

Día de los Muertos

The Mexican All Souls' Day

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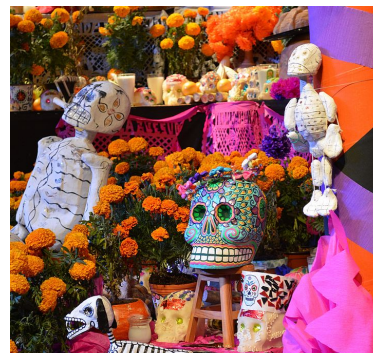
„Día de los Muertos“ is Spanish, means literally “Day of the Dead”, and is mainly celebrated in Mexico on the 1st and 2nd of November every year. Like many other traditions dedicated to death and the deceased these days are not sad at all: many people celebrate instead that at this time of the year the souls of the deceased are visiting. In this fashion, the dead are offered little gifts on altars which are called “ofrendas”. Most people spend these holidays picknicking and dancing on cemeteries, wearing bells to wake up the dead and even dress like them.

Día de los Muertos connects Catholic elements such as crucifixes or depictions of Holy Mary, which made their way to Mexico during the Spanish colonial occupation, to indigenous Aztec aspects. It's not sure however, if the tradition most likely dates back to European holidays before colonization or if it's mainly Aztec holidays such as “Quecholli” (honoring the God of Warfare with “ofrendas”). What's for sure, though, is that Día de los Muertos links Spanish and Indigenous traditions.

One of the best known characters playing a role within the festivities is “La Calavera Catrina” which translates to “The Skull of Catrina” and has been made up by the artist José Guadalupe Posada and made popular by Diego Rivera – Frida Kahlo's husband. You can see her on the right. Catrina depicts a rich Mexican woman of the early 20th century, only having in mind to look as “European” as possible, in an exaggerated way. According to Posada, for example, she will thus forget about her Mexican culture. Even though Día de los Muertos connects Spanish and Mexican elements, one of its most prominent figures warns that an overly presence of the former colonial power's culture is unwanted. To this day, the tradition is charged with political content which is, in most cases, presented in a humorous way.



How do you feel about dealing with death rather cheerfully than sadly? If you like, try two of the typical Día de los Muertos activities – you will find instructions of the following page.





OFRENDAS

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As we have described above, on Día de los Muertos little altars are put up for those in the family or friends that have deceased. These altars are meant to motivated the dead to visit and often offer pillows and blankets for them to rest, shampoo, tooth brushes and such things as well as their favorite food and drink to freshen up after their long journey from the afterworld. The “ofrenda” can be placed on many surfaces, for instance a cardboard box or your bedside table. Many people assort them in three layers, so that a small and empty shelf is an ideal place.

1. Photos of the person deceased and, as long as you want, religious objects
2. Food, drink and other things the person deceased loved – for example toys or magazines
3. Candles, as well as pillows and blankets to rest, shampoo, tooth brushes and such things to freshen up

Next to family and friends deceased also popular persons are made “ofrendas” on this day. If you prefer that you can just as well put up an altar for an artist, sportsman or sportswoman or someone else you like.



Once Día de los Muertos has passed, many people eat the food they offered - since the visitors from the afterworld have eaten their spiritual essence already, it doesn't nourish you any more but it's still tasty!





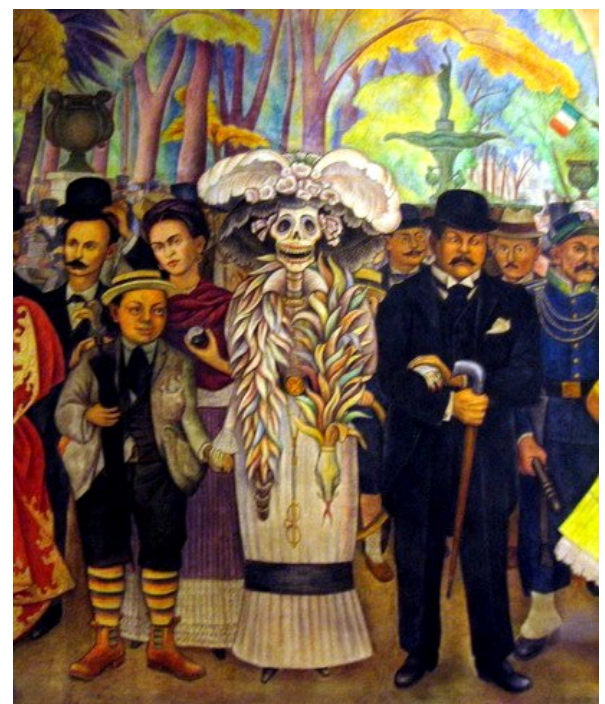
CALAVERAS LITERARIAS

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Friends and family or famous people still alive are not forgotten on Día de los Muertos: they are addressed with so called “calaveras literarias” – translating to “literary skulls”. It’s not really skulls, but little poems describing how the person addressed dies, in a humorous way of course! Often these poem have 4 to 10 lines and funnily deal with the person’s guilty pleasures. In Mexico many children write these poems in their Spanish classes.

“The Skull of Catrina” – that caricature of the rich Mexican woman – was depicted next to one of these poems in the newspaper, and it’s up to today that the “literary skulls” often comment on political ideas. It’s because of this that in the past they have sometime been censored. If you like, you can ornament your calavera literaria with a little drawing.

If you prefer not to write about the death of a friend or family member you can also take a famous person, as is done with the ofrenda, or even one that’s entirely made up by you. When writing you can take the text below as an example – it’s about an imaginary torero – however you’re not limited to that. Literary skulls can end up very diversely!



The Matador

He’s in the ring, holding a cloth in red
Facing that bull, lifting the rag
Moments of tension, he’s starting to wag
Well, the bull sped up, now he is dead.

