

# Celebrating Mexico's Days of the Dead

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**M**y school has a large Latino population so the Spanish teacher and I created an activity around the Mexican holiday, *Días de los Muertos*, to validate the cultural heritage of our students and to help them share their traditions with other students.

The Days of the Dead, November 1 and 2, are celebratory of people who are no longer with us. It is a combination of indigenous and Catholic traditions still celebrated in Mexico as well as in many places in the United States. It is believed that the spirits of loved ones return at this time, welcomed by the living who place photos, flowers, favorite foods, and other mementos on an *ofrenda*, or altar, often in the home.

## Origins

The origins of *Los Días de los Muertos* in Mexico date back long before the arrival of the conquistadors in the 1500s. Concepts of death and afterlife existed in the Olmec, Toltec, Maya, and Aztec cultures. When the conquering Europeans introduced Christianity to the native cultures, its rituals and practices became synthesized with traditional indigenous beliefs. All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day are holy days celebrated in all Catholic countries, and the customs and practices of *Los Días de los Muertos* developed from this fusion.

In Mexican culture there is a philosophical acceptance of death as an integral part of the life cycle. During *Los Días de los Muertos*, people believe that the souls of the dead return to earth for one day of the year—the spirits of *los angelitos* (children) on All Saint's Day and the spirits of adults on All Soul's Day.

## Materials

- shoeboxes or cardboard
- cloth/tissue paper/paint
- hot glue gun and glue sticks
- photographs
- beads, buttons, yarn, ribbon, lace, and sequins
- bars of white soap
- sharpened wooden dowels
- scissors

## Procedures

1. Discuss the origins of the Days of the Dead with students. Compare and contrast Mexican views about death to views of other cultures.
2. Students bring in a shoebox, a photo of a deceased family member, and objects that remind them of that person.
3. Students place the lid inside the box (cut apart from box if necessary).
4. Students cover the box with material, tissue paper, or paint, and decorate it.
5. Students add photos and objects that remind them of the person honored.
6. Students write a poem about the person, copy it to card stock, decorate it, and add it to the *ofrenda*.
7. Give each student a bar of soap, a sharpened wooden dowel, and have students then carve a skull from the soap.

Students are assessed on the completeness of their *ofrendas* (photo, poem, skull, memory object), how well it is put together, and aesthetics.

## Culminating Experience

In collaboration with the Spanish classes, students set up a large *ofrenda* in the library, complete with paper flowers and *papel picado*,

(Mexican cut paper banners). Students invited their teachers, friends, and family members to view the *ofrenda* on the evening of November 2. 🌀

## Alternative Approaches

- *Ofrendas* can be made of clay.
- Students can decorate their photos instead of making an *ofrenda*.
- The collaborative *ofrenda* can be set up in the artroom or vestibule of the school.

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## NATIONAL STANDARD

Student differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art.

