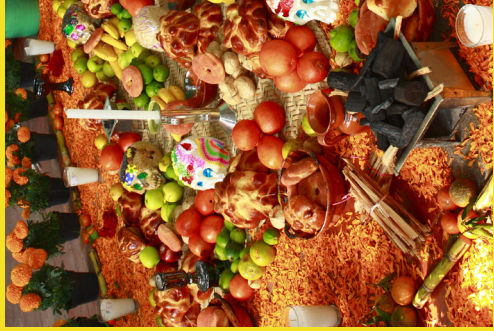
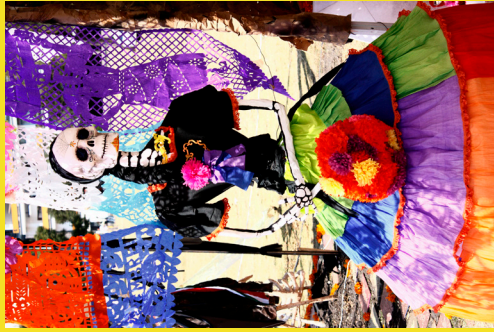


The Big Book of Día de los Muertos

Written by Katrina Dillon

Día de los Muertos is a celebration to honor, remember,
and celebrate the ancestors and loved ones who have passed away.

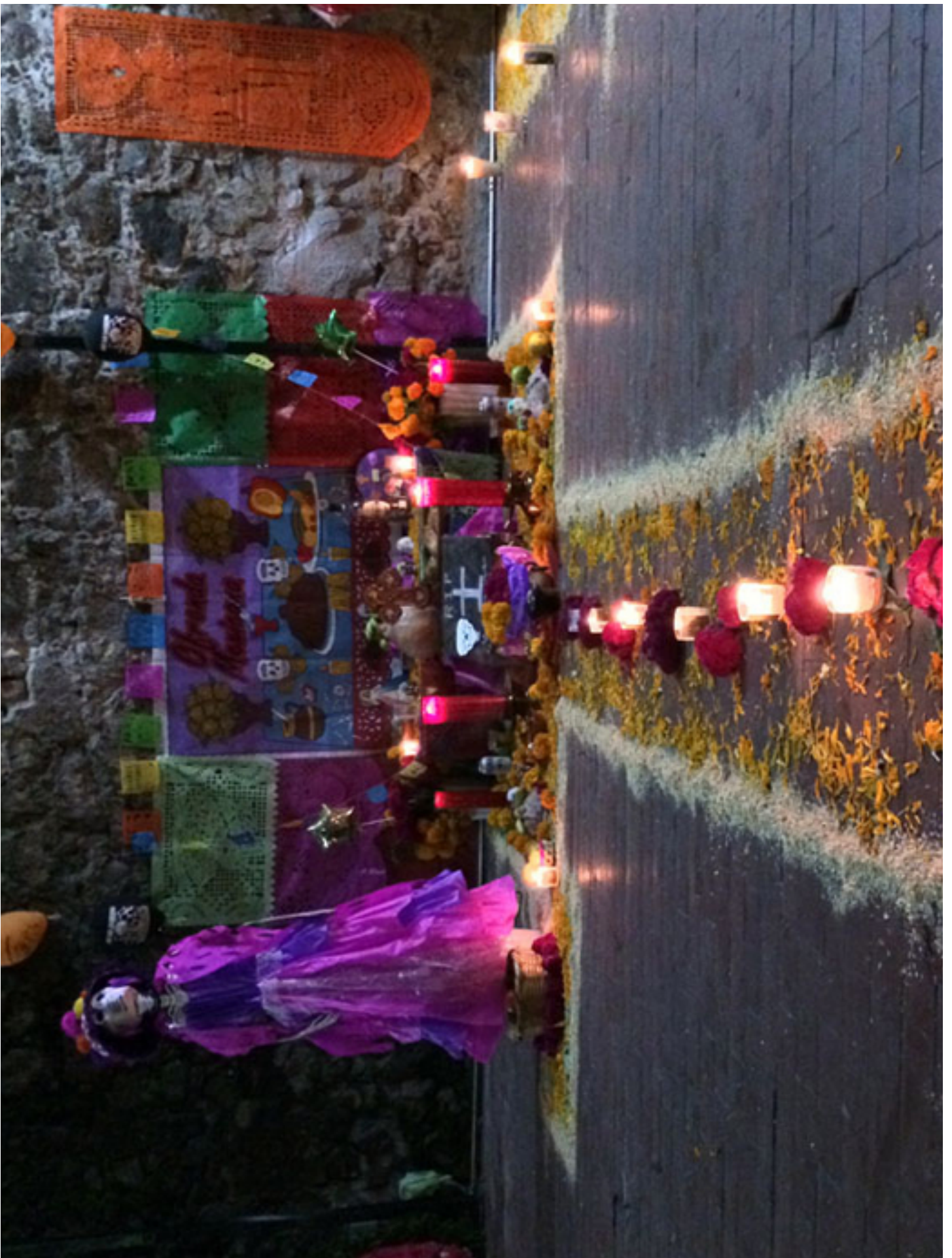




The important thing about Día de los Muertos is that it is a celebration to honor, remember and celebrate the ancestors and loved ones who have passed away.

Día de los Muertos is an important cultural celebration in Latin America. Not everyone in Latin America celebrates Día de los Muertos. It is most widely celebrated in Mexico, but people also observe it in Guatemala, Ecuador and parts of the United States.

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Día de los Muertos takes place on November 1st and 2nd. It is believed that on these two nights of the year the deceased may return and visit with the living. Many of the practices associated with the holiday are meant to guide the deceased back to the homes of the living, and once there, help them remember the sensations and experiences they had while they lived. For a brief time, the living and the dead are reunited.

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Ofrendas (offerings) are an important part of the Día de los Muertos celebration. Ofrendas are typically built on a flat, table-like surface or constructed as stairs. The items included in the ofrenda vary, but often include a cloth to cover the altar, photos of the deceased, the favorite foods of the deceased, and small mementos to commemorate the memory of those who have passed away. Some refer to ofrendas as altares, or altars, but these are not altars for worshipping, only remembering and honoring the deceased.

