

# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

## K-12 EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



PRODUCED BY THE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO  
LATIN AMERICAN & IBERIAN INSTITUTE





## LATIN AMERICAN & IBERIAN INSTITUTE

Because of the geographic location and unique cultural history of New Mexico, the University of New Mexico (UNM) has emphasized Latin American Studies since the early 1930s. In 1979, the Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) was founded to coordinate Latin American programs on campus. Designated a National Resource Center (NRC) by the U.S. Department of Education, the LAI offers academic degrees, supports research, provides development opportunities for faculty, and coordinates an outreach program that reaches diverse constituents. In addition to the Latin American Studies (LAS) degrees offered, the LAI supports Latin American studies in departments and professional schools across campus by awarding student fellowships and providing funds for faculty and curriculum development.

The LAI's mission is to create a stimulating environment for the production and dissemination of knowledge of Latin America and Iberia at UNM. We believe our goals are best pursued by efforts to build upon the insights of more than one academic discipline. In this respect, we offer interdisciplinary resources as part of our effort to work closely with the K-12 community to help integrate Latin American content materials into New Mexico classrooms across grade levels and subject areas.

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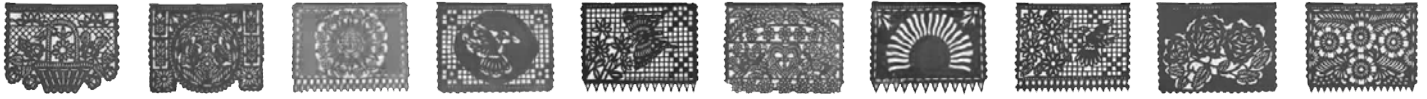
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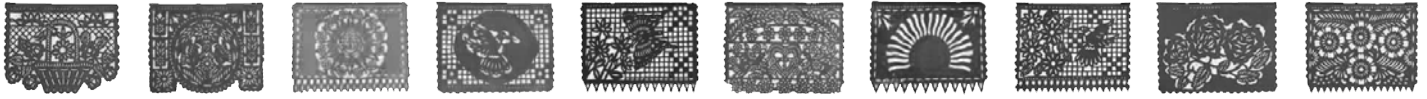


## INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Día de los Muertos is an important celebration in Mexico and other parts of South America that dates back to the Aztec Empire, before the arrival and conquest of the Spanish. In recent decades, it also has become increasingly celebrated in U.S. cities which have significant Hispanic populations. Oftentimes in the U.S., Día de los Muertos is misunderstood as a variation of Halloween, but it is a very different celebration. It is a time during which families remember and honor their loved ones who have died. Death is celebrated as a natural and normal part of life. It is believed that during Día de los Muertos, the spirits of those who have passed away return to visit their family and loved ones who are still alive. Families and communities create altars filled with brightly colored flowers, papel picado, sugar skulls, pictures of the deceased, and favorite foods. Cemeteries are cleaned and decorated. All of this is done as a way of inviting the spirits of our loved ones back to visit with us for one day out of the year.

The following thematic guide was created with the hope that it would encourage increased cultural awareness, appreciation and acceptance of Día de los Muertos. The first part of this guide includes a more in-depth introduction to Día de los Muertos. The lesson plans that follow focus on teaching about Día de los Muertos through various literacy and art-based activities. In the process of participating in these lessons and activities, students will better understand the cultural significance and purpose of Día de los Muertos celebrations.

Unless otherwise noted, the curriculum materials contained in the following pages were developed by Katrina Dillon.



## ABOUT DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

*“The word death is not pronounced in New York, Paris or in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.”*

*-Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1961.*

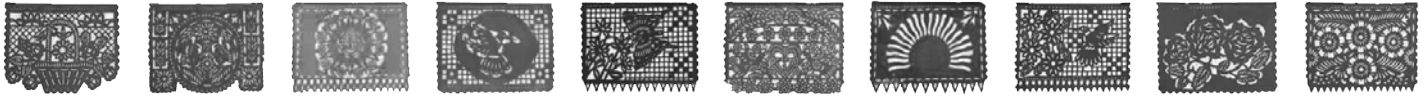
### OVERVIEW

Día de los Muertos is an important cultural celebration in Latin America, with a particularly strong history in Mexico. It is also a meaningful custom for many Spanish-speaking people living in the United States.

Día de los Muertos is a day of commemoration - an opportunity for individuals to come together to focus on their loved ones who have passed away, and to honor, revere, and celebrate their memory. Far from the somber tones of many Western European or North American funeral services, Día de los Muertos is a time of celebration. It is believed that upon 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 - a suitable cause for celebration.

The holiday takes place on November 1 and 2, coinciding with the Roman Catholic practices of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, respectively. In Spanish, All Saints' Day is known as the Día de Todos los Santos and All Souls' Day as the Día de las Animas. Together, the two dates are conceptualized as the Día de los Difuntos or, more commonly, as the Día de los Muertos. For those who celebrate Día de los Muertos, the first day is reserved for recognizing young children who have passed away while the second day is meant to honor all others.

The practices associated with Día de los Muertos are complex and rooted in the intertwined histories of the ancient and modern indigenous peoples of the Americas, the conquering practices of the Spanish explorers, and the more current, contemporary iterations of modern communities. In short, it is a fusing together of cultural practices and religions. Understanding its historical background can lead to a deeper appreciation



for its modern value and meaning.

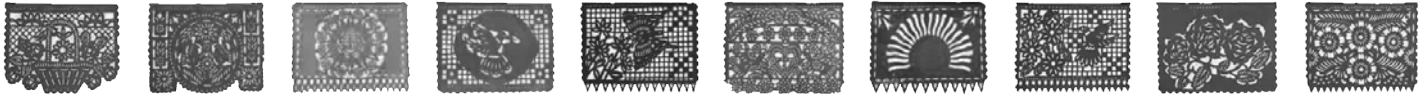
## PRE-HISPANIC INDIGENOUS INFLUENCES

Long before current practices of Día de los Muertos, the southern United States, Mexico, and countries of Central America were home to many indigenous peoples, many of whose practices formed the basis for what we now know as Día de los Muertos. These founding elements were produced in a region known as Mesoamerica, an area that is generally acknowledged to include Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador (FAMSI), though several scholars also cite Nicaragua and Costa Rica as part of its boundaries. “Mesoamerica” is an historical term; there is no such region in existence today. Instead, when scholars refer to Mesoamerica, they refer to a historical commonality of culture and language shared by the peoples of the region. Many of the cultures in the region shared similarities, including the “cultivation of maize, the use of two calendars..., vigesimal number systems (based on the number 20), pictographic and hieroglyphic writing systems, the practice of sacrifice, and similar linguistic and grammatical qualities” (Bridgeman, 2013).

Over the course of centuries, Mesoamerica has witnessed many of the greatest civilizations known in the New World. While there were many notable peoples which together shaped the history of the region, most scholars recognize five major civilizations of Mesomaerica: Olmec, Teotihuacan, Toltec, Aztec (also known as the Mexica) and the Maya.

The Olmec were dominant from c. 1500 to 400 BC in the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico; the Teotihuacan from c. 150 BC to AD 700 in the Basin of Mexico; the Toltecs from AD 900 to 1250 in Central Mexico; the Maya from AD 250 to 950; and, the Aztecs (or Mexica) from AD 1325 to 1521 in the Basin of Mexico. Each of these cultures left an enduring legacy, but it is the religious and spiritual practices of the Aztec or Mexica which are most relevant to an understanding of Día de los Muertos.

The Aztec, although frequently misunderstood as a unified and hegemonic force, originally began as a heterogenous collection of tribes known as the Chichimecs. The Mexica, those who eventually emerged as the rulers, were one of the tribes of the Chichimecs. In looking for a permanent home, the Mexica migrated into the Basin of Mexico, where they encountered hostility from the current inhabitants. In response and retaliation, the Mexica formed a military alliance with a kingdom to the north, Tlacopan, and a kingdom to the east, Texcoco. Through this merging, what has since come to be called the “Triple Alliance,” the Mexica became the dominant force in the region (PBS, 1999). They overcame their “former rivals, and together



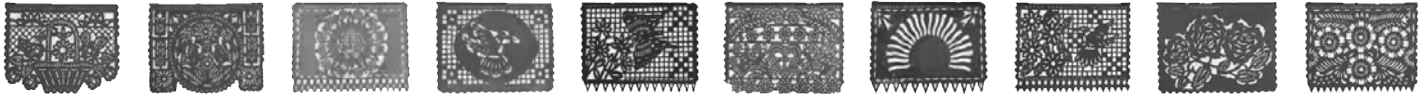
conquered an empire. Eventually they gave their name to the place as Mexico, while their city Tenochtitlan became what we know today as Mexico City” (Moreno, 2007).

Given their late rise to civilization and dominance over other cultures, the Aztec offer the most recent and lasting influence on Día de los Muertos of all the pre-Hispanic, indigenous cultures that existed in Mesoamerica. It is the syncretic mingling of Aztec beliefs and practices, alongside those of Roman Catholicism, that creates the unique practices of Día de los Muertos which are customary today.

Death, which is the central theme behind Día de los Muertos, held a complicated physical and figurative place in Aztec culture. “According to the Codex Vaticanus A, the underworld was made up of nine layers, eight of which were underneath the Earth’s surface. The nine layers were the inhabitable Earth, the passage of waters, the entrance to mountains, the hill of obsidian knives, the place of frozen winds, the place where the flags tremble, the place where people are flayed, the place where the hearts of people were devoured, and the place where the dead lie in perpetual darkness” (Moreno, 2007). The ninth layer was known as Mictlán Opochalocan.

More broadly, the entire region was known as Mictlán, and it was the final destination for all people who had died of natural causes. Other realms of the underworld included Tonatiuh, “the sun in the sky, for warriors who died in combat, people sacrificed to the sun, and women who died while giving birth for the first time; Tlalocan, the rain god’s mountain paradise, for those whose death was caused by water or water-related forces like frost or cold sicknesses; or Chichihualcuauhco, which was exclusively reserved for infants who died while still nursing from their mothers, that is, who had not yet eaten from the earth” (Carrasco, 2012). To proceed through the nine layers of Mictlán took an individual four years, after which time it was said that the soul of person ceased to exist entirely. Regardless of social position, the majority of the Aztec population were destined to journey through Mictlán. Only the few who were able to reach the other realms of the underworld were granted immortality (Moreno, 2007).

According to the Codex Borgia, Aztec culture included specific veintena festivals held in relation to the seasonal cycles, “especially those involving weather, plants, and agricultural activities” (Milbrath, 2013). There were 15 veintena festivals held throughout the year. Those celebrated during the harvest period in August and the subsequent months held much in common with the current practices of Día de los Muertos -- including an emphasis on the duality of life and death and a focus on the fruits and flowers of the harvest cycle.



In sum, many of the practices of the Aztecs have carried forward into the present time - from parts of their cosmological fixation and interest in death, to the seasonal celebrations focused on the agricultural cycle and harvest.

## SPANISH INFLUENCES

By the time that the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs' empire included approximately twenty-five million people - a formidable force with which to defeat invaders. Nonetheless, once Cortés allied his forces with the Aztec's enemies, the Tlaxcala, the Aztecs were eventually defeated and forced to retreat. Tenochtitlán was captured and ransacked by 1521, with the foundations of what is now Mexico City laid over its rubble.

The military conquest was not limited to arms and warfare; rather, it “was quickly translated as the triumph of Catholicism over the Mexican gods” (Pardo, 2006). As Catholic missionaries “fanned out across the land in the wake of the conquistadores, [they] brought a cosmology parallel in some ways to that of the Aztecs. Made familiar enough to be palatable, their ideas came to coexist rather than supplant existing beliefs” (Greenleigh, 1998). Their efforts led to varying degrees of fusion between Catholicism and the pre-existing indigenous beliefs (Geertz et al., 2007).

With the advent of Roman Catholicism, the indigenous people of Mexico were exposed to new ideologies not drastically unlike their own. “For example, they believed in an eternal life in which souls continued to live in an afterworld. The difference was that there was no hell. You were not punished after death. The Aztecs also believed that their great god Huitzilopochtli was born of a virgin goddess. The cross was a sacred sign. It symbolized the cardinal points of direction. The Indians also practiced rites similar to baptism, confession, and communion. A priesthood was dedicated to the administration of religious affairs. Other kindred symbols included temples with altars, statues of various gods, and religious processions. The Spaniards used these parallels to their advantage in their systematic effort to conquer in the name of the cross. During their confrontation with the indigenous cultures, the Spanish sensed the power of the celebrations honoring the dead which were at least 5,000 years old. Finally, they realized that conversion could not obliterate tradition, and certain customs would remain. What eventually developed through this tolerance of the old religion was a fusion of Catholic symbols, beliefs, and rituals with those of the conquered people. The celebration of the Mexican Day of the Dead is the best example of this blending of traditions” (Mújica et al., 1999).





## CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

Today, the practices of Día de los Muertos evince a unique blend of customs drawn from the indigenous peoples of Mexico as well as the Roman Catholic practices brought and imposed by the conquistadores. The modern “attitude toward death in present-day Mexico folk culture is the product of a combination of pre-Hispanic with Spanish beliefs and practices...the fusion of the European cultural patterns with the pre-existing beliefs offers a third and perfectly individualized complex of practices and ideas” (Brandes, 1998).

Día de los Muertos, true to its heterogenous and competing origins, is nowadays celebrated in a plethora of different ways depending on the location, tradition, and the cultural composition of each community. Variations occur, as well, due to the degree to which different communities and regions were exposed and subjected to the colonizing effects of Catholic acculturation (Nutini, 1988). Nonetheless, despite the differences, most communities in Mexico celebrate the holiday. For a brief time, normal activities are suspended in favor of this tradition (Moss, 2010).

Across these communities, there are at least two primary elements of commonality that hold true across the different spaces. The first relates to the timing of the event and the second to the physical creation of an altar.

First, Día de los Muertos is always held on November 1 and 2, coinciding with the agricultural cycle and the combined liturgical feasts of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day. During these days, as well as the preceding and succeeding week, “individuals and families are renewed by remembering their roots and paying homage to those who have departed. For a transient moment, the living and the dead are joined in shared existence” (Nutini, 1988).

The second element of commonality is the creation of an ofrenda, or “offering” made in homage to the deceased. Ofrendas are either built on a flat, table-like surface or constructed as stairs. In both cases, the spaces below and above the ofrendas are considered symbolic, respectively, of the underworld and heavens. The surface of the altar represents the earth in between and the land of the living. The entire construction symbolizes the cosmological universe in which we exist.

Decorations laid atop 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. The purpose is to display on the ofrenda items that were meaningful or attractive to the deceased so that the deceased might want to return and celebrate with the living. Each item is imbued with meaning for the deceased and for the traditions of the holiday; no item is lightly placed without significance.

