

Chaffey College



While at the market, people select from abundant displays of flowers—the yellow-orange *zempoaxóchitl/sem pazuchil* (marigold); velvety-purple cockscomb and baby's breath; and the necessary ingredients to prepare the moles, champurrado and other dishes the dead enjoyed while being part of the living.

Los días de los muertos are celebrated with a mixture of reverence for the departed, revelry to make them happy upon their return, and mockery to defy the fear of death itself. Although details vary from region to region and village-to-village, the basic observance is the same, the fruits of the earth are shared with the deceased as the *ofrenda* (offering) at the family altar and communing with them beside their graves.

Contemporary Variations

As the concept of cultural hybridity continues to take root, nowhere is this notion more evident than in the work of contemporary artists who have been experimenting and reinterpreting this tradition with installations, interventions, and performances. The themes of death and self-preservation, while having nuances from culture to culture, are universally regarded. At the edge of the 20th and into the 21st centuries, some take a pluralistic position and reach beyond the confines of the traditional focus of Days of the Dead; while critics deride contemporary expressions as a "hijacking" of the tradition. The author argues that "great art often engages the most significant issues of the community, calling on each of us to bring our deepest understanding and empathy to our shared social experience. It further allows us to see the world through the eyes of others—encountering difference—understanding the meaning of cultural conventions in terms of the complex aesthetic, social, and historical contexts out of which they emerge. It allows for the representation of culture as dynamic changing and evolving in contemporary times."

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Center for Culture and Social Justice

WIGNALL MUSEUM of
CONTEMPORARY ART



México's Días de muertos / Days of the Dead

From a Western perspective celebrations to honor the dead might produce horror and seem right out of an Edgar Allan Poe novel, but in Mexican culture death is accepted as a continuum of life. November 1st and 2nd belong to the departed. According to popular belief the deceased have divine permission to visit relatives and friends here on earth. The traditional celebration involves profound spiritual rituals—rooted in observance of the agricultural cycles—and more contemporaneously, artistic forms of expression, which include song, dance, poetry, crafts and art. The Days of the Dead are planned and held with deep reverence for the dearly departed and are celebrated in a festive manner. Those who have passed on continue life in a different dimension. Observing Days of the Dead is a way to pay tribute to those individuals that have paved the way for us, the living.

“Son los muertos que alumbran el camino.” (“It is the departed that illuminate the path.”)

Indigenous Cosmology

Before European contact in pre-conquest México, death were active personages in the images of humans without flesh—*Mictlantecuhtli*, and his consort *Mictlancihuatl*, worshipped as gods who controlled humans' destiny in the universe. *Mictlán*, the land of the dead, was their domain—later called the underworld by Christian friars—which in the ancient worldview was the center of the earth. In one account, human mortality was the result of an accident, so tells a *Náhuatl* creation story. Poised at a moment after a cataclysmic event on earth, *Quetzalcóatl* (feathered serpent) began the human race by retrieving the bones of his ancestors from *Mictlán*. Upon leaving he was startled by quail and inadvertently dropped the bones; at this moment, quail bit into the scattered bones causing damage to them. *Quetzalcóatl* picked up the bones and continued on his journey to *Tamoanchan*, a paradise inhabited by the gods and ancestors of the human race, where he gave them to *Cihuacóatl*, the earth goddess. She ground them up and fertilized them with *Quetzalcóatl's* blood. From this arose a new race of humans, the People of the Fifth Sun, whose existence was impaired by the damage the bones had suffered—as a consequence these inhabitants were mortal. For these ancient cultures worship of life involved worship of death, as it signified a stage in a constant cycle of cycles.

Miccailhuitontli (Little Feast of the Dead) began in the ninth “month” (late-July) and *Huey Miccailhuitl* (Great Feast of the Dead) continued through the tenth “month” (August) of the ritual calendar. Both of these feasts preceded the major harvest season and ceremonies honoring the earth goddesses. On the most fundamental level, these agrarian societies through their social and political philosophy maintained complex and scientific understanding of the earth's cycles. This ancient cosmogony affirms the visible seasonal cycle of birth, growth, maturation, and death. In essence creation stories were metaphorical references and explanations of the principles that elucidated the truth of life and the human condition.

The Spanish Confluence

After the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, the subjugated cultures of New Spain/*Nueva España* (what the colonized territories were renamed) were introduced to the terror of hell and death's mourning rituals. Contrary to popular belief, the imported European system of religious rites came to coexist rather than supplant the existing traditions of the indigenous cultures. The European's fear of death was also imported to the “new world,” influenced and represented by *Le Dance Macabré* (the Dance of Death). This was a religious convention used by the “old world” to curb sin and instill fear of a life in hell after death. During the colonial period the grim reaper, a skeleton with a scythe at its side carrying a sand clock, represented death. It is during this era that skull motifs, which appeared in pre-conquest symbology, reappear in Christian altars. In addition to reinstating this tradition, there were other “fortunate coincidences” (for the conquerors) that helped to accelerate the adoption of the Catholic religion by the conquered indigenous peoples. For example, the cross symbol was not new; in ancient cosmology and rites, it symbolized fire and therefore the sun—life-giving energy. The cross element also represented the universe with the four cardinal directions and the center. Native celebrations to honor the dead were “allowed” to coincide with the European calendar of Saints' Days, and therefore maintained some preservation. Essentially, the Spanish colonizers appropriated and fused ancient folkways with the imposed cultures from Europe. Complex forms of acculturation and transculturation were at play as distinct cultures clashed. This concept is most apparent in how *Tonantzin* (Honored Mother) “becomes” *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.

Modern México

In the late-18th and early-19th centuries two master engravers, Manuel Manilla and José Guadalupe Posada, were influential in challenging the now assimilated Mexican attitude towards death; a composite of ancient indigenous beliefs and imposed European religious traditions. In Manilla's and Posada's art, using images of skulls and skeletons, death took a common place in their daily lives as it was illustrated as a fleshless entity partaking in everyday life. Recollecting the imagery and symbols of long arrested cultures in the “new world,” Manilla and Posada mocked death and used the theme to illustrate irreverent and defiant political statements for the time. Mexican writer Octavio Paz emphasized this point by writing later, “partake of it, join it, because there is no escaping it.”

The theme of death continues to inspire many artists and artisans who share the vision that the inscrutable essence of the ancients is not yet fully understood. Beginning in the spring, craftspeople, artists and farmers begin to fabricate and create the large array of items used for the celebrations marking *Los días de los muertos*. *Calacas* (skeletons) depicting people from all walks of life attired in vibrantly covered garments are made from cloth, clay, paper, flowers, wood, sugar, and other materials. The panaderos (bakers), specially bake *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead); edible creations twisted into fanciful shapes of skulls, crossbones and skeletons.