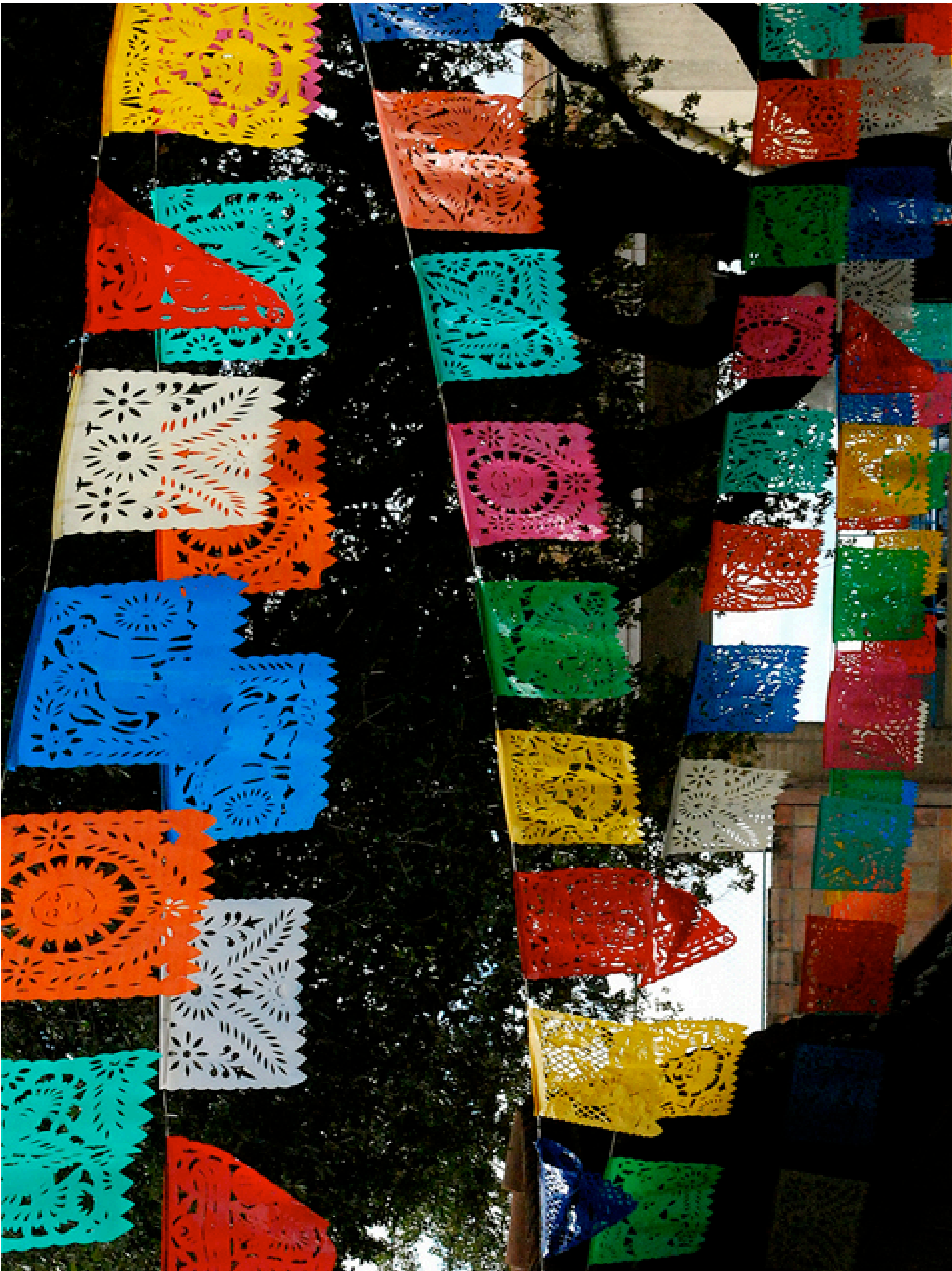
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Salt, water, copal and cempasúchitl flowers (marigolds) are also traditional items often placed on and around the ofrenda. The salt is believed to purify the spirits. The water is to quench the thirst of the spirits from their long journey. The copal rises like smoke, giving the air a sweet scent. The cempasúchitl flowers with their bright colors and unique scent form a path to guide the spirits home.

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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. Specific color schemes are tied to each celebration. Pink, purple and orange are typically used to decorate for Día de los Muertos.

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Sugar skulls, also known as *alfeñiques*, are a traditional folk art from Mexico used to celebrate Día de los Muertos. Sugar skulls are colorfully decorated with a variety of materials including icing, sequins, and brightly colored tin foil. Families either make their own or buy them in village markets to adorn their *ofrendas*.