As the renowned Mexican writer, cultural philosopher and activist Elena Poniatowska once wrote:

“The offering consists of corn, a sacred plant that assures the continuity of life. If the dead was fond of beer, then a dozen bottles of beer are lined up on the altar. There are Coca-Cola altars, Bacardi Rum altars, the luxury of death has no limits: altars of cut-pattern violet tissue paper where the dead can see his photograph sitting among candles, his rifle and his hat, his cartridge belts and his belly band, his dog-if it didn't die of sadness-candy fruit, water to scare away the bad spirits, beans, black mole sauce from Oaxaca, or mole poblano, to his individual taste, casseroles *of rice, or tejocotes in syrup, ate candy, fruits, coconuts from the tropic, appetizers: enchiladas, covered with white dry cheese, onion and cilantro, tacos rolled up very neatly, hot pepper sauce, lard, tortillas, tostadas de pata, totopos, marquesotes, and tamales, because the body has its reasons*” (PBS, 1999).

Ofrendas may be the private construction of an intimate, family celebration or they may be built atop tombs in cemeteries. In the former case, homes are turned into welcome zones to encourage the deceased to return; in the latter case, cemeteries are cleaned, swept, and decorated. In more recent years, ofrendas have also become, at times, large, public displays built for the entire community. In the last case, they serve a dual function as public art for community organizations and schools.

In addition to the food and other memorabilia, there are several components that signify the deeper philosophies about life and death which underlie the celebration. First, the ofrenda may also incorporate the “four essential elements of nature...according to indigenous beliefs...earth, wind, water, and fire. The earth is represented by symbols and aromas of the harvest season...wind is evoked by the use of papel picados (artfully cut paper) fluttering freely in the breeze...water is placed in an open container so the souls may quench their thirst after the long journey; and fire is symbolized by the ever-present burning candles that guide the souls home, and they are also representative of the souls themselves” (Hall, n.d.)

In addition to the four natural elements, “salt is also placed on the altar in containers and serves to purify the spirits. Copal, an incense made of tree resin, is aromatic and its smoky tendrils rise like spirits in the night, further sweetening the air...cepozuchtl flowers (marigolds) form the bright and golden path further guiding the spirits on this night” (Hall, n.d.).



Although the ofrenda is the primary common element across Día de los Muertos celebrations, the holiday is generally celebrated as well with copious food and celebratory activities. Food varies, of course, depending on the region. In Colombia, a traditional soup called sanocho is served alongside beans, fried pork rinds, rice, chicken, and small doughnuts. In Mexico and parts of the US, however, traditional recipes for Día de los Muertos include alfeñiques (sugar skulls), atole (a type of thick hot cocoa made with masa), and pan de muerto (a dessert bread shaped into bones).

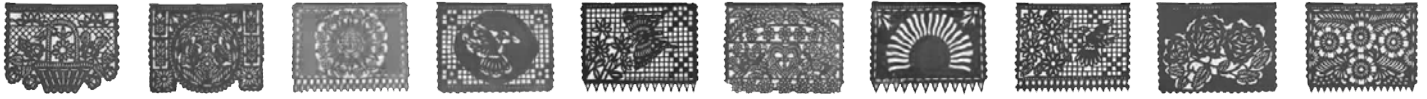
In many communities, the private celebrations of the family are complemented by public displays. Cheerful and irreverent decorations of skeletal figures and puppets, pan de muerto, alfeñiques, and flowers are commonly sold. Alongside the cempasuchitl, baby's breath and red cockscomb make frequent appearances.

Wherever and however Día de los Muertos is celebrated, it is a day to revere and remember the deceased, to make sure they know that they are never forgotten and are truly celebrated.

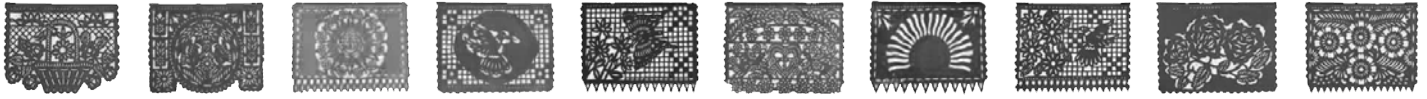
## NEW ITERATIONS AND APPROPRIATIONS

Día de los Muertos is a holiday with significant meaning across Latin America, although, as has been explained above, it remains particularly relevant to Mexican communities and people. “The observance of Day of the Dead traditions throughout Latin America for more than five hundred years makes this celebration a point of cultural continuity for peoples of diverse Latino ancestries living as racial minorities in the United States. Some 40 percent of U.S. Latinos have ancestry from Latin American countries other than Mexico, and as new Latino immigrant groups participate in Day of the Dead activities, they manifest their regional traditions, transforming these celebrations into pan-Latino events. For example, Honduran and Bolivian immigrants have held Day of the Dead activities featuring native foods and dances in Cleveland, Ohio; Chilean immigrants erected Day of the Dead altars in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to remember those who were disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet; and the Guatemalan community of San Rafael, California, hosted a Day of the Dead kite flying celebration at a local cemetery” (March, 2009).

Día de los Muertos, once unknown to US communities, is now “part of the educational curricula of many U.S. schools and universities and is one of the most popular annual exhibits in art galleries and museums. Receiving prominent media coverage because of its colorful rituals, the celebration in its new socio-political context honors the growing demographic of Latinos in the U.S. and encourages moral reflection on issues of political importance. Many Day of the Dead activities honor popular Latino icons (i.e. artist Frida Kahlo,



labor union organizer César Chávez, salsa star Celia Cruz) and a significant number draw attention to sociopolitical causes of death affecting the Latino community (i.e. gang violence, war, labor exploitation). Through public altars, art installations, street processions and vigils commemorating the dead, participants contest the privatization of sadness and frustration experienced by sectors of U.S. society disproportionately affected by an unnecessary loss of life. At the same time, the celebration is a unique medium for teaching about Latino identities and histories.” (Marchi, 2011).



## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

### USING THIS GUIDE IN THE CLASSROOM:

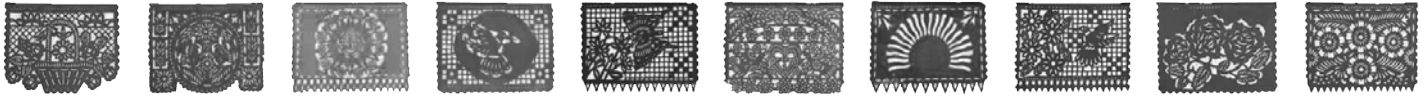
There are numerous ways to introduce this unit and provide an initial foundation of knowledge on which to build throughout the lessons. Below is one option that is an adaptation of a KWL chart which, while slightly different, still serves the purpose of activating prior knowledge and engaging students in a new topic.

### PREPARATION:

Search the internet for images related to Día de los Muertos. Print off various images that are the most thought provoking and interesting. You only need one copy of each image. Glue each image to a large piece of paper—construction paper glued together vertically or long strips of butcher paper. You will divide your class into small groups and provide each group with a copy of an image.

### PROCESS:

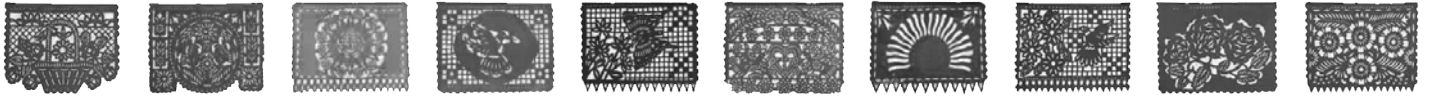
1. Explain to students that they are going to be working in small groups. Each group will rotate around the room to each table. One person will need to be the secretary at each table—they can take turns doing this job. At each table there will be an image. As a group, they will look at the image and discuss the questions “What do you see?” “What do you think is happening?” “How does this picture make you feel?” Then, the secretary will record their answers to the question. You could also put a pad of sticky notes at each table and have students record their own thoughts and stick them on the paper when they’re done, instead of having a secretary. Be sure to explain to students that they will have a set amount of time at each picture—usually about 5 minutes, but to be determined by the teacher. Explain that you will give students a signal at the end of each 5 minutes and students will rotate to the next image at the next table, until they have rotated through all of the images.
2. Place one image glued onto paper at each table group with one marker (and sticky notes if you are using them). Begin the activity, rotating students through each image at 5-minute increments.
3. Hang up or post all of the images with comments. Discuss each image, giving students time to share and respond to what they posted. Keep these posted throughout the unit, allowing students to revisit them, or discuss them as they learn more about the unit and possibly the images.



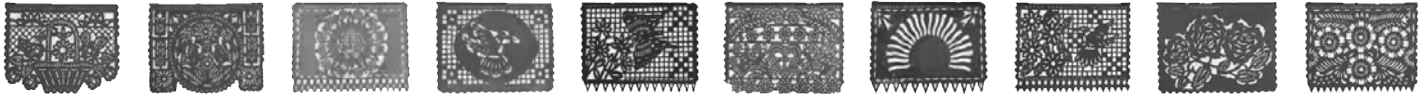
## RECOMMENDED CLASS READINGS:

Once you have introduced students to the topic, there are various ways to proceed. Many of the lesson plans and activities included here require some knowledge of Día de los Muertos. One way to provide this is to read children's literature books about Día de los Muertos each day. Create a large chart that lists the different information and vocabulary learned with each book. After reading two to three books, students should have the knowledge they need to proceed with any of the activities. More books or articles can be incorporated into the beginning of each lesson. Below are some recommended titles. The articles included at the end of the list can be found at the back of this guide.

- *The Spirit of Tío Fernando / El espíritu de tío Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story / Una historia del Día de los Muertos* by Janice Levy
- *A Gift for Abuelita / Un regalo para Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead / En celebración del Día de los Muertos* by Nancy Luenn
- *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead* by George Ancona
- *Days of the Dead* by Kathryn Lasky
- *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith
- *Beto and the Bone Dance* by Gina Freschet
- “The Day of the Dead Ofrenda: A Heartfelt Work of Art” from Inside-Mexico (Article)
- “Misconceptions” by May Herz from Inside-Mexico (Article)
- “Day of the Dead: Celebration, History & Origins” by May Herz from Inside-Mexico (Article)
- “The Day of the Dead Offering” by Oscar Guzmán from Inside-Mexico (Article)



## WRITING ACTIVITIES



# EXPOSITORY WRITING: THE COMPARE AND CONTRAST ESSAY

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will take information acquired about Día de los Muertos and apply their knowledge of either Halloween or Memorial Day to create a Venn Diagram and Compare and Contrast Essay. Oftentimes there is the misconception that Día de los Muertos is the “Mexican version” of Halloween. In order to clarify this, students will produce a Venn Diagram that compares and contrasts the two celebrations. This should reinforce the knowledge that the two holidays are quite different. If your students are familiar with Memorial Day, this may be a way for them to understand Día de los Muertos in light of another U.S. holiday that is more similar than Halloween. One way to extend this activity would be to complete 2 Venn Diagrams: (1) that compares Día de los Muertos with Halloween; and (2) that compares Día de los Muertos with Memorial Day. Then, as a class or in small groups, have students complete a Three-Way Venn Diagram that includes all three celebrations.

This activity can be used at the beginning or end of a teaching unit on Día de los Muertos. If it is used at the beginning, you will need to begin the activity by providing information and knowledge about Día de los Muertos. You can do this through various children’s books, articles, or DVDs that discuss Día de los Muertos. The introduction to this thematic guide lists various books and how they can be used in the classroom. This activity can also be used as a closing assessment for the unit. The expectations for the assignment are easily adjusted to meet the needs of your grade level. Students will go through the different steps of the writing process: brainstorming, rough drafting, revising, editing, final copy and publishing.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

2-4 hours

## VOCABULARY:

- Día de los Muertos vocabulary and concepts
- Compare and Contrast
- Same and Different





## MATERIALS:

- Pen or pencil
- Copies of Venn Diagram
- Paper for drafting
- Final copy paper
- Books, articles, photos, DVDs about Día de los Muertos

## PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce information on Día de los Muertos through children’s books, articles or other resources. Using large chart or butcher paper, keep a running list of information and vocabulary related to Día de los Muertos that the students are learning. This should be kept up throughout the unit to be used as class reference material for other assignments. If you are using this activity as a closing assessment, then simply review the information and reference materials the class has already learned or created.
2. Introduce or review the concept and purpose of a Venn Diagram. If this is the first time your students are using a Venn Diagram, you may want to complete this as a whole group. This can also be completed in small groups, pairs, or individually.
  - In preparation for the Compare and Contrast Essay, encourage students to think about items or information for their Venn in terms of how they relate to both celebrations. For example, if a student writes “Halloween takes place on October 31st”, encourage them to think about how this compares to Día de los Muertos and then write “Día de los Muertos takes place on November 1st and 2nd.” Here you want to guide students to compare ‘like’ things, so that they will then transfer this type of organized or ‘chunked’ information to their essay. Often younger students will want to write something like “On Halloween children go trick or treating, but Día de los Muertos is celebrated on November 1st and 2nd.” Begin modeling how to make appropriate comparisons during the Venn Diagram.
3. Once the Venn Diagram is completed, students can begin to draft their Compare and Contrast Essay. The next steps are largely dependent upon the grade level of your students. With younger students or students who have never done this activity, templates and modeling are key to their success.
4. First, review the purpose of the essay—to discuss how Día de los Muertos and Halloween (or Memorial Day) are the same and different.
5. Next, discuss the format of the essay in terms of number of paragraphs, indentations, and topic sentences. With younger students, this is typically a two-paragraph paper. You may want to create the topic sentences as a class by modeling one broad introductory sentence and then two specific topic sentences. For example: (1st Paragraph) Día de los Muertos and Halloween are two celebrations that take place in



the fall. Even though they are celebrated around the same time, they are very different holidays. . . .(2nd Paragraph) While they are very different, there are some things that are the same (OR that they have in common).

6. From here, students may begin writing their essays. Again, if this is a new essay format for students, model how they should write comparative sentences. For example, Halloween is \_\_\_\_\_, but Día de los Muertos is \_\_\_\_\_. Be sure to point out that they should be comparing or contrasting like things as mentioned above in the discussion of the Venn Diagram. For very young students, you may want to provide a template for the entire essay, including sentence starters and transitional words. For example:

Día de los Muertos \_\_\_\_\_ but Halloween \_\_\_\_\_. On Halloween \_\_\_\_\_, but on Día de los Muertos \_\_\_\_\_. People \_\_\_\_\_ on Día de los Muertos, but on Halloween they \_\_\_\_\_. Last, Día de los Muertos \_\_\_\_\_, but Halloween \_\_\_\_\_.

Día de los Muertos and Halloween both \_\_\_\_\_. They also both \_\_\_\_\_. Both \_\_\_\_\_. Finally, they both \_\_\_\_\_.

7. When students have finished their rough draft, follow your classroom procedure for editing and revising. One approach would be to use the following procedure: rough draft, read out loud to self and revise, read out loud to partner and revise, meet with teacher for final editing and revising. Students then write their final copy on some sort of “special” final copy paper—perhaps paper with a special border then glued onto construction paper. Publish essays by hanging them in a designated area.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS:

K-12 Common Core Standards Addressed

### Reading

#### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.



