemble skeletons in everyday clothing. TIP: Paint the figure white, and then add details in black with a toothpick.

3. Once the paint has dried, decorate your altar with the Calacas/Catrinas.

Additional Resources

- Arts and Crafts of Mexico, Chloe Slayer. ISBN: 0500276145
- Mexican Folk Art: From Oaxacan Artist Families, Arden Aibel Rothstein and Anya Leah Rothstein. ISBN-10: 0764326732
- Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond, Stanley Brandes. ISBN-10: 1405152486
Activity 4 – Santos
All ages

Altars de Dia de los Muertos will often be adorned with images of santos (saints) that were important to the person to whom the altar is dedicated.

Saints are very important in Mexican culture, particularly Our Lady of Guadalupe, or Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. According to Catholic tradition, in 1531, the Virgin Mary (known as Our Lady of Guadalupe in this story) appeared to a native Mexican, Juan Diego, and spoke to him in his native language. When he returned home, an image of Mary had been miraculously inscribed on his tilma (a cloak made of cactus cloth.) Thus, the Basilica of Guadalupe was built in her honor to house this image.

The tradition of Our Lady of Guadalupe is important in history, because it is largely responsible for the Native Central American’s conversion to Catholicism. She was relatable to the Native Mexicans because she spoke their language and even looked like an Aztec princess when she appeared.

Supplies:
- Copies of Saints coloring pages
- Markers, crayons, or colored pencils
- Scissors
- Glue sticks

Procedure:
1. Color the picture.
2. Cut out.
3. Glue your santo to the construction paper and cut out the glued figure, creating a thin frame of construction paper around the image and reinforcing the figure.
4. Cut a triangle out of construction paper the height of the figure.
5. Fold the triangle long-ways, or “hotdog style.”
6. Glue one side of the folded triangle to the figure, creating a stand. (see illustration)
7. Prop up on your altar.

Additional Resources
- The Lady of Guadalupe, Tomie dePaola. ISBN-10: 0823403734
- Viva Guadalupe: The Virgin in New Mexican Art, Jacqueline Dunnington. ISBN-10: 0890133212
- The Oxford Dictionary of Saints, David Hugh Farmer. ISBN-10: 0198609493
Activity 5 – *Calaveras de Azúcar* (Sugar Skulls)

**All ages**

*Altars de Dia de los Muertos* are often decorated with images of *calaveras* (skulls) and *calacas* (colloquial Mexican Spanish for “skeletons”). *Calaveras de azúcar* (sugar skulls) are made from a sugar paste called *alfenique*, and are used as ofrendas to decorate altars. They are decorated very elaborately with colorful frostings, candies, foil, and even rhinestones. In this activity, we will be coloring and decorating paper *calaveras de azúcar*.

**OPTION:** If you would like a more authentic project, you may choose to make real sugar skulls using the recipe on page 10. If the students are younger than 3rd grade, it is advised that you make the skulls beforehand and use class time to decorate them, as the process is a bit too complicated for younger children to do without a lot of one-on-one assistance.

**Supplies:**
- Copies of the sugar skull coloring pages
- Markers, crayons, colored pencils, pastels
- Sequins, glitter colorful foil, anything that could be used to decorate sugar skulls
- Scissors
- Glue

**Procedure:**
- Decorate your *calaveras de azúcar*.
- Cut out.
- Display on your *altar*!

**Vocabulario**

*Dia de los Muertos*: Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.

*Calaveras*: n. skulls

*Calacas*: n. handmade skeleton figurines. Colloquial Mexican Spanish term for “skeleton.”

*Calaveras de azúcar*: n. sugar skulls

*Alfenique*: n. sugar paste

*Oferenda*: n. offering

*Altar*: n. altar

**Key Point:** Sugar skulls are elaborately decorated candy skulls used to decorate Dia de los Muertos altars.

**Additional Resources:**
- [http://mexicansugarskull.com](http://mexicansugarskull.com)
- *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond*, Stanley Brandes. ISBN-10: 1405152486
**Calaveras de Azúcar – Sugar Skulls**  
(mexicansugarskull.com)

**Skull molds** can be purchased online at [http://mexicansugarskull.com](http://mexicansugarskull.com). This website also has a lot of great tips when it comes to the process as well.

