

# *Día de los Muertos:* DAY of the DEAD

*D*ÍA DE LOS MUERTOS  
(DAY OF THE DEAD), ONE  
OF THE MOST MEANINGFUL

YEARLY CELEBRATIONS IN MEXICO AND  
OTHER PARTS OF LATIN AMERICA,  
COMBINES PRE-HISPANIC RITUALS AND  
BELIEFS WITH CATHOLIC PRACTICES  
AND SYMBOLS. DURING THIS PERIOD OF  
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RITUALS

(ALSO REFERRED TO AS *Todos Santos*,  
ALL SAINTS' DAY), LIVING AND DEAD  
FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS ARE  
JOINED TOGETHER IN AN ATMOSPHERE  
OF COMMUNION AND SPIRITUAL

REGENERATION. AS ELIZABETH  
CARMICHAEL AND CHLOË SAYER HAVE

WRITTEN, "As a time of reunion, there is  
nothing somber or macabre about the event:  
the returning come as spirits who have  
returned from another world, which for many  
Mexican Indians is very like this one.

These worlds of the living and the dead exist  
in a state of permanent interaction"

(*Skeleton at the Feast*, p. 14).



Important elements of the Day of the Dead festivities were practiced in pre-Hispanic times and have become integrated into the Catholic traditions of Latin America. For instance, indigenous Mesoamerican peoples offered incense and food, including tamales, to the images and spirits of their dead ancestors long before Europeans arrived in the New World. Following the great encounter between European and indigenous peoples, some of these practices were joined with the Christian celebration of All Saints' Day, the commemorative festival of all Christian saints and martyrs.

Day of the Dead rituals involve preparations for the ceremonies and construction of the family altars dedicated to the dead, the ceremonial feast of the dead, and the spiritual communion with the dead at homes and cemeteries.

The decorated family altars in homes and at cemeteries are an important feature of the celebration. Prominent in the decorations are marigold or *zempoalxochitl* (a Nahuatl word meaning "twenty flower") flowers, which are used to create brilliant mounds and arches. The color and aromatic scent of these flowers are believed to attract the souls toward the altars, where offerings of food await them. Equally important are preparations of special foods for the dead. These include baked breads, candied fruit, skulls made of sugar, human figurines made of pumpkin seeds, apples, pears, and quince preserves. Family altars often contain the favorite foods of the deceased as well as pictures of the dead, candles, incense burners, religious figurines, and banners of colored tissue paper perforated or stippled with humorous or reverent scenes of the dead. In these ways, the traditional family altar becomes a sacred center for the household. The visual elements are often placed in a *retablo* (a structure forming the back of an altar), where images of the Virgin, Christ, the cross, and saints watch over the *ofrenda*, or offering to the dead.

The exhibit is a collaborative work, created with objects from the Museum's Alice Melvin Mexican Folk Art Collection, popular Day of the Dead ephemera, and artwork contributed by many artists.

#### FURTHER READING:

*The Days of the Dead/Los Días de Muertos: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed*, Rosalind Rosoff Beimler and John Greenleigh. POMEGRANATE, 1998 (ENGLISH AND SPANISH).

*The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS, 1992.

*Day of the Dead*, Tony Johnston and Jeanette Winter. VOYAGER BOOKS, 2000 (for ages 4–6).

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