## Writing

### Text Types and Purposes

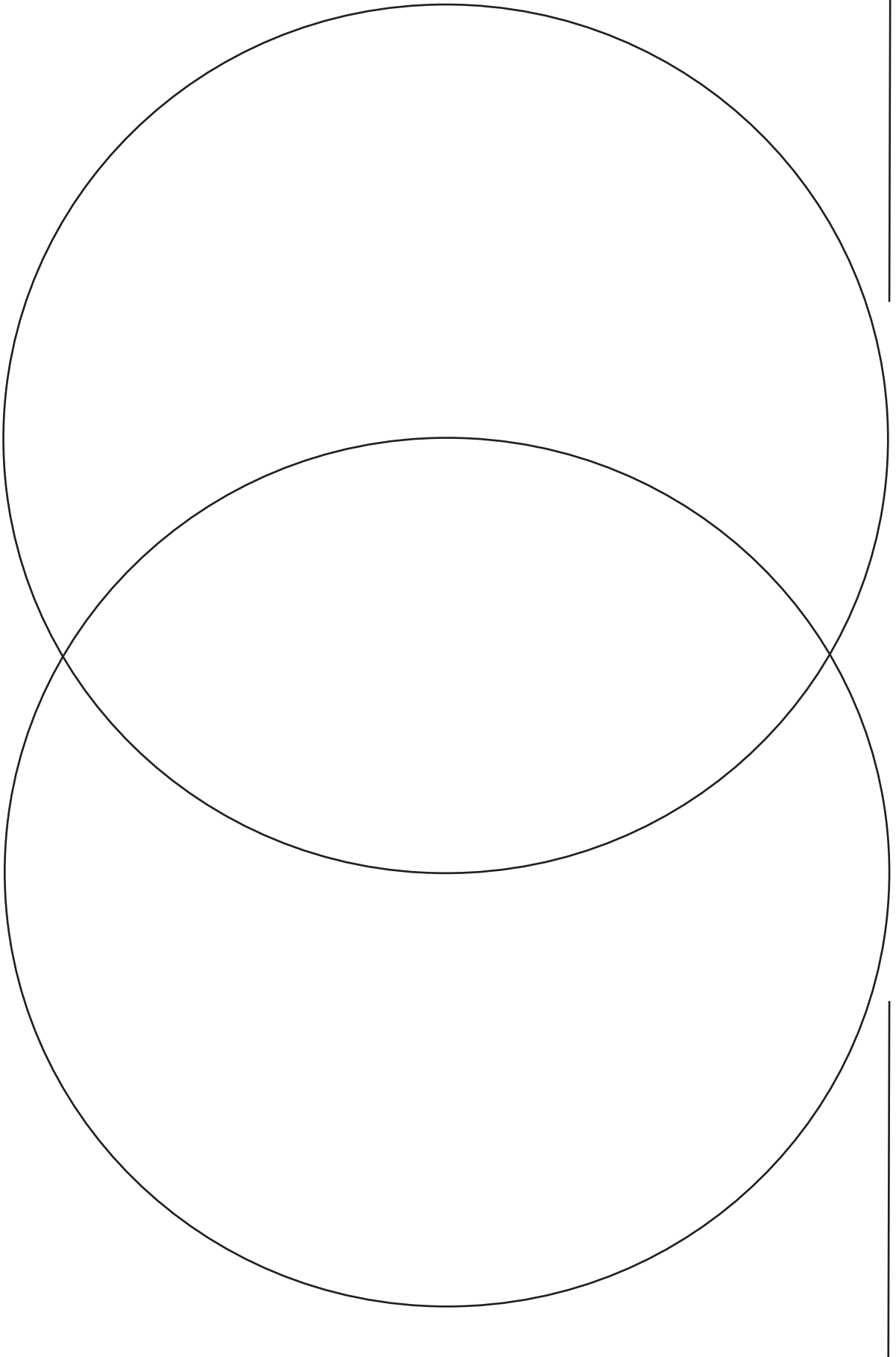
- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

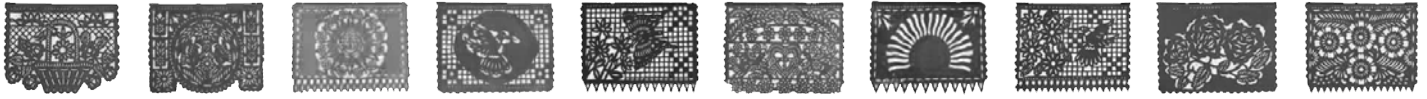
### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.





# DESCRIPTIVE WRITING: A LETTER HOME

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will take information acquired about Día de los Muertos and write a descriptive essay in the form of a letter. Imagining they are living in Mexico during Día de los Muertos, students will write a letter to their families describing everything they experience during the celebrations. They will rely on sensory descriptions to paint a picture, so that the reader of the letter feels as though he or she is actually in Mexico.

This activity is best used at the end of a unit on Día de los Muertos, as students will have to apply much of the knowledge they learn through the unit to write the letter. The expectations for the assignment are easily adjusted to meet the needs of your grade level. Students will go through the different steps of the writing process: brainstorming, rough drafting, revising, editing, final copy and publishing.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

2-3 hours

## VOCABULARY:

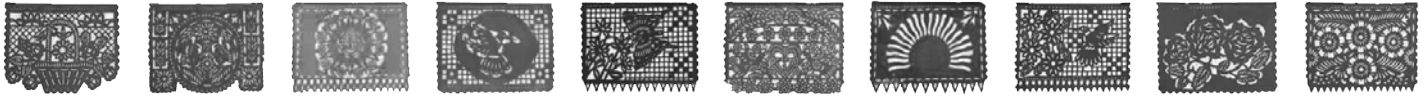
- Día de los Muertos vocabulary and concepts
- 5 Senses
- Descriptive language and imagery
- Letter

## MATERIALS:

- Pen or pencil
- Paper for drafting
- Final copy paper
- Books, articles, photos, DVDs about Día de los Muertos

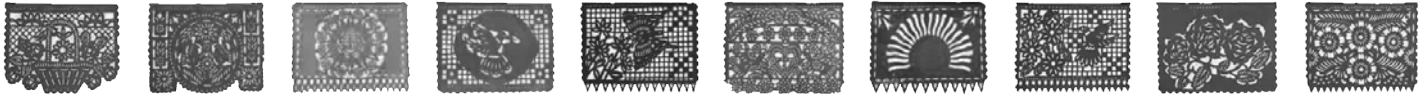
## PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce the assignment explaining to students that they are going to imagine that they are in Mexico for Día de los Muertos. They are going to write a letter to their family describing what this celebration



is like. Review any reference materials that have been created through the unit, encouraging students to use as much of the information and vocabulary they have learned.

2. Explain that the purpose of the letter is to paint a picture of Día de los Muertos in the mind of the letter's reader. They want their readers to feel like they are in Mexico too. In order to do this, they will need to rely on lots of sensory imagery or descriptions based on the five senses. If you need to review the five senses or descriptive imagery, follow steps 3-5 below from the "5 Senses Poetry" Lesson. Otherwise, continue to step 6.
3. As a whole group, review or teach the concept of the five senses.
  - Activate students' prior knowledge by asking them to list all of the five senses. Write these on the board or chart paper for students to refer back to throughout the assignment.
4. Once students have an understanding of the five senses, ask the class to volunteer objects or things related to Día de los Muertos that they could use in the poetry. Write their suggestions on the board or chart paper. This would be a good time to review any vocabulary or concepts already covered. For example: ofrendas, Calaveras, sugar skulls, candles, papel picado, etc.
5. With the vocabulary the class has generated, explain and model how to write descriptions based upon the senses. For younger students, you may need to offer guiding examples appropriate for their ability level. Highlight various aspects of descriptive language (such as adjectives, metaphors, and similes) appropriate for your grade level. Some examples:
  - “The flickering candle light cast shadows on the ofrenda” OR “I see the candles glowing on the ofrenda”
  
  - “The warm atole runs down my throat, warming my whole body, wrapping me in a blanket” OR “I feel the atole going down into my tummy”
  
  - “The smell of the zempasúchil permeates the air, as if it were a path, guiding the spirits to the ofrendas” OR “I smell the zempasúchil in the air
6. Model the format of a letter and the different parts: date, salutation, introduction, body, and closing. Explain that a descriptive letter is similar to a story, in that students are telling the story of their experience of Día de los Muertos. Students are now ready to write their rough drafts.
7. When students have finished their rough draft, follow your classroom procedure for editing and revising. One approach would be to use the following procedure: rough draft, read out loud to self and revise, read out loud to partner and revise, meet with teacher for final editing and revising. Students then write their final copy on some sort of “special” final copy paper—perhaps paper with a special border then glued onto construction paper. Publish essays by hanging them in a designated area, or, since these



are letters, have the students mail them to their families.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS:

### Writing

#### Text Types and Purposes

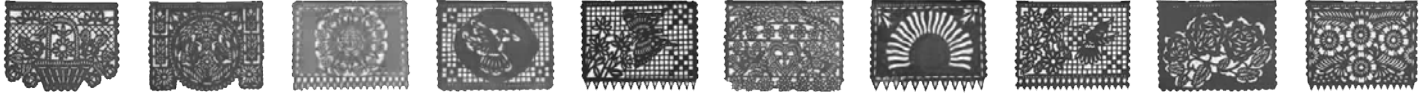
- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

#### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

#### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



# CALAVERAS LITERARIAS

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about and discuss the practice of “calaveras literarias.” Calaveras literarias are a form of poetry that has become quite popular in Mexico during Día de los Muertos. These poems range from being teasing, joking, fun, satirical or critical as the writer highlights a particular quality or trait of the deceased subject of the poem. Initially these poems were meant to make fun of death itself, but later began to focus on politicians, government leaders, and other public personalities. Today they are often composed in ‘honor’ of a specific person or famous personality. They typically are written in metric verse with a rhyme scheme. An example, in Spanish, is included below (source: [http://es.wikipedía.org/wiki/Calaveras\\_literarias](http://es.wikipedía.org/wiki/Calaveras_literarias) and [http://es.wikipedía.org/wiki/Calaveras\\_literarias](http://es.wikipedía.org/wiki/Calaveras_literarias)).

“Mujeres juntas, ni difuntas!  
Dijo la catrina llevándose a su galán,  
Es más fácil que lloremos juntas  
Que éste se pase de patán!”

In translation, the poem loses its rhyme scheme and some of its humor, but a loose translation could be:

“Women together, whether dead or alive!”  
Said la catrina, taking her beau,  
It’s easier to cry together  
Than it is to deal with this jerk!”

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

1-1.5 hours

## VOCABULARY:

- Satire
- Calavera literaria
- Muerte
- Death





## MATERIALS:

- Pen
- Paper

## PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce students to calaveras literarias through examples from the newspaper in Mexico, or examples found on the internet.
  - Examples/information can be found at <http://www.calaverasliterarias.net/> or [http://es.wikipeDía.org/wiki/Calaveras\\_literarias](http://es.wikipeDía.org/wiki/Calaveras_literarias).
2. Discuss the rules of this genre of poetry—rhyming, quatrain, satire, etc.
3. Model how to write this type of poetry by creating one as a whole class.
4. Then, have students write their own calavera literaria as individuals, partners, and/or small groups. An example of a way to display this is found at <http://lluvisnita.blogspot.com/2009/11/celebrando-Día-de-muertos-con-calaveras.html>

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS:

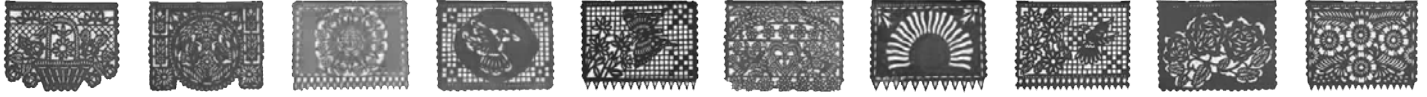
### Writing

#### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

#### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



## 5 SENSES POETRY

### INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about or review the five senses and how they can be used to write engaging and descriptive poetry within the context of studying Día de los Muertos. This activity is best implemented after students have some understanding and knowledge of Día de los Muertos. The expectations for the assignment are easily adjusted to meet the needs of your grade level. Students will go through the different steps of the writing process: brainstorm, rough draft, revising, editing, final copy and publishing.

### RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

### ESTIMATED TIME:

1-1.5 hours

### VOCABULARY:

- Poetry
- Rhyme
- Adjectives
- Synonyms
- Similes and metaphors
- Alliteration
- Descriptive writing
- 5 Senses: Hearing, Sight, Smell, Touch, and Taste

### MATERIALS:

- Pen
- Paper for drafting
- Final copy paper

### PROCEDURE:

1. As a whole group, review or teach the concept of the five senses.
  - Activate students' prior knowledge by asking them to list all of the five senses. Write these on the board or chart paper for students to refer back to throughout the assignment.



2. Once students have an understanding of the five senses, ask the class to volunteer objects or things related to Día de los Muertos that they could use in the poetry. Write their suggestions on the board or chart paper. This would be a good time to review any vocabulary or concepts already covered. For example: ofrendas, calaveras, sugar skulls, candles, papel picado, etc.
3. With the vocabulary the class has generated, explain and model how to write descriptions based upon the senses. For younger students, you may need to offer guiding examples appropriate for their ability level. Highlight various aspects of descriptive language (such as adjectives, metaphors, and similes) appropriate for your grade level. Some examples:

- “The flickering candle light cast shadows on the ofrenda” OR “I see the candles glowing on the ofrenda.”
- “The warm atole runs down my throat, warming my whole body, wrapping me in a blanket” OR “I feel the atole going down into my tummy.”
- “The smell of the zempasuchil permeates the air, as if it were a path, guiding the spirits to the ofrendas” OR “I smell the zempasúchil in the air.”

4. At this point, students are ready to write their own five senses poem.
  - For younger students, you may want to provide a template for them to fill in as they create their rough draft. See the example provided below. You can include as many stanzas as you would like.

I see \_\_\_\_\_

I feel \_\_\_\_\_

I taste \_\_\_\_\_

I hear \_\_\_\_\_

I smell \_\_\_\_\_

I see \_\_\_\_\_

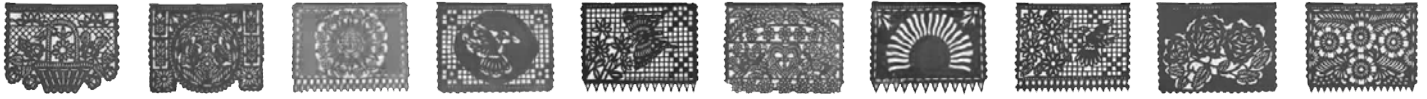
I feel \_\_\_\_\_

I taste \_\_\_\_\_

I hear \_\_\_\_\_

I smell \_\_\_\_\_

- For older students, encourage them to be creative, moving away from the “I feel. . ., I see. . ., I smell. . .” format, and instead incorporating the sensory description into the various lines of their poem. You may even want to have students incorporate a rhyme scheme or alliteration.
- When students have finished their rough draft, follow your classroom procedure for editing and



revising. One approach would be to use the following procedure: rough draft, read out loud to self and revise, read out loud to partner and revise, meet with teacher for final editing and revising. Students then write their final copy on some sort of “special” final copy paper—perhaps paper with a special border then glued onto construction paper. If time allows, ask students to illustrate their poem. Publish poems by hanging them in a designated area. You may also want to create a class book of their poetry.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

### K-12 Common Core Standards Addressed:

#### Reading

##### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

##### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

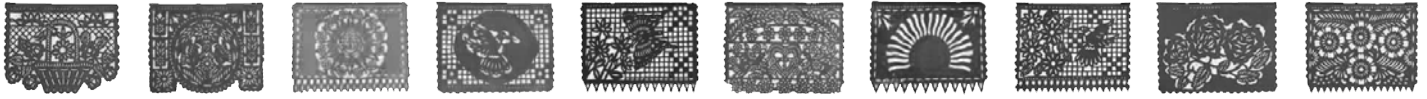
#### Writing

##### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

##### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



# CALAVERAS AND CONJURING WITH WORDS

## AKNOWLEDGMENT

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## BACKGROUND

The altar or ofrenda tradition of Dia de los Muertos builds a bridge for the dead to travel between this world and the next. Family and friends place food, drink, objects, photographs, and personal items of the deceased on the altar to entice them to return. The powerful smell of marigolds makes a kind of aromatic trail leading the departed back. This tradition is meant to be welcoming and fun, not frightening. It is done with love, respect and sometimes humor.