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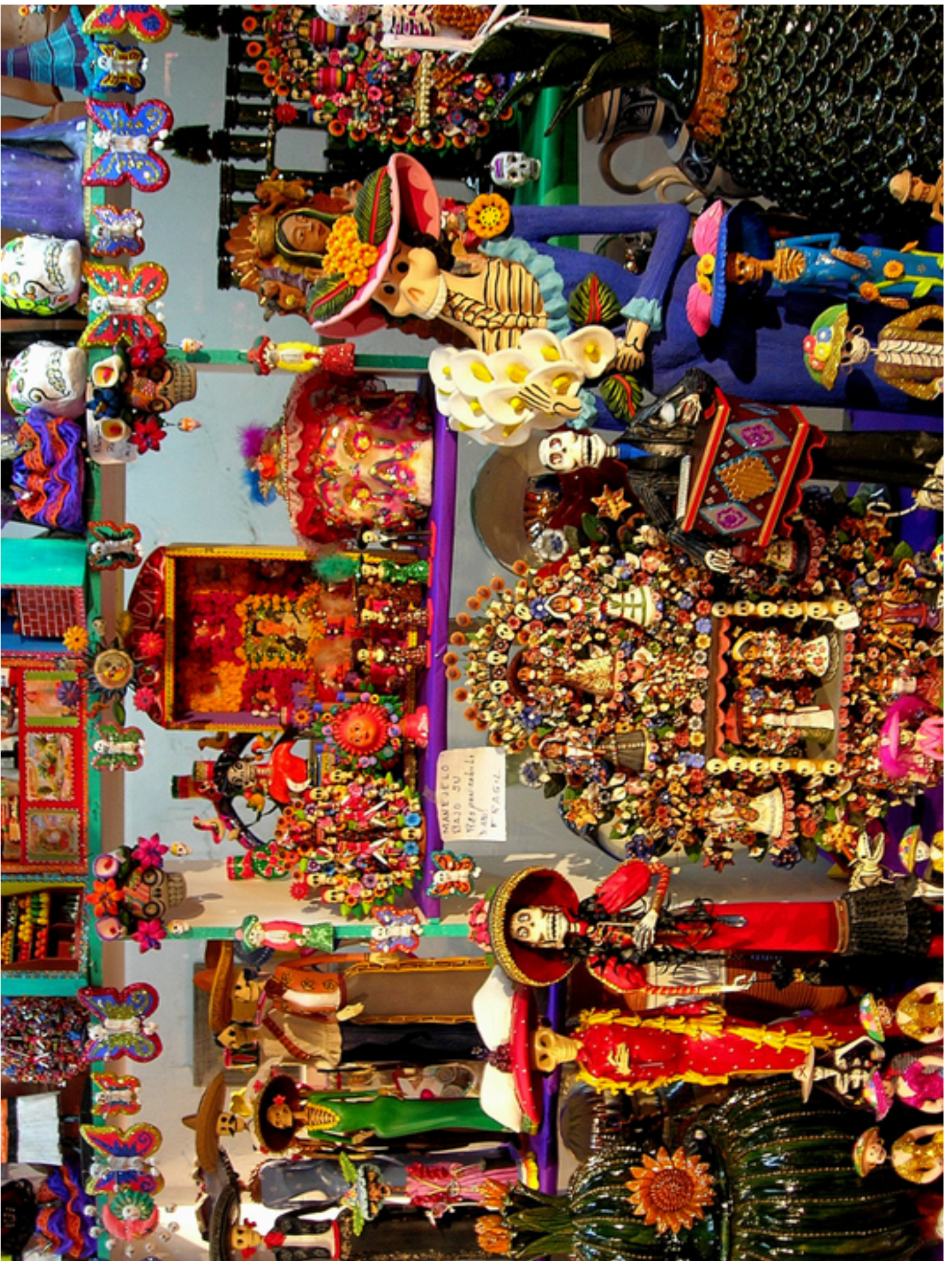
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Pan de muerto, or bread of the dead, is a traditional sweet bread made during Día de los Muertos. It is often made in a circular shape, like a bun, and decorated with bone shaped pieces. Some place it on the ofrenda. It is also eaten at the gravesite or ofrenda of the deceased.

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Skulls and skeletons (calacas in Spanish) are important icons or symbols of Día de los Muertos. These are not sad or scary, but created playfully and colorfully. They are meant to symbolize the cycle of life and our mortality. People will place the skulls and skeletons on their ofrendas, at gravesites, and in windows. Some people even paint their faces to resemble a skull.

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Día de los Muertos, once unknown to in the majority of the U.S., is now celebrated in communities across the country. In addition to honoring one's own deceased family and friends, it is a way to honor popular Latino icons, like Frida Kahlo or Cesar Chavez. It also honors the growing demographic of Latinos in the U.S. Many public ofrendas, museum exhibits, and local events commemorating the dead call attention to issues of social and political importance directly related to the deaths of Latinos.

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