

**Teaching Sensitive Cultural Traditions with Honesty and Respect:
The Mexican Celebration of the Days of the Dead/
Los Dias De Los Muertos**

Nancy Walkup

Are there any artworks, artists, or cultural traditions that you would like to include in your curriculum but have not because of trepidations about sensitive subjects? Can you think of any examples? Kachina dolls and totem poles most likely will come to mind, but, for me, the celebration of Los Dias de los Muertos, the Mexican Days of the Dead, has much personal appeal. If you have already decided you have no interest in this festivity or believe that your administration would not let you teach about it, please bear with me. Hopefully I can share the true meanings of the celebration and suggest some usable approaches you might want to try in your classroom and school.

The two days of Los Dias de los Muertos, the Mexican Days of the Dead, represent the most important celebration of the year in Mexico, especially in rural areas. Celebrated on the Catholic holy days of November 1, All Saints' Day, and November 2, All Souls' Day, the occasion is a joyful time of remembrance, family reunion, and feasting, as relatives and friends gather together to honor their loved ones who have died. According to tradition, it is believed that the souls of departed children return on November 1 and the souls of the adults visit on November 2. While some people call this fiesta time "Day of the Dead," the plural form better describes the celebration as it spans several days.

Mexican families save all year to buy the flowers, candles, incense, and special foods needed for the festivities to properly honor their dearly departed. No expense is spared in preparing for the Days of the Dead. Mexican families participate in the construction and decoration of ofrendas (home tabletop displays or altars) to honor their loved ones. Decorations for the ofrenda may include candles, gifts, flowers, incense, papel picado (cut paper banners), photographs, pictures of saints (and often the Virgin of Guadalupe) and offerings of the favorite food and drink of the deceased. Mexican marigolds (called zempascuchitl) and cock's comb are the flowers most associated with the Days of the Dead. The marigold is particularly pungent in aroma as is the copal incense that is burned on the ofrenda and in the cemetery.

Pan de los Muertos (bread of the dead), candies, and toys are made in the shapes of calavera (skulls and skeletons). The skeleton or skull is seen as a promise of resurrection, not as a symbol of death. Calavera toys and papier-mache skeleton figures depict specific professions, musicians, brides and grooms, bicycle riders, and other subjects from everyday life. There are rich traditions in Mexican folk art that incorporate calaveras in many ways. For example, the Linares family of Mexico City is well known for their fantastic papier-mache calaveras figures.

In preparation for the fiesta, tombs and gravestones in the cemeteries are cleaned, freshly-painted, and elaborately decorated by the members of the community with candles, flowers, breads, fruits, photographs, and other objects. Since the cemeteries are often in or very near a village or town, they are not seen as places separate from the community, but as part of everyday village life. Though specific practices of the Days of the Dead may vary from village to village, in most communities the entire village holds vigil in the cemetery the nights of the Days of the Dead. Each

family maintains a vigil around its graves - graves which are covered with lit candles and flowers, as many as a family can afford. The entire family, from oldest to newborn, each dressed in their best clothing, keeps watch, quietly offering prayers until their candles burn down in the cold night.

Historical and Cultural Background

The origins of Los Dias 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 Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are holy days celebrated in all Catholic countries, and the customs and practices of Los Dias de los Muertos developed from this fusion.

In the United States, misconceptions sometimes arise about Los Dias de los Muertos because of differing cultural attitudes about death, misinterpretation of the meaning of symbolic objects such as skeletons and skulls, and the concurrent dates of the celebration with Halloween. But Los Dias de los Muertos is not in any way somber, morbid, or macabre.

The United States celebration most like Los Dias de los Muertos is Memorial Day, a day in which we also honor the dead (though the focus is on military veterans). Because of the rising rate of immigration to the United States of people from Mexico and Latin America, the Days of the Dead have recently become a way to honor Latino traditions. In addition, many artists such as Carmen Lomas Garza have spread awareness and popularity of the Days of the Dead through appropriated images and meanings. In many ways, these concepts have also found expression in popular culture. Think of the spontaneous offerings of flowers and objects left in public places to honor and mourn the deaths of loved ones such as traffic accident victims, Vietnam veterans, and celebrities such as Princess Diana, Selena, and John and Carolyn Kennedy.

Making Artist Ofrendas

My favorite classroom method of teaching about the Days of the Dead is through the creation of artist ofrendas. I have found this secular approach helpful to teach students about the Days of the Dead without focusing too much on the religious aspects of the celebration. Other types of memorials could also be discussed, such as the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, and memorials to individuals.

Though traditional ofrendas are usually found at home, in the classroom ofrendas can be created to honor one or more artists (in a kind of art history lesson) rather than student's relatives. Because the Days of the Dead celebrations in Mexico usually include some form (candy, food, or toys) of skeletons or skulls, it is important to understand that to Mexicans the skeleton does not carry the negative meanings promoted by Hollywood. Instead, it simultaneously laughs in the face of death while serving as a reminder that all, both rich and poor, are equal in death. An ofrenda can certainly be created without any such images if they would be problematic. Each individual teacher must decide what approach is best to respect the sensitivities of his or her students, teachers, and community.