## POEM

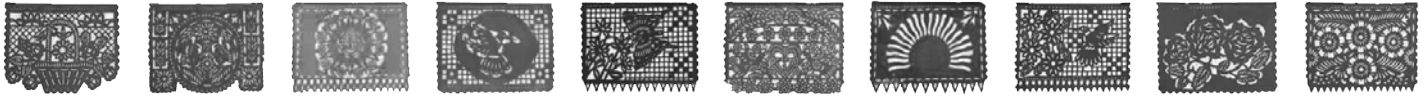
What the altar does with physical items, we can do with words. We are calling these “conjuring” poems, because the idea is to create such a strong sense of the person through the details in the poem, that they, in a sense, come back. The magic of the words, the details of speech, physical description and thought, bring these characters to life.

Definition of *conjure*:

2 a : to summon by or as if by invocation or incantation b (1) : to affect or effect by or as if by magic (2) : IMAGINE, CONTRIVE -- often used with up <we conjure up our own metaphors for our own needs -- R. J. Kaufmann> (3) : to bring to mind <words that conjure pleasant images> -- often used with up <conjure up memories>

## WORKSHEET FOR CONJURE POEM:

- Select the person who has died to whom you want to address your poem
- Write down a smell or scent you associate with this person
- Name a food or drink or taste of something they loved to eat or drink



- Write down a sound you associate with them. This can be music or the sound of them hammering or sweeping or chopping in the kitchen, a car horn, a whistle, a laugh, a cough, anything
- Remember a favorite article of clothing, a sweater, a pair of shoes they always wore/ Write those down.
- Was there a favorite saying they had? Something you associate with them, a nick name, a way of teasing? How would they greet you?
- What would you say to them if they came back? What might they say to you?
- What activity might you do together? Who else, if anyone, would join you?

## STARTING TO WRITE:

- You might think of this as an informal letter to this person. Address them by name (e.g., Tio Manuel). Or a nickname or term of endearment like Grammy.
- Some possible starts are “When you come back....” or a direct appeal, “Come back...”
- The memories and details from their lives are what you are offering as the lure to bring them back. Let them know what will happen if they return.

## SAMPLE POEMS

### 1

For you, Grammy, I put your false teeth in a glass of water  
next to the jewelry box with the dancing ballerina on top,  
and inside, those green glass earrings that I bought you at Uncle Tony’s church rummage  
sale,

and which you wore on Christmas.

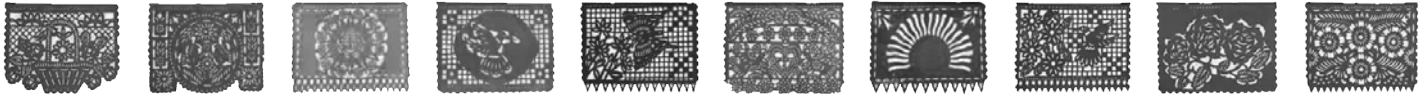
Underneath, I put our aprons, the matching ones with red rick rack trimmed pockets,  
and all my Barbie doll dresses you sewed from Dad’s ties.

I sprinkled a little of that pink face powder you used  
and added some vanilla and molasses.

I set out African violets, and dahlias big as lions’ heads, and Christmas wreaths made of  
coat hangars and Kleenex.

For dinner we’ll have beef stew with celery and just a little flour to thicken the sauce.  
Can you see them, Grammy?

The candles look pretty behind the orange carrot Jell-O molds.



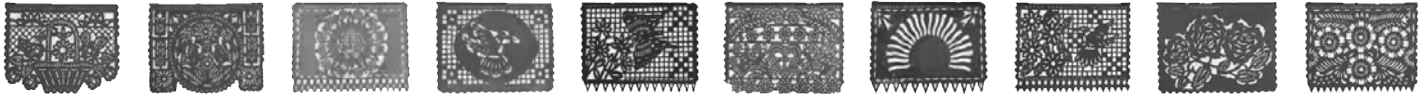
And if you come,  
I promise I'll sit up straight,  
just like you always told me to.

## 2

Aaliyah,  
I don't know much about you  
I'm not even sure how to spell your name  
But I like your music.  
You died in a plane crash- what was that like?  
If you come back will you wear a short tight shirt or  
that bra made of silver chains?  
What song will you sing? I miss you.  
Do you  
miss anyone?  
I don't know what perfume you wear but  
when you come back  
will you smell like heaven

## 3

Hey, Grumpy  
If you come back will you put on that guy cologne, the one with the fresh smell  
like cool water.  
We'll leave out a pizza for you  
Plain, just with pepperoni and cheese  
and a cold 40 bottle of Mickies.  
You were so sensitive ... we'll talk about your girlfriend Tania.  
Do you still want to go back with her?  
She's somewhere,  
who knows where.  
I'll try not to get you mad- the way you do when someone insults your friends.  
When you see us Julio, will you go "OH" in that breathy voice  
And say hello with the accent on the O?  
You can wear your Dallas Cowboys' jersey( I forgot the number)?



And your dark baggy jeans  
and the blue handkerchief hanging out of the pocket  
and your plain super white super clean Nikes.  
You are my good friend, Julio  
I can talk to you like no one else.  
Come back Julio,  
you can imitate Mr Capone  
and goof around  
and even though I know your jokes are stupid.  
You can make me laugh.

#### 4

Angel, when you come back  
I bet you'll come back on your black cruiser  
moving slowly  
with a lit sweet swisher cigar in your mouth  
you'll be wearing a black buttoned up shirt with a collar  
But only buttoned up half way  
and baggy jeans  
and your iPod will be playing Tupac loud enough so everyone can hear-  
When you come back, Angel  
me you and Hans will skate together out at UCSB  
and maybe the skate park.  
We'll just ride around  
you'll say "Whas up den?"  
and I'll tell you  
we are good friends  
like I meant to do  
I guess I did  
when you were here.





# ACROSTIC POETRY

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about and discuss the practice of acrostic poetry within the context of studying Día de los Muertos.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

1-1.5 hours

## VOCABULARY:

- Satire
- Muerte
- Death
- Poetry
- Rhyme
- Adjectives
- Synonyms
- Alliteration

## MATERIALS:

- Pen
- Paper
- Individually-made calaveras (see lesson on calaveras in this thematic unit) OR images of typical Día de los Muertos objects (i.e. calaveras, sugar skulls, ofrendas, catrinas, etc.)

## PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce students to the idea of an acrostic poem if they are not familiar with it. Acrostic poems can be adapted for the grade level of students. For younger students one word descriptions for each letter of the word “calavera” may be sufficient. For older students, you may want to require a sentence or multi-word description, a rhyming scheme, or even alliteration. You could also encourage students to incorporate some of the satire that is a part of the “calaveras literarias” (Día de los Muertos poetry



often found in newspapers in Mexico; see lesson included in this thematic unit). If acrostic poetry is a new concept, you may want to create one as a class, in order to model the activity for students. Be sure to connect the activity to literacy content appropriate for your grade level, highlighting the meaning and use of adjectives, synonyms, rhyme scheme, and alliteration.

2. Then have students write an acrostic poem. The subject of this poem can vary. If students have completed one of the activities where they create their own calavera, then they can write a poem describing the calavera they've created. If students are creating their own individual ofrenda (see lesson included in this thematic unit) or contributing to a class ofrenda, they can write about whatever or whomever they have chosen to honor or remember. This poem can also be used to describe any of the typical objects included in a Día de los Muertos celebration (i.e. calaveras, sugar skulls, ofrendas, catrinas, etc.)

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS:

### K-12 Common Core Standards Addressed:

#### Reading

##### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

##### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### Writing

##### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

##### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



# WHAT MY CALAVERA DID AT NIGHT

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about calaveras in the context of Día de los Muertos and create their own stories, in the process learning about multi-paragraph paper writing.

This unit is adapted from a unit that would generally take place in January, tied to the book *Snowmen at Night*. In this story, a boy imagines what his snowman does at night while he's sleeping. Students would make their own very large snowperson, then write a story about what their snowperson did at night. For younger students, this was a project where they would learn how to use a brainstorming web for a multi-paragraph paper, with each section of the web representing a different paragraph. For older students, it was practice for skills that they'd already learned. Hesitant writers were often excited and engaged by creating their snowperson before any of the writing began.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for elementary and middle school.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

2-3 hours

## VOCABULARY:

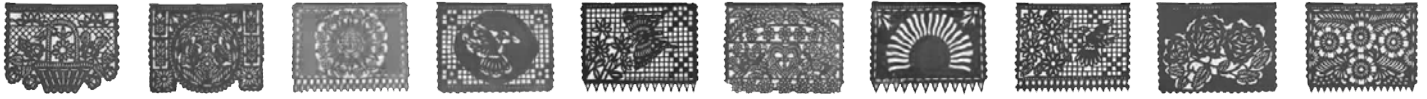
- Calaveras

## MATERIALS:

- Pen
- Paper
- Individually-made calaveras (see lesson on calaveras in this thematic unit) OR images of typical Día de los Muertos objects (i.e. calaveras, sugar skulls, ofrendas, catrinas, etc.)

## PROCEDURE:

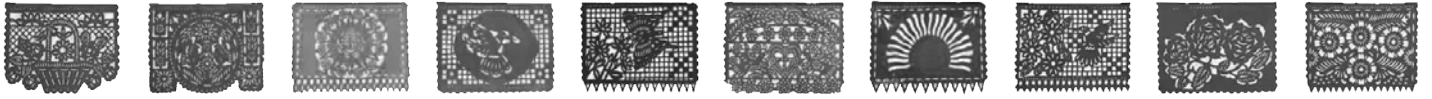
1. To adapt this lesson for Día de los Muertos, instead of snowmen, students will create calaveras. This guide has a number of patterns for calaveras. If time permits, it would be most engaging to use the over-sized one found on pages 42-47; smaller, perhaps more feasible options are on pages 48-50. Stu-



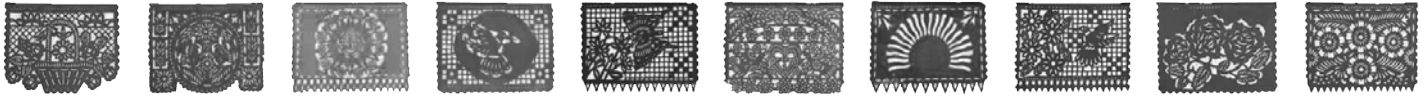
dents seem to love anything that's big. Below are two pictures to give you an idea of what students could make.

2. As students cut out the different parts of the skeleton, encourage them to brainstorm how they're going to decorate or design their calavera. Provide as many different types of art materials as are available—construction paper, crepe paper, tissue paper, sequins, glitter, yarn, fabric, ribbon, etc. Allow students to be as creative as they want in decorating their skeleton.
3. Once the students are ready to begin writing, explain to them that they're going to write a story about what their calavera did the night of Día de los Muertos. This will require students to have some background information on the celebration and an understanding of what people do when they observe Día de los Muertos. From here you can use whatever writing process you're teaching your students. One approach would involve starting with brainstorming and creating the web, then moving on to rough drafting, editing, revising, and creating a final copy.
4. It may be beneficial to give students the first few sentences from the book to start their story. Adapted for Día de los Muertos, you could use the following sentences: "One fall day, I made a calavera very long and loose (you could substitute other adjectives). The next day when I saw him (or her), he was not the same at all. His hat had slipped, his arms drooped down, he really looked a fright—it made me start to wonder: what do calaveras do at night?"
5. Once the stories and skeletons are completed, you can display them in the room both to provide a sense of 'publishing' and decoration for the fall.





## ART ACTIVITIES



# CALAVERAS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The over-sized skeleton template on the following pages is reprinted here courtesy of [www.azcentral.com](http://www.azcentral.com).

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

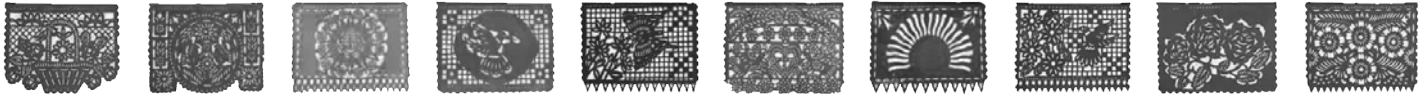
Students will learn about and discuss how the calavera imagery created by José Guadalupe Posada represents the view of death in Día de los Muertos. Students will understand the symbolism of the calavera in Día de los Muertos and will create their own calaveras.

## BACKGROUND

José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) was an “extremely prolific artist, creating about 15,000 prints in thirty years. He spoke to and for the everyday person. Inspired by ballads, native history, and folklore, as well as the political struggle of his day, Posada’s work has inspired generations of printmakers who came after him. He is perhaps best known for his representations of the calavera, the skull or skeleton, popularized in Day of the Dead celebrations on November 1 and 2, when the dead are invited to return to their families for a visit.”

“His popular calaveras were used in publications, and later were sold to the mostly illiterate public on street corners. Posada’s images of calaveras are X-ray versions of humans (and sometimes animals). They are dressed, ready to do their everyday work as soldiers, laborers, cooks, and various other jobs. These skeletal figures are also depicted drinking, eating, and playing musical instruments. They laugh and mock the upper classes, who will be equalized with the peasants in death. Posada’s Calaveras point out that wealth and position do not save one from dying. In the end, no matter how much status and money one has, death takes everyone. These witty and ironic illustrations allowed Posada to make statements that could not easily be put into words. His biting political criticism of the wealthy gave him wide appeal with the laborers and peasants.”

“Posada is remembered not only as a great artist but also, through his work, as a cultural critic. He had a great love for Mexico’s working-class people. He never married; instead, he spent his lifetime making political and cultural statements about what was happening in his country. Grounded in traditional folklore, his over-the-edge depictions of events, both real and imagined, played an important role in Mexican society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, Posada is internationally known, and his work is frequently reproduced.”



(Source: Kristen G. Congdon & Kara Kelley Hallmark (2002). *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary*. Greenwood Publishing Group.)

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

1-3 hours (depending upon length of discussion of Posada, and time given to create calaveras)

## VOCABULARY:

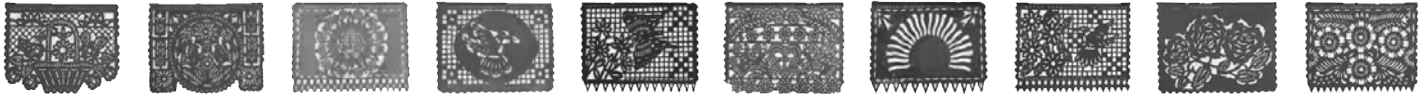
- Satire
- Calavera
- Muerte
- Death
- José Guadalupe Posada

## MATERIALS:

- Scissors
- Glue Stick
- Calavera pattern
- Crayons
- Variety of art materials (e.g., construction paper, tissue paper, glitter, sequins, yarn, etc.)
- Brads (if using Pattern A or B)

## PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce the lesson by asking students what they think of when they see skulls or skeletons.
2. Introduce students to the images of calaveras used in Día de los Muertos through the work of José Guadalupe Posada. Explain that Guadalupe Posada was a well-known artist, illustrator and cartoonist recognized for his representations of calaveras, among other things. Here is a link to an online collection of José Guadalupe Posada's work: <http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm/.landingpage/collection/joseguad> While there are hundreds of images in the collection, the following show his depictions of calaveras and or death: #79, 179, 180, 181, 211, 213, 242, 243, 311 and 312.
3. Discuss how Guadalupe Posada chooses to represent death and dying. For older students, discuss Gua-



dalupe Posada’s use of satire and how his art conveys his idea that death was the great equalizer among the rich and the poor.

- There are multiple calavera patterns and projects included here. You will want to choose one according to the time and resources you have available. Pattern A creates a life-size skeleton in which students cut out the various bones or parts, connect them together with glue or brads, and then create clothes for the skeleton out of various art supplies such as yarn, construction paper, tissue paper, glitter, sequins, etc. Pattern B creates a much smaller calavera that could simply be colored and cut out. Pattern C is a mask that can be colored, decorated with glitter, and cut out. Hand out the calavera patterns to each student. Each student will then cut out and glue or attach the parts of their calavera together. Have materials like construction paper, crayons, colored pencils, markers, fabric, sequins etc. available for students to decorate their calavera. Remind students of the various calavera images they’ve seen to help them get started.
- Display the completed calaveras around the classroom. The masks can be glued to yarn and strung across the room for a great classroom decoration.

## RESOURCE:

Center for Southwest Research:  
 New Mexico’s Digital Collections::  
 Fernando Gamboa Collection of Prints  
 by José Guadalupe Posada, 1888-1944

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Arts  
 Content Standards 1 -5

### K-12 Common Core Standards Addressed

#### Reading

#### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite



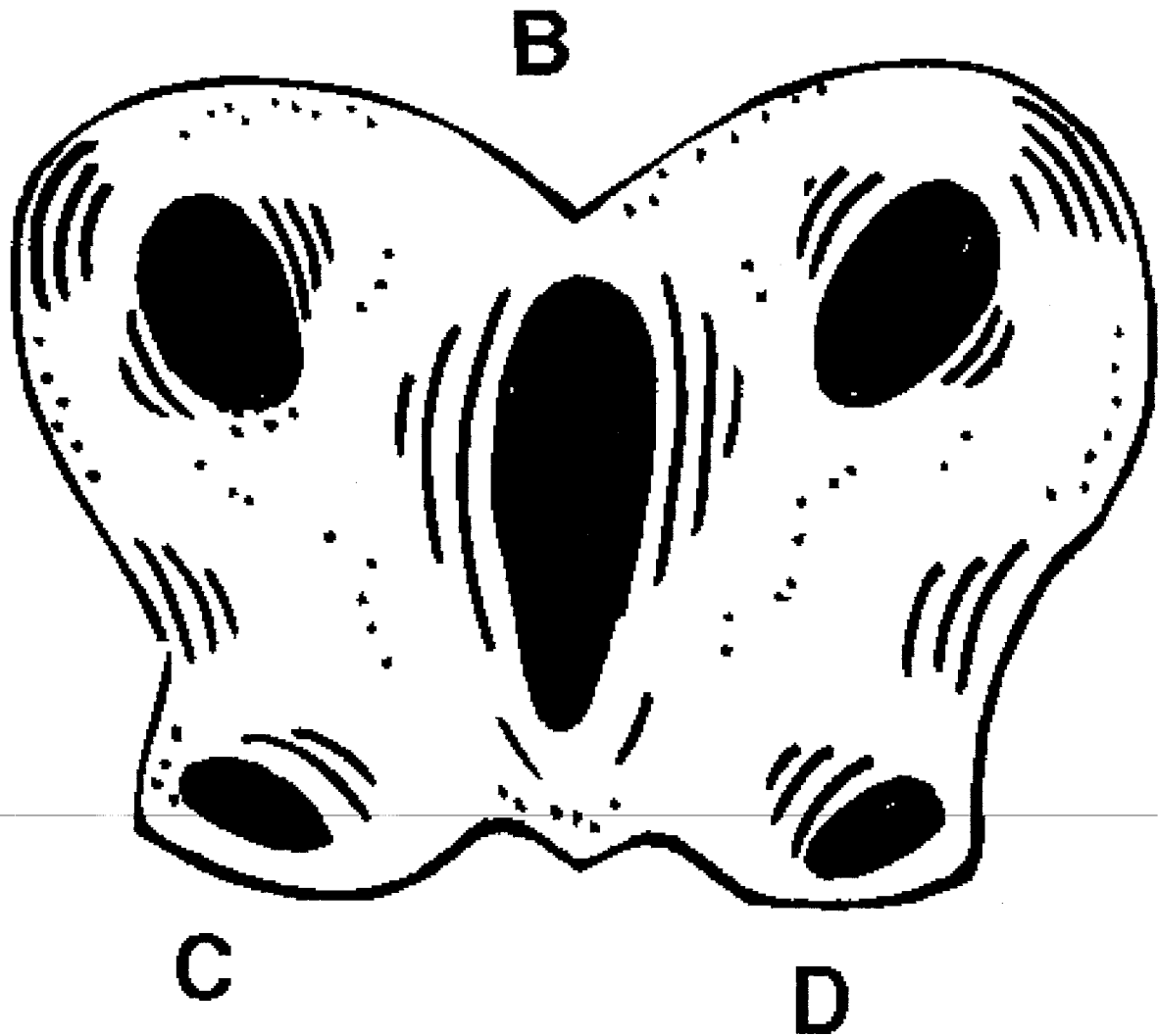
Figure 1.  
 José Guadalupe Posada,  
 “La Calavera de Cupido.”  
 Center for Southwest Research.  
 New Mexico Digital Collections.





specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support

- conclusions drawn from the text.



### **Make A Skeleton Puppet**

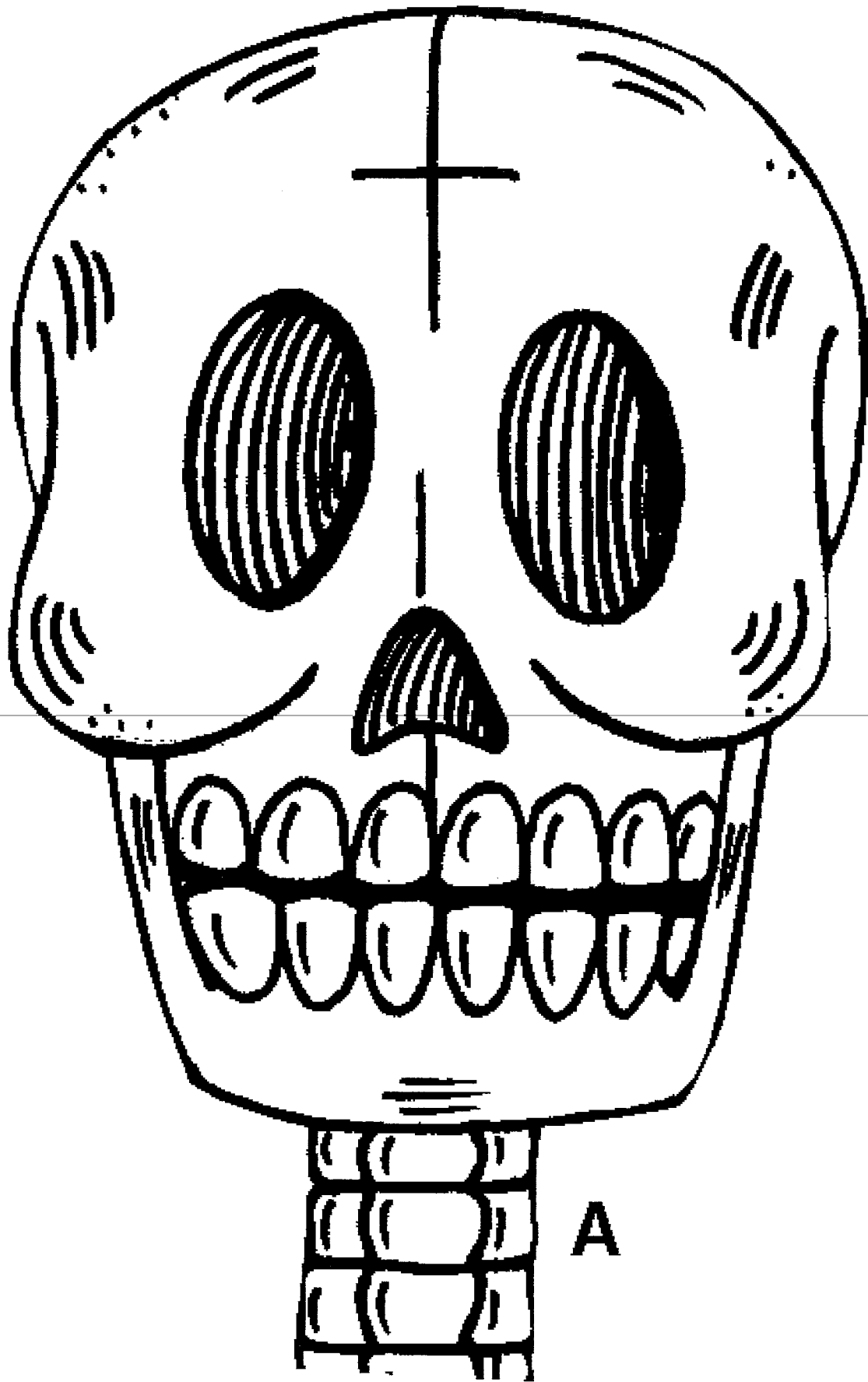
#### **Materials**

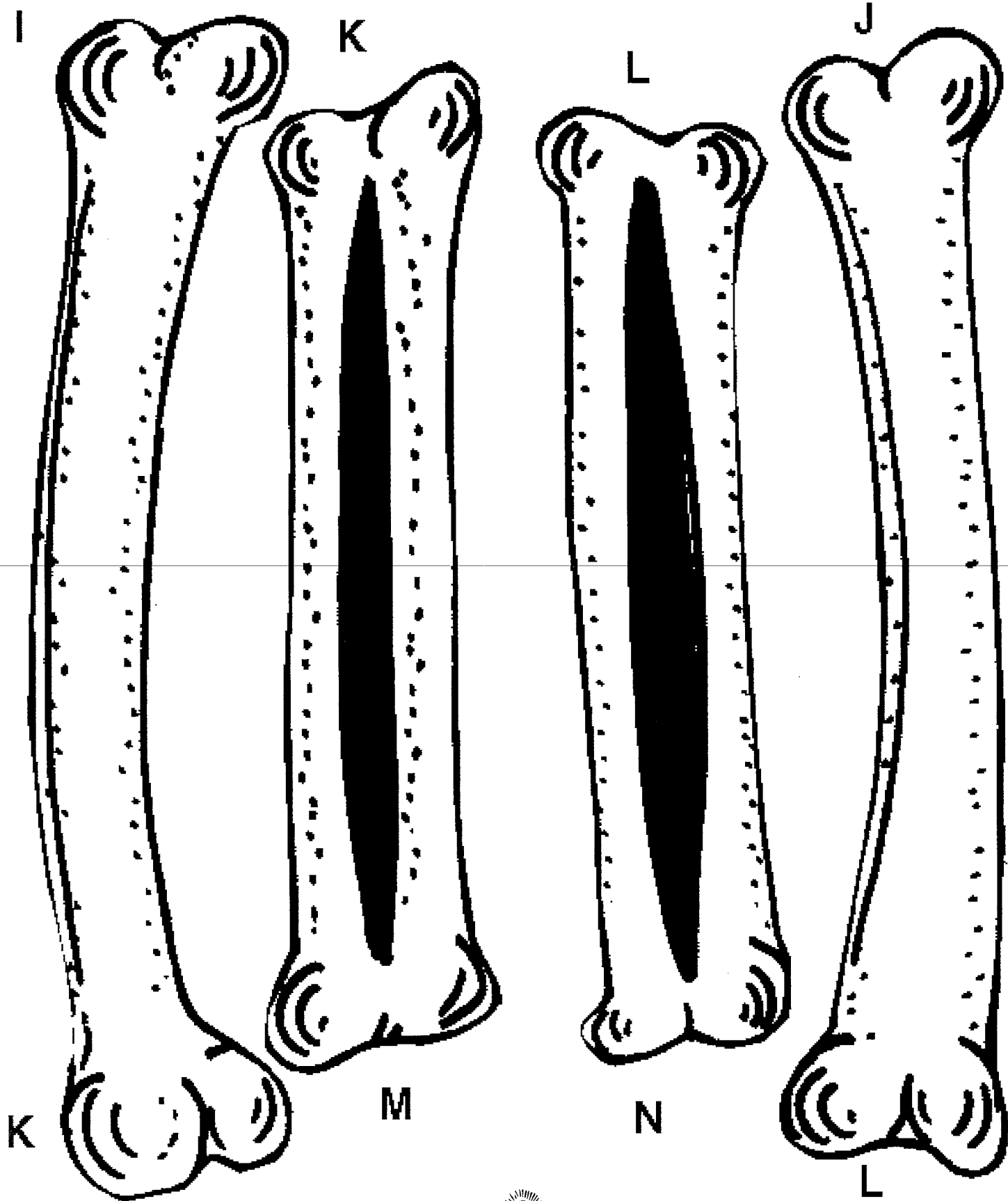
Crayons, paint, markers, scissors, string or yarn, paper punch, glue, glitter, buttons, tissue paper, feathers etc.

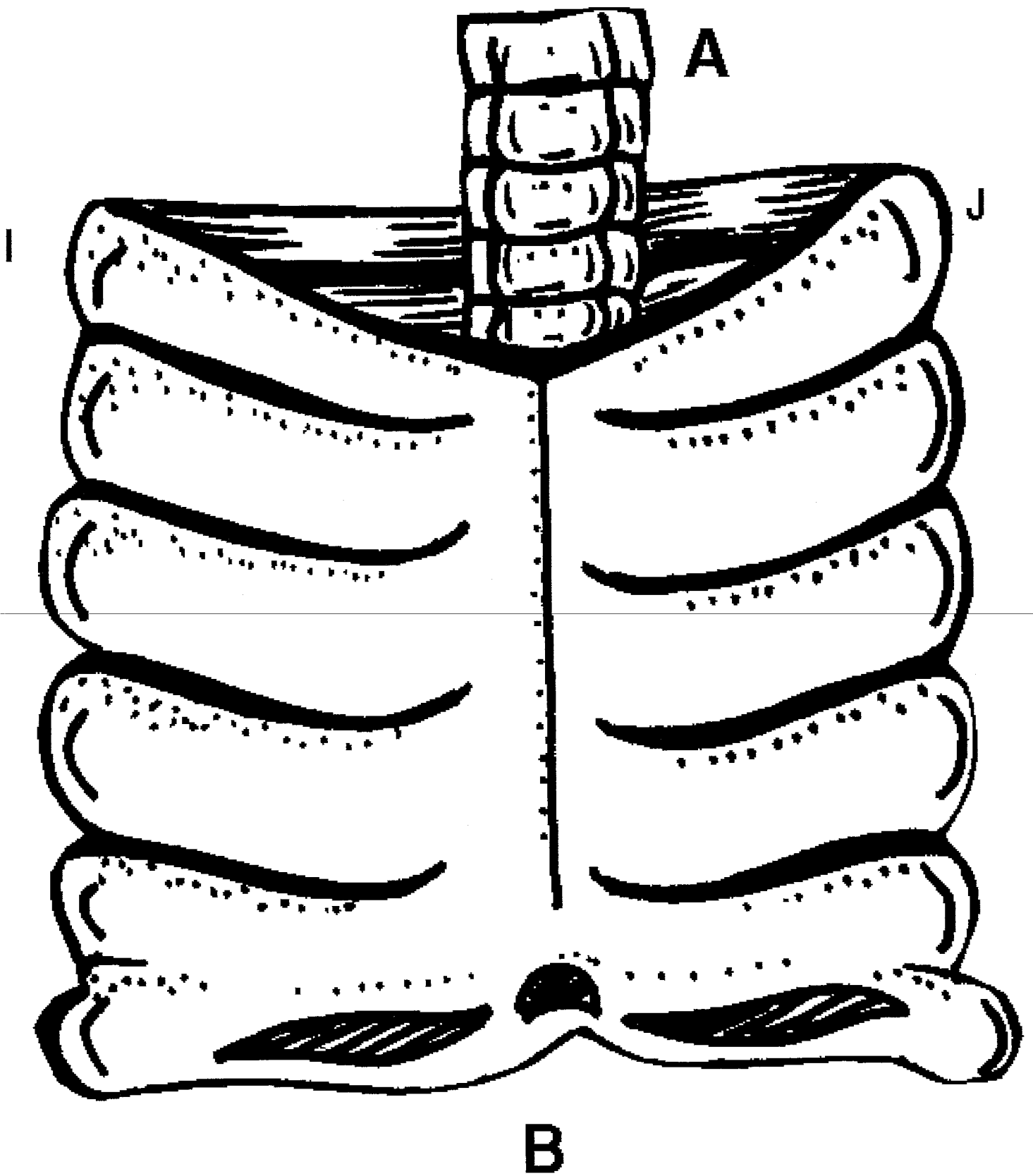
#### **Instructions**

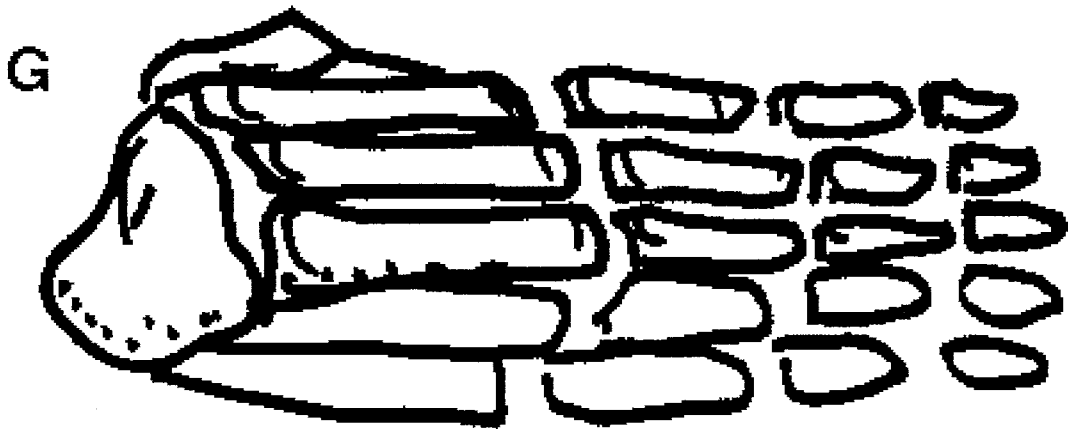
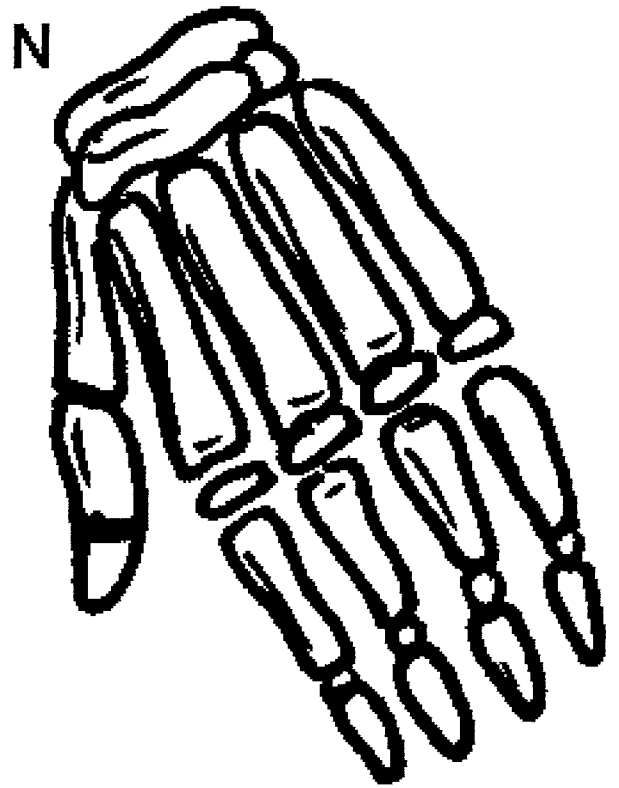
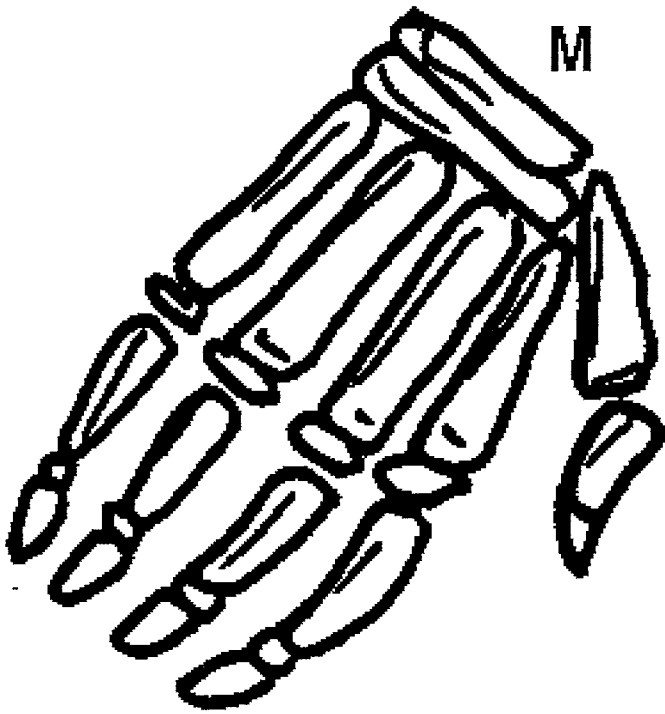
Print out the skeleton parts. Punch holes in the bones next to letters (each leg and arm bone will have a hole at either end, etc.). Cut out all of the parts. Color and decorate with glitter, paints, feathers etc. as you like. Let dry and tie bones together matching the letters (string will go through both B holes and both C holes, for example).

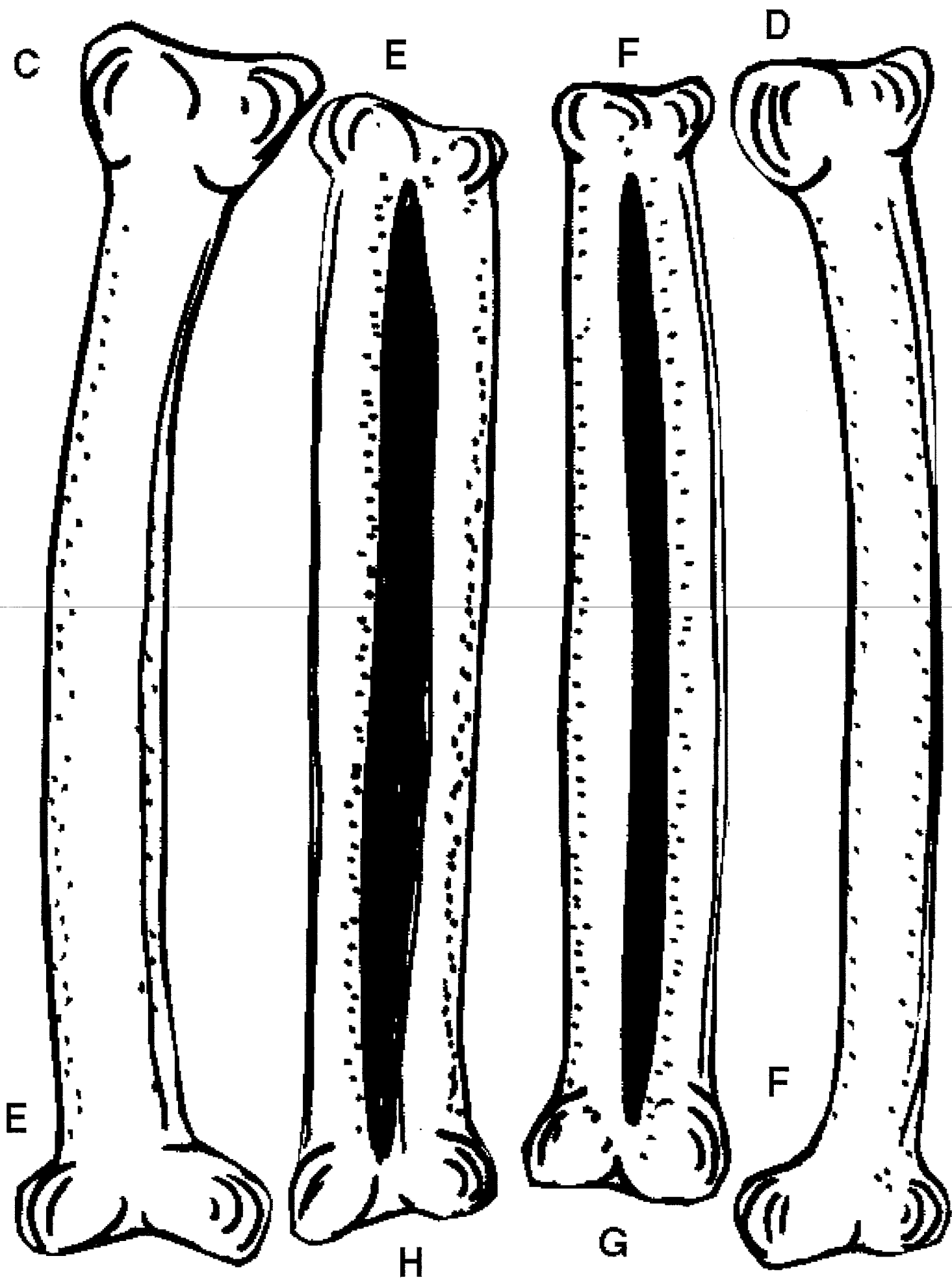
Once the skeleton is assembled, you can move him about as you like.

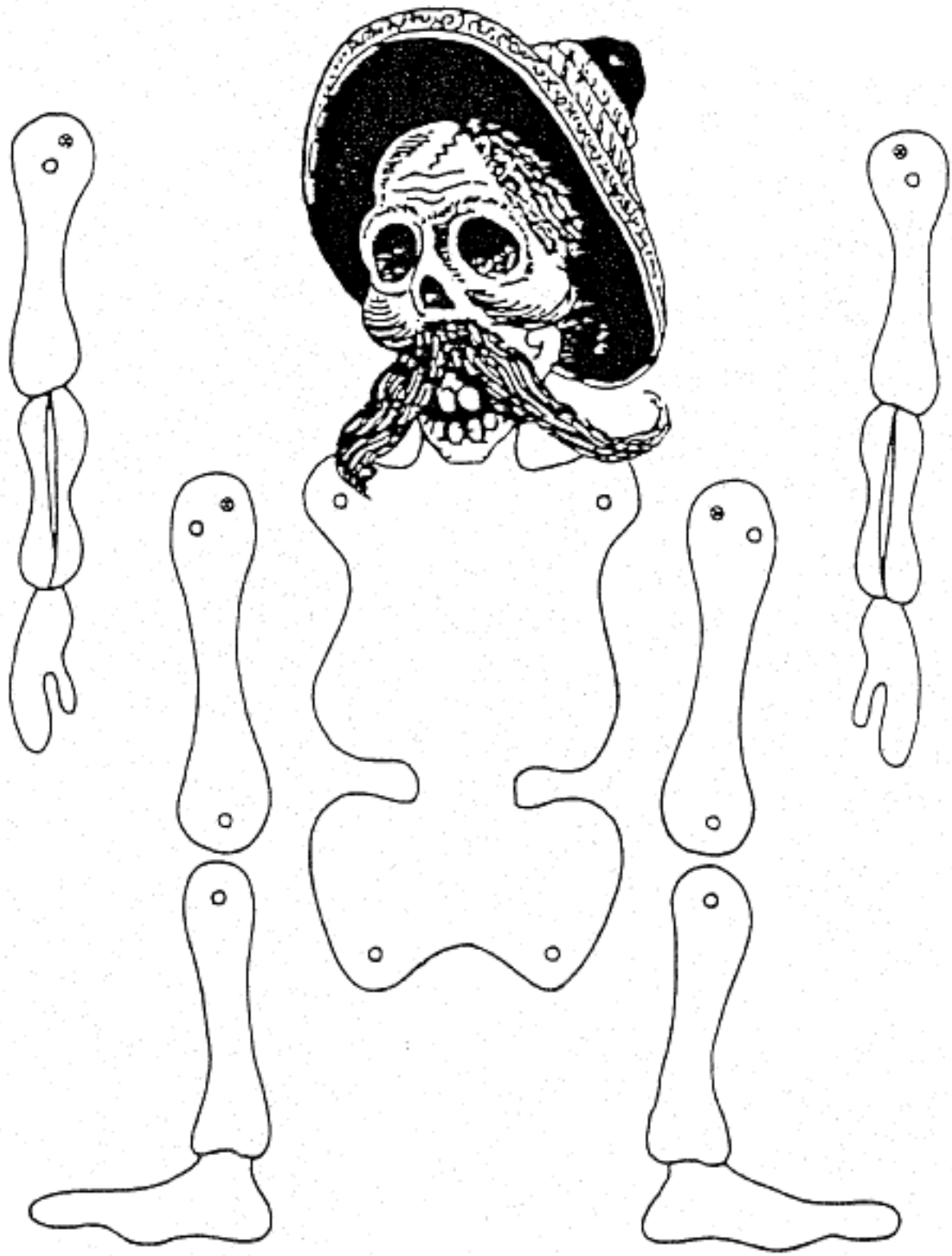




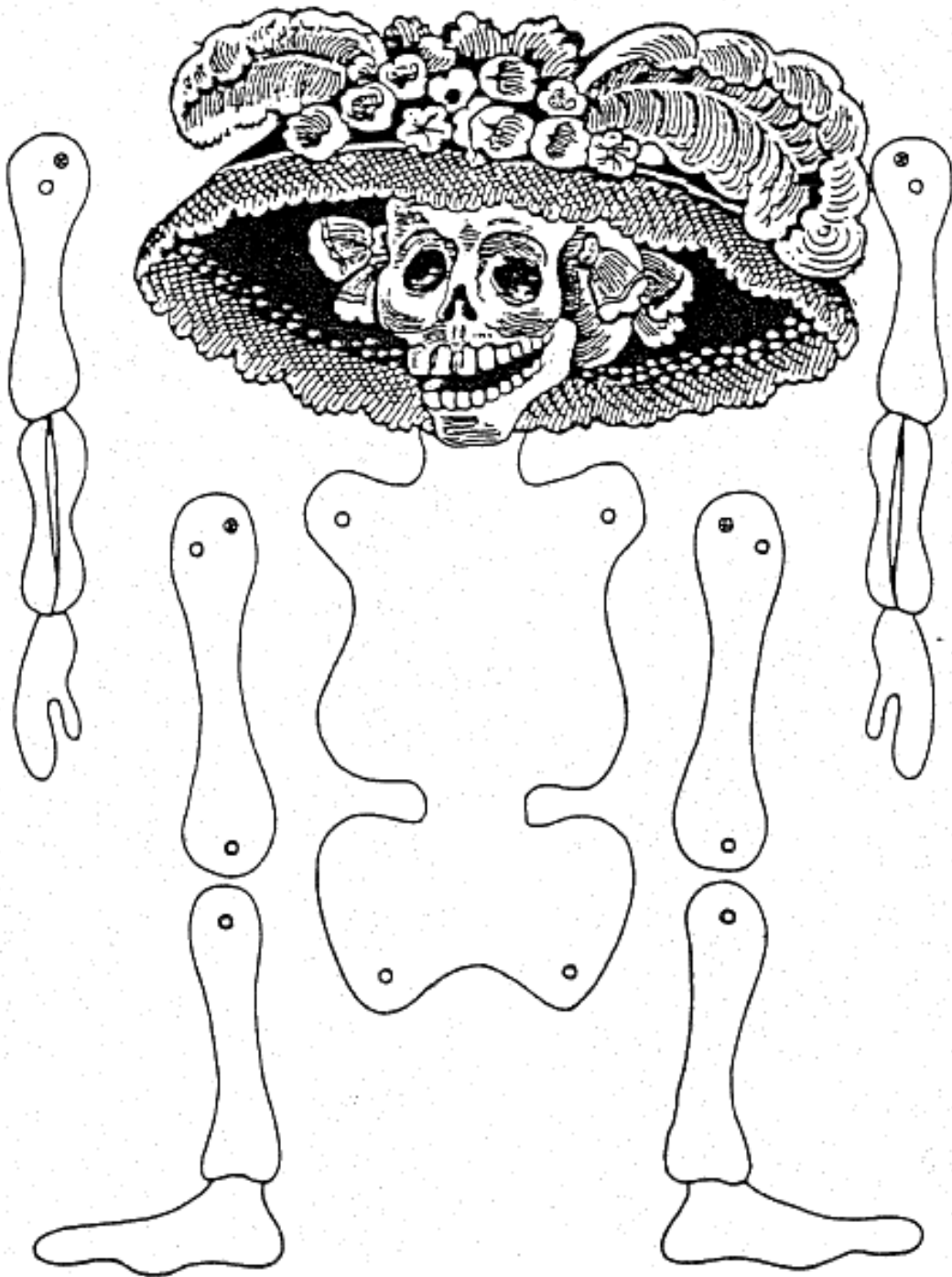






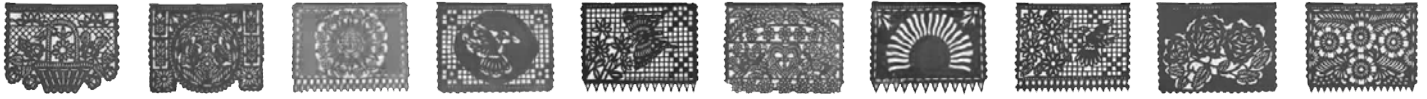












# ARTICULATED CALAVERAS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This activity was produced by Micaela Seidel, independent artist in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is reprinted here with permission.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

2 90-minute sessions

## VOCABULARY:

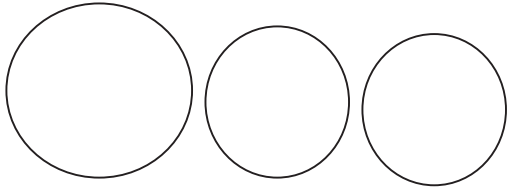
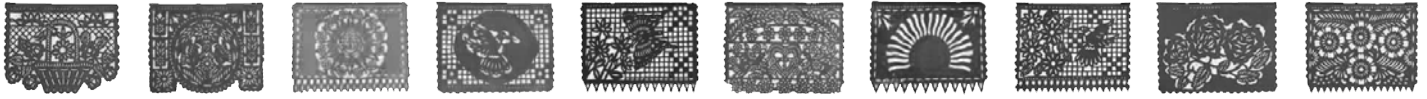
- Calavera
- Articulated
- Muerte
- Death
- Skeleton

## MATERIALS:

- Floral wire (24, 22, or 20 gauge) cut into 28 pieces at 1.25" long
- Air Dry Clay (white or earth tone)
- Acrylic Paint

## PROCEDURE:

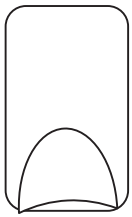
1. Arrange all of the art supplies so that the wire is pre-cut and the clay is divided among the students. Each student will construct his or her own miniature, articulated skeleton (see photo below for finished product).
2. Begin by forming the clay into the different portions of the body, as follows (see illustrations on following page):
  - 3 medium size balls for head, torso, and pelvis (torso is slightly larger)
  - 6 small balls for legs and arms
  - 6 smaller balls for hands and feet



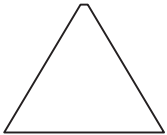
Torso, Head, Pelvis



Skull



Torso with thumbprint



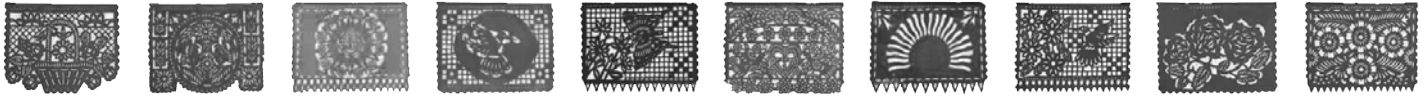
Pelvis



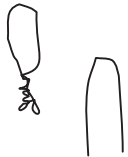
Arm and Leg Bones (16)



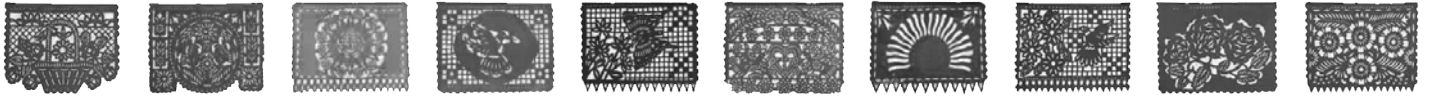
Feet and Hands (4)

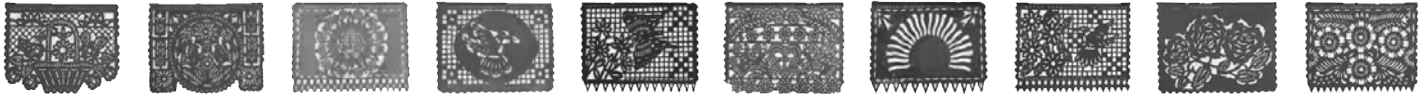


3. After you have shaped the individual pieces, begin shaping each to conform to unique body characteristics.
  - a. Form the head by making a pear or lightbulb shape; indent two holes for the eyes.
  - b. Form the torso by making a rectangle and then pressing in the lower front to represent the ribcage.
  - c. Form the pelvis as a rounded triangle.
  - d. Form the upper and lower arms, and upper and lower legs, by making cylinders.
  - e. Form hands and feet as small, rounded triangles (feet are pointer, of course!)
4. After each piece has been crafted, then you will begin forming the joints.
  - a. Form all of the joints by joining two U's together and twisting (see below)



- b. Lay pieces down on wax paper as they will appear.
  - c. Attached twisted wire loop to torso (neck, shoulders, and below rib cage = 4 loops)
  - d. Form arms and hands with twisted loops. Leave top OFF until joining with shoulder.
  - e. Attach legs and feet to torso. Leave top loop OFF torso until attaching to ribcage.
  - f. Attach head to rib cage last so it doesn't get squished.
  - g. Attach large loop to top to hang to dry.
5. The calavera is now complete. Given that it is made with air-dry clay, it needs exposure to harden. Cover \*lightly\* with plastic or wax paper while drying so that it does not crack, but \*do not seal.\*
6. Once the skeleton is dry (a minimum of 24 hours), you can decorate the body however you like. One approach would entail covering the body with black acrylic paint and then, after that has dried, adding in the skeletal details with white paint. See the following page for an illustration of this technique. Other approaches could include multiple colors, glued-on decorations, paper or cloth clothing, etc.





# GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will explore the specific regions of Mexico through the use of mapmaking. Students will learn about and discuss the differences, similarities, and significance of various regional celebrations of Día de los Muertos. In the process, students will become familiar with basic Mexican geography and the regional and cultural differences in the celebration of Día de los Muertos in Mexico.

## BACKGROUND:

Día de los Muertos celebrations in Mexico vary according to regional and cultural influences. The differences, for instance, may reflect the regional availability of certain flowers and foods during November or the cultural impact of living in metropolitan versus rural areas. Below are some examples of these many variations:

### Mixquic:

- The celebration lasts from Oct. 31st – Nov. 2nd.
- On Oct. 31st it is believed that the souls of deceased children return to visit with family when the church bells toll 12 times. The family prepares a table with white flowers, water, salt and a candle for each child who has passed away. The visiting souls are fed with atole and sweets. The next morning they are given breakfast. When the church bell tolls 12 again, the souls of the children depart (TSF, p. 139-140).
- On November 2nd, everyone gathers in the cemetery, bringing flowers, candles and candlesticks, and wooden crosses.
- In their homes, people create an altar for those who have passed away. Often the altar has a white table cloth, picture of the patron saint of the family, a photo of the deceased, flowers, candles, and some form of a beverage. Foods and other favorite things of the deceased are also set out (TSF, p. 140-142).

### Mexico City:

- In Mexico City, people often build altars representative of the regional style from where they originate.
- Ofrendas can be very traditional or quite unique—there is a great deal of variety. Often food, except for pan de muerto or small fruit, is not a part of the ofrenda at all.
- The skulls and skeletons are very popular in Mexico City, like other urban areas. Rural areas rarely use





these as much.

- Museums, public buildings, hotels and shops will often create an ofrenda.

#### **Oaxaca City:**

- Very little Spanish influence, the Spanish versions of All Souls' and All Saints' Day are more bleak and sad, while in Oaxaca, Day of the Dead is a celebration, much like a party (DoD, p. 2).
- Living family members return to the cemetery in mid-October to invite their deceased family members to the celebration (DoD, p. 2).
- The altars are either inside the house or in a protected area outside. They are almost always built by the men of a family and must be constructed against a wall or corner so that it is impossible to step behind it (DoD, p. 65).
- Arches often made of sugarcane, bent and tied together, create the frame for the altar (DoD, p. 67).
- The ofrendas often have cloth, flowers, hanging fruit, candles, pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Christ child, saints and photos of the deceased family (DoD, p. 69-76).
- On November 1st, family members put out hot food, water, and incense (DoD, p. 77-83).

#### **Huaquechula, Puebla:**

- Origins of the styles of offerings unknown, but seem to come from early Spanish colonial traditions (TSF, p. 21).
- Families will sometimes hire a builder to help construct elaborate altars (TSF, p. 21).
- The market held at Huaquechula before Day of the Dead has many of the items used in the ofrendas: pottery—like incense burners, candlesticks, or figurines; sugar figures—especially white lambs with pink decorations; bread; and cempasuchil and other flowers (TSF, p. 67).
- The ofrendas here are built in tiers, unlike those found in any other part of Mexico.
- Many of the houses in Huaquechula have rooms with high ceilings and often the ofrendas will reach to the tops of these rooms (TSF, p. 67).
- The ofrendas are made out of largely white and gold materials: white satin, netting, and paper with gold braid, gold stars and images of angels and cherubs (TSF, p. 68).
- In Puebla, some continue the tradition of setting the dining room table with a place for each dead relative, nearby or on the chairs the family places some of the favorite things of the deceased person (TSF, p. 21).



## RESOURCES:

“TSF”: Carmichael, E. and Sayer, C. (1992). *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

“DOD”: Haley, S., Fukuda, C. (2004). *Day of the Dead: When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca*. Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

### Estimated Time:

45-90 minutes.

