

Background: Papel Picado

Papel picado, loosely translated as “perforated paper,” is a folk art technique practiced in Mexico. Colorful pieces of cut paper are strung to flutter in the wind during many holiday celebrations, including Día de los Muertos, Christmas, Easter, and personal ceremonies such as weddings and christenings. Specific color schemes are tied to each of these holidays. Pink, orange, and purple, for instance, often decorate ofrendas for Día de los Muertos, while red, white, and green (colors of the Mexican flag) are used in commemorating Independence Day or Mexico’s patroness, La Virgen de Guadalupe.

It consists of rectangular pieces of tissue paper which are cut away into intricate, repetitive designs. Simple versions can be constructed by folding and snipping with scissors; more elaborate versions require awls, chisels, and other special tools. The design emerges as the artist manipulates the negative space of the tissue paper. Experts in the craft will handle many layers of paper at once, generating extensive designs that often include motifs such as flowers, birds, skeletons, crosses, and historic figures, among others.

Papel picado decorations are ephemeral, existing only during the celebration. They are typically displayed outside, where their delicate construction will disintegrate naturally in the wind and rain. This transitory existence is repeated in many of the other elements of Día de los Muertos celebrations, such as the fresh food and flowers that adorn many ofrendas at this time.