Divide students into groups of four to five and assign an artist to each group. Any artist will do, but if you want to use Mexican artists, some to consider are Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Ruffino Tamayo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Tina Modotti. Have groups research the artists' lives, collect items to include on their ofrendas, and create artworks and written passages based on the chosen artists.

Use small tables for each ofrenda and have students cover them with fabrics appropriate for the chosen artists. For example, a brightly colored oilcloth would make a great table cover for an ofrenda to Frida Kahlo, but an off-white, sedate linen might be more appropriate for an ofrenda to Leonardo da Vinci. Other possible items for the ofrendas include real or paper flowers, candles (you don't have to light them), photographs or self-portraits of the artist, reproductions of the artist's work, ceramics of different kinds (bowls, candleholders, and picture frames could be made by students), favorite foods, candy, and other items that might be associated with each specific artist. Ofrendas are often completely covered with objects, so encourage students to develop a variety of offerings. Display the completed ofrendas as an educational exhibit with a written explanation of the project and biography/biographies of the artist/s honored.

Summary

An investigation of the annual celebrations and rituals of Los Dias de los Muertos offers an opportunity for understanding the true meaning of this important cultural tradition. Learning about the meanings of such celebrations as the Days of the Dead promotes cross-cultural understanding of the commonalities shared by all people. For the Mexican people, the celebration marks a reference for life, respect for death, and the philosophical acceptance of the cycles of life. I invite you to explore Los Dias de los Muertos with your students.

Extensions/Interdisciplinary Connections

- * Other non-Mexican artists that are fun to do ofrendas about (because their works are so familiar) are *Georgia O'Keeffe*, *Leonardo da Vinci*, *Grant Wood*, or *Picasso*.
- * If you can locate someone who is familiar with the Days of the Dead and/or has a collection of related objects, invite them to speak to your class and/or bring any appropriate items they may have. For example, when I speak to classes, I bring in a small table and a woven suitcase, then unwrap and assemble an ofrenda while I talk.
- * Use strips of white construction paper to make three-dimensional skeleton figures to hang as mobiles. With assorted colors of construction paper, add details to represent specific characters such as cowboys and cowgirls, artists, bicycle riders, football players, skateboarders, or any other figures that can be identified by clothing, hair, and accessories.
- * Investigate the political cartoons of *Jose Guadalupe Posada* and create cartoons with social or political content. Skeletons can be used as the basis for figures, but encourage students to show interaction between figures, dress them in contemporary clothing, and make social comments on human behavior.
- * Instead of using artists as the focus of the ofrendas, have students memorialize their pets who have died, bringing in photographs to display on the ofrenda. Include photographs and/or artworks

of the dearly departed animals. Many students will have photos of their pets they may want to display on the ofrenda and this approach may be more acceptable to administrators and parents.

Enduring Idea: Respect and honor for the dead and an appreciation of life's cycles are common human experiences.

Art Idea: Art can express respect and honor for the dead and an appreciation of life's cycles.

Key Questions

- * How do people from different cultures express respect and honor for the dead and an appreciation of life's cycles?
- * How is respect and honor for the dead and an appreciation of life's cycles expressed in the artifacts and customs in Mexico associated with the Days of the Dead?
- * What can we learn by exploring the Mexican Days of the Dead?

Unit Objectives

- * Students will demonstrate an understanding of how the Mexican Days of the Dead reflect the time, place, and culture in which they were created.
- * Students will respond to the meaning and value of Days of the Dead artifacts supported with persuasive reasons.
- * Students will communicate interpretations of Days of the Dead artifacts supported with compelling reasons.
- * Students will draw upon universal concepts of the human experience to create artist memorials.

Recommended Resources and Materials

- *Days of the Dead: A Curriculum Resource*, Stevie Mack, Amy Metcalfe, with consultant Nancy Walkup, a teacher's guide and art prints, available from CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Educational Materials, inc., 800-913-8555 or <http://www.crizmac.com>.
- *Homenaje a Tenochtitlan An Installation for the Days of the Dead* by Carmen Lomas, videotape available from I. V. Studios/Elizabeth Sher, PO Box 8123, Berkeley, California, 94707-8123, 510-528-8004.
- Carmen Lomas Garza's web site, <http://www.carmenlomasgarza.com/>.
- *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi Corazon: The Art of Carmen Lomas Garza*, New York: The New Press, 1991.
- *Making Magic Windows: Creating Papel Picado/Cut Paper Art with Carmen Lomas Garza*, Children's Book Press.
- Posters and books by Carmen Lomas Garza are available from MedioDia Productions, PO Box 140304, Austin, Texas 78714-0304, mediodia@latino.com.
- *Mexican Papercutting*, Kathleen Trenchard, North Carolina: Lark Press, 1998.
- *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead*, George Ancona, New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1993.
- *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration*, Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith, New York: Holiday House, 1994.

- Humorous Day of the Dead artifact images (I only use objects that are not the least bit frightening), found online at *The Days of the Dead in Mexico*, <http://www.art.unt.edu/ntieva/artcurr/latino/index.htm>.
- *The Days of the Dead in Mexico*, <http://www.art.unt.edu/ntieva/artcurr/latino/index.htm>.
- Reproductions and videos on Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and other artists are available from Crystal Productions, 800-255-8629, www.crystalproductions.com