**CAUTION**  
Do not make sugar skulls on a rainy or high humidity day. They will not turn out.

**YIELD TABLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mold Size</th>
<th># of Skulls</th>
<th>Sugar (lbs.)</th>
<th>Meringue Powder</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5 lbs</td>
<td>1/4 cup</td>
<td>3 Tablespoons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5 lbs</td>
<td>1/4 cup</td>
<td>3 Tablespoons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 lbs of sugar = approx. 10 cups

**Step 1:** Mix dry ingredients well. (1 tsp. meringue powder for 1 cup of granulated sugar)

**Step 2:** Sprinkle sugar mixture with 1 teaspoon water per cup of sugar used.

**Step 3:** Pack sugar mixture FIRMLY into the skull mold with special attention to chins & edges. Use a straight edge to scrape the back of the mold flat. Pack down some more until perfectly tight.

**Step 4:** Place a stiff cardboard square (approx. 5” x 6”) over mold and invert immediately. Lift mold off carefully. Throw any “mistakes” back into your bowl, stir up and try again. If mix is too dry, spritz with a water bottle.

**Step 5:** Air-dry skulls on their card boards from 8 hours to overnight.

**Step 6:** Decorate with icing (the same type used for gingerbread houses). Colored foil may also be “glued” on with the icing, as well as any other pretty decorations you can come up with or small candies.

**NOTE:** Though the sugar skulls are entirely edible (not including the foil decorations), it may not be wise to eat them due to the amount of handling required their creation.
Activity 6 – Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead)  
2nd grade and up

Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead) is a traditional food during the Dia de los Muertos celebrations. Most often, it is baked in a circular loaf topped with criss-crossed “bones” made of dough and sugar. Sometimes, it is also shaped into people, animals or skeletons.

During Dia de los Muertos, relatives of the dead will often eat pan de muerto at the cemetery, or leave it on their altar as an ofrenda for the spirits. In this activity, we will simply shape and decorate pre-made biscuit dough. If you would like a more authentic project, see the traditional Pan de Muertos recipe on page 12.

Supplies:
- Pre-made dough (such as Pillsbury Crusty French Loaf, yields 3-4 mini loaves per tube.)
- Colored sugar for topping
- Baking sheet
- Pam
- Wax paper or paper plates

Procedure:
1) Divide up biscuit dough evenly on wax paper or paper plates.
2) Shape dough.
   Traditional Round: (1) Shape a round ball of dough. (2) Flatten ball slightly to make a hockey puck shape. (3) Make “bones” by rolling out long snakes of dough with your fingers. (4) Place bones on top of the loaf.
3) Decorate with the sugar.
4) Bake according to biscuit dough package instructions.
5) Serve warm.

Vocabulario
Pan de Muerto: n. Bread of the Dead
Dia de los Muertos: Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.
Altar: n. altar
Ofrenda: n. offering

Key Point: Pan de Muerto is the traditional bread eaten during Dia de los Muertos.

Additional Resources
- The Days of the Dead/Los Dias de Muertos, John Greenleigh and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler. ISBN-10: 0764906194
- Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond, Stanley Brandes. ISBN-10: 1405152486
Pan de Muertos – Bread of the Dead
(www.inside-mexico.com)

1½ cups flour
½ cups sugar
1 tsp. salt
2 packets dry yeast
1 tsp. anise seed
½ cup milk
½ cup water
½ cup butter
4 eggs
4½ cups flour
Colored sugar

Mix all dry ingredients together except the 4 1/2 cups of flour.

In a small pan, heat the milk, the water, and the butter. Add the liquid mixture to the dry mixture.

Beat well.

Mix in the eggs and the first 1 1/2 cups of flour. Beat.

Little by little add in the rest of the flour.

Knead the mixture on a floured board for 10 minutes.

Put the dough in a greased bowl and allow it to rise until it has doubled in size.

Punch the dough down and reshape. On top put some strips of dough simulating bones, and a little ball (tear).

Let it rise another hour, then sprinkle with colored sugar.

Bake at 350° F for about 40 minutes.
**VOCABULARIO**

**Alfenique:** n. the sugar paste used to make sugar skulls

**Altar:** n. altar; shrine

**Calacas:** n. handmade skeleton figurines. Colloquial Mexican Spanish term for “skeleton.”

**Calaveras de azúcar:** n. sugar skulls

**Calaveras:** n. skulls

**Catrinas:** n. handmade, well-dressed, female skeleton figurines

**Dia de los Muertos:** Day of the Dead. Hispanic holiday celebrated at the beginning of November to honor the souls of the dead.

**Flores:** n. flowers

**Ofrenda:** n. offering

**Our Lady of Guadalupe:** Mexican Virgin Mary as she appeared in Guadalupe, Mexico.

**Pan de Muerto:** n. bread of the dead

**Papel Pegado:** n. papier-mâché

**Papel Picado:** n. cut paper

**Santo:** n. saint

**Tilma:** n. cloak made of cactus cloth
Bibliography