## VOCABULARY:

- Altar
- Ofrenda
- Copal
- Mixquic
- Mexico City
- Oaxaca City
- Hauquecula, Puebla

## MATERIALS:

- Computer with internet access
- Projector

## PROCEDURE:

1. Display a map of Mexico with the specified areas above labeled. Point out major components of Mexico—the U.S.-Mexico Border, Mexico City, and major rural and urban areas. Then, present the information about each region to students. To make this portion of the lesson more interactive, you could create a Google map, inserting a ‘pin’ into each highlighted area and then typing the information about each area into the map. See the link listed below for an example of how to do this (the example was created to map settings of various multicultural children’s literature). <https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msid=203533340684638434090.0004b74a15618a5b29230&mmsa=0&ll=13.049112,13.359375&spn=130.324711,257.695313>



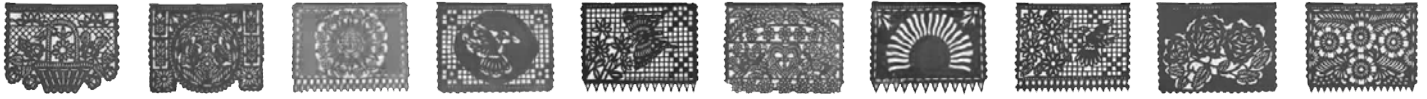
2. To create your own map:
  - Go to Google Maps and click on “My places” at the top left hand side of the screen.
  - Give your map a title.
  - Find the small map at the bottom of the right hand of your screen. Drag the rectangular outline over the area of Mexico. The large map should adjust to show Mexico.
  - Now you can begin adding pins. Find the pin icon on the top left hand side of the large map. Click it and then drag and drop it to a location you would like to highlight.
  - A text box should open up when you drag and drop the pin. Type the Día de los Muertos information specific to that area in the text box and hit save. Students could even copy and paste photos specific to that region’s celebration into the descriptions.
  - If computers are accessible, older students could complete this activity as an individual or small group project.
3. Older Students:
  - Compare and contrast different regional celebrations of Día de los Muertos. Choose two regional celebrations and complete a Venn Diagram that compares and contrasts aspects of these celebrations. Then, use the Venn diagram to write a compare and contrast essay on these two celebrations
4. Students could also research how people in Guatemala and Ecuador observe Día de los Muertos and compare this with what they’ve learned about Mexico. Younger Students: For younger students who may not be able to grasp the significance or discussion of regional differences in Día de los Muertos, they could focus on comparing Día de los Muertos to Halloween to reinforce the idea that Día de los Muertos is NOT the Mexican version of Halloween, as many students believe. If students are familiar with Memorial Day, this could be used as an example of a holiday that has more in common with Día de los Muertos. Students can complete a Venn Diagram comparing the two, then write an essay about the similarities and differences between the two celebrations (for a more in-depth discussion of this activity, see the specific lesson plan on Expository Writing: The Compare and Contrast Essay).

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

### Writing

#### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Use technology, including the internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.



# OFRENDAS

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will discuss the materials used to create an ofrenda and understand their significance.

Students will design and construct their own ofrendas, experimenting with different types of visual representations as they create them. In the process, students will better understand the cultural significance of the ofrenda and the role it plays in Día de los Muertos celebrations.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

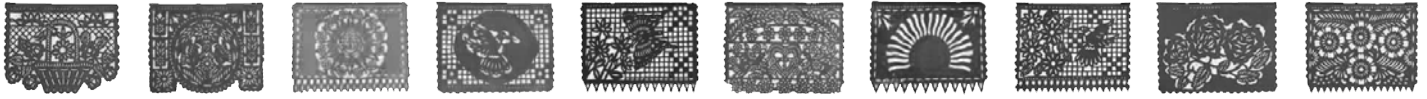
60-90 minutes.

## VOCABULARY:

- Ofrenda
- Altar
- Papel picado
- Copal
- Sugar skulls
- Pan de Muerto
- Calaveras
- Death
- Cempasúchil

## MATERIALS:

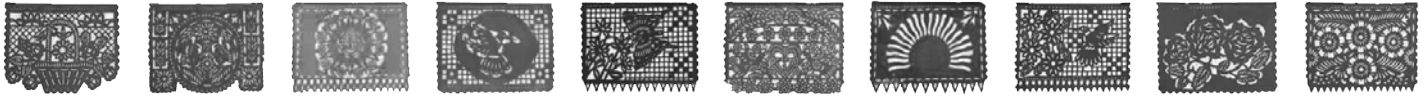
- Small poster board or other heavy paper for each student
- Shoe Boxes
- Glue
- Crayons, markers, colored pencils
- Paint
- Scissors
- Glitter
- Sequins



- Tissue paper
- Ribbon
- Photographs
- Magazines or other pictures for collages
- Butcher paper
- Table cloth
- “The Day of the Dead Ofrenda: A Heartfelt Work of Art” (included at end of guide)
- Optional children’s books: (1) *The Spirit of Tio Fernando/El espíritu de tío Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story/Una historia del Día de los Muertos* by Janice Levy (2) *A Gift for Abuelita/Un regalo para Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead/En celebración del Día de los Muertos* by Nancy Luenn (3) *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead* by George Ancona (4) *Days of the Dead* by Kathryn Lasky

## PROCEDURE:

1. Discuss with students what they know or have experienced about death. Provide open-ended questions such as: Have you ever had a family member, a neighbor, or a pet pass away? How were they honored? What do you do to remember them?
2. Explain that they are going to create an ofrenda to honor or remember a person, a group of people, an event, or a particular issue that is important to them.
3. Have students read the article, “The Day of the Dead Ofrenda: A Heartfelt Work of Art.” You may also want to read a selection of the children’s books listed above. Depending upon how you organize your unit on Día de los Muertos, you may have already read some of these books as introductory content material, but if not, they would be appropriate material to introduce the concept and purpose of an ofrenda in the context of Día de los Muertos. These also provide great visual images of various types of ofrendas that can help students in planning their individual ofrenda.
4. Students can use posterboard or shoe boxes as the base for their ofrenda. Once they’ve decided on the theme for their individual ofrenda and planned a design they can begin creating it. If using a shoe box, students can paint the exterior and interior. Then, using the shoebox or poster board, students create the central image that represents their theme. They can use photographs, pictures from magazines or other objects. Then students can decorate using sequins, glitter, ribbon, tissue paper, handwritten messages, etc.
5. Once students have completed their individual ofrendas, have them create some version of a written explanation or accompaniment to explain their ofrenda. This can be as simple as a paragraph that explains who or what the ofrenda is in honor of. Or, you may choose to incorporate one of the other



writing activities included in this thematic unit such as “Calaveras and Conjuring with Words” from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; the Acrostic poem about the person remembered by the ofrenda; or Calaveras Literarias.

6. Prepare a large table or area to display the students’ ofrendas. Cover the area with butcher paper or a table cloth. Papel picado, sugar skulls, marigolds, candles, pan de muerto, water, salt, and copal are often found on ofrendas and can be arranged along with the students’ work. Students may also want to bring in small objects that represent the person, event, or issue that their design honors to add to the ofrenda as well.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

### National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Arts Content Standards 1 -5

#### K-12 Common Core Standards Addressed

##### Reading

##### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

##### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

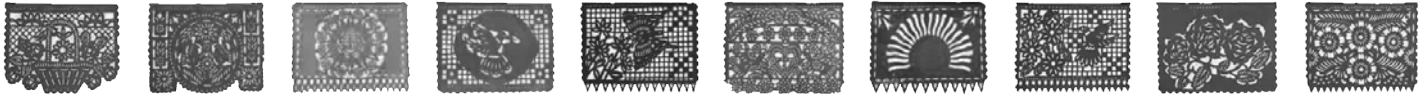
##### Writing

##### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

##### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



## SUGAR SKULLS / ALFEÑIQUES

### INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about sugar skulls and discuss the roles and representations they provide in Día de los Muertos celebrations. Sugar skulls 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.

To integrate writing into this activity, combine making the sugar skulls with the acrostic poem activity (see lesson in this thematic unit). Once students have finished their own sugar skull, have them write an acrostic poem about their sugar skull.

### RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Adaptable for all grade levels.

### ESTIMATED TIME:

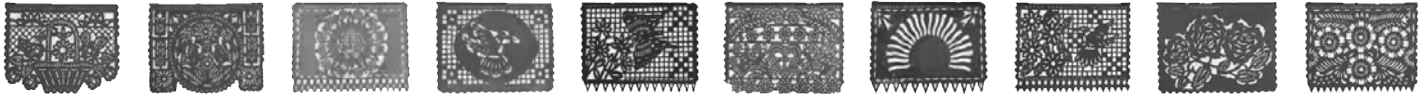
1-1.5 hours

### VOCABULARY:

- Alfeñique
- Calavera
- Recipe
- Measurement

### MATERIALS & PROCEDURE FOR SUGAR SKULLS :

- 8 cups (5 pounds) granulated sugar
- 2 egg whites
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 teaspoon clear vanilla
- ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
- Skull molds
- \*\*\*Note: 2 tablespoons of meringue powder + 4 tablespoons of water can be used in place of egg whites, vanilla, water and cream of tartar\*\*\*



1. Mix egg whites, vanilla, water and cream of tartar then add to sugar.
2. If using meringue powder, mix powder and sugar well, then add water. This can be done by hand, but a handheld or standing electric mixer is preferable.
3. Mix well until all the sugar is moistened. It should be the consistency of wet sand. To check the mixture, squeeze a small amount in your hand, if it holds its shape and fingerprints remain, it is ready. If it doesn't hold together, the mixture is too dry and needs more water. Add a little at a time, so as not to add too much. The water will sink to the bottom of the bowl, so be sure to stir the mixture thoroughly throughout the whole process.
4. Using a spoon, pack the sugar mixture firmly into the molds, pressing each spoonful down into the mold. Pack down sugar mixture until perfectly tight. Use a spatula to scrape the back of the mold flat.
5. You can either place a stiff cardboard square over the mold and invert, or smack them out onto a clean, dry, flat surface. Lift the mold off carefully. If there are any mistakes, just scoop the mixture back into the bowl and repack. You will need to periodically rinse and dry your mold to prevent the mixture from sticking.
6. Allow the sugar skulls to air dry for 24 hours or more.

## MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE FOR ROYAL ICING:

- 2 pounds of powdered sugar
- 4 egg whites (OR ½ cup of meringue powder + 2/3 cup of water )
- Paste food coloring (NOT liquid food coloring from grocery store)

You will also need:

- 5 small Ziploc bags
- Bowls or small cups for mixing colored icing
- Spoons
- Sequins
- Colored foil

\*\*\*Note: do not mix more than 2 pounds of sugar at a time\*\*\*

1. Using an electric mixer, mix ingredients together until icing forms peaks and has a glossy texture (about 7-10 minutes).
2. Divide icing up according to the number of colors you plan on making. Using bowls or small paper cups, mix food coloring paste with icing until well blended.
3. Place colored icing into a small Ziploc bag, pressing the icing into a bottom corner of the bag. Do not





fill the bag more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  full.

4. Close the bag firmly and then snip the tiniest corner from the bag. Using like a pastry bag, squeeze the icing onto the skull to create various designs.
5. Use colored foil as additional decorations, especially for the eyes. Sequins can also be added for more decorations. The foil and sequins can be 'glued' on using the icing.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

National Standards for Arts Education,  
Visual Arts Content Standards 1 -5

### NOTES:

Recipe and instructions adapted from [mexicansugarskull.com](http://mexicansugarskull.com) and Erin Gibson and Christopher Gibson of Calavera King. Sugar skull kits for your classroom can be ordered through Calavera King by contacting them at 505-554-1814.



# PAPEL PICADO I

## INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about and create their own examples of papel picado as contextualized by Día de los Muertos celebrations. In the process, they will also learn about concepts of lines, color contrast, and value.

## BACKGROUND:

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.

## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Appropriate for early elementary.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

30-45 minutes for each version, or 1-1.5 hours for entire lesson. Note: This can be broken up into a two-day lesson with two separate activities.



## VOCABULARY:

- Papel Picado
- Fold
- Cut
- Line
- Shapes
- Over
- Under
- Contrasting Color
- Color Value

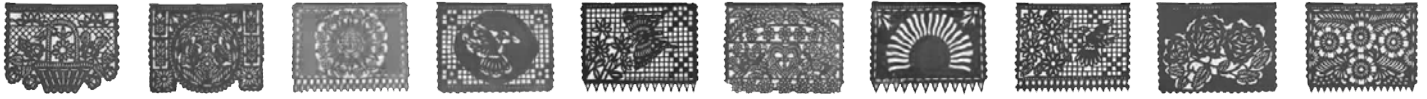
## MATERIALS:

- Multi-colored tissue paper or foil paper. Note: You may want to use double-sided paper with contrasting colors or madras tissue paper.
- Scissors
- String
- Glue Stick

## PROCEDURE:

### Version I (Easiest)

1. Give each student a piece of tissue paper (square or rectangular).
2. Fold the paper: Modeling for the students first, demonstrate how to fold the tissue paper like a fan or an accordion. Fold the paper back and forth (about 2-3 inches each time) until you have folded the entire piece of paper and are left with a long, narrow rectangle. Discuss what contrasting colors are if you are using contrasting paper.
3. Have students fold their paper as you have just demonstrated.
4. Begin cutting the paper: Modeling first, demonstrate how to cut down the long edges of the rectangle (you will not cut the short edges). You can cut waves, miniature triangles, squares, half circles, etc. You want to be sure to have a firm grasp on the paper, because as you cut you are eliminating the edges that keep the paper held together. You will end up with a stack of strips of tissue paper.
5. Have students cut their tissue paper, creating any design around the edges that they would like. Encourage them to use a different design and shapes on the two sides.
6. Folding the strips: Modeling first, taking one strip at a time, fold the strip in half so that the two short edges meet. While continuing to hold the edges of the first strip together, take the next strip and fold

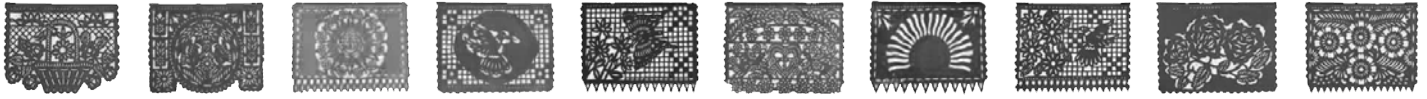


its edges together, then, put it next to your first strip, now holding four edges together. Continue to do this until you have folded all of the strips of paper and are now holding all of the folded edges together. Then, staple the edges together to hold all the paper strips in place.

7. Have students fold the paper as you have demonstrated, circulating around the room to help them as needed.
8. Now, you make create a garland by punching a hole where the strips are stapled together and stringing them together. You may also want to have students repeat the activity so that they have two that they can staple together to make a flower shape.

### Version II (Basic Garland)

1. Give each student a piece of tissue paper (square or rectangular). You may want to use the madras colored tissue paper for this activity
2. Fold the paper: Modeling for the students first, demonstrate how to fold the tissue paper like a fan or an accordion. Fold the paper back and forth (about 2-3 inches each time) until you have folded the entire piece of paper and are left with a long, narrow rectangle. Discuss what contrasting colors are if you are using contrasting paper.
3. Have students fold their paper as you have just demonstrated.
4. As a class, fold the rectangles in half from left to right. You now have two short edges (right and left) and two long edges (top and bottom).
5. You will want to model this before you have your students do it. You are going to make two stair case like shapes at the top of the not folded, short side of the rectangle (if you folded to the right, you'll be cutting the short, right edge or if you folded to the left, the left short edge). The staircases will meet at the center of this short, not-folded side. On the top edge, start about an inch from the short, not-folded side, begin cutting a staircase, stopping when you reach the center of the short edge. Then, do the same thing along the bottom edge, so that the two staircases meet in the center of the short edge.
6. Now, cut designs into the long edges (bottom and top) of the rectