

Dia de los Muertos – A Celebration of Life

By Mary Lyle, Director of Education

In Mexican and Central American countries, Dia de los Muertos or *Day of the Dead* is celebrated on October 31, November 1 and 2. This celebration is often misunderstood and confused with the western holiday tradition of Halloween but they are very different. To fully appreciate why Dia de los Muertos has become so popular in the United States and around the world, we need to better understand the tradition.

Many of the traditions of Dia de los Muertos date back to ancient civilizations in Mexico and South America in which “death was seen as simply another stage of living.”¹ When the Spanish came to the New World in the early sixteenth century, they were accompanied by Catholic missionaries who set out to convert the indigenous people. The easiest way to accomplish this goal was to combine the natives’ existing beliefs with Catholic customs. In this way, there the emphasis was placed upon the similarities rather than the differences in cultural practices and beliefs. For example, both cultures believed in an afterlife, and had rituals associated with honoring those who have died. By acknowledging what each culture had in common, the Catholic missionaries were able to slowly convert the indigenous population.

One important feature of the holiday is the “ofrenda” (offering table) a kind of temporary altar, decorated with flowers, candles, and pictures of the family members who have passed on. Offerings of fruit, bread, candy or anything that the departed ones may have enjoyed during their life on earth are placed on the altar on October 31 – “All Souls Day.” It is believed that the souls of the departed will return to enjoy some of their favorite things.



The beautifully decorated “calavera” (skull) has become one of the prominent symbols of the holiday. For many years the Museum staff members made over 200 “calaveras” or sugar skulls, which patrons could decorate with colorful icing. Other decorations include “flores de papel” (paper flowers), and “papel picado” (cut paper banners).



Dia de los Muertos has become a part of popular culture. There are two animated films that I would like to recommend. *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017). Both of these films help to illuminate the meaning of this popular celebration in a way that is both interesting and entertaining. The meaning is summed up by one of the characters in *Coco* who explains, “When there’s no one left in the living world who remembers you, you disappear from this world . . . Our memories, they have to be passed down by those who knew us in life—in the stories they tell about us.”² By celebrating Dia de los Muertos in our own way, we are helping to keep alive the memory of those who meant so much to us.

¹ “Blog.” *National Museum of American History*, Oct. 2018, americanhistory.si.edu/ko/blog/exploring-dia-de-los-muertos.

² Quotes from “Coco”. (n.d.). Retrieved October 06, 2020, from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2380307/quotes/?tab=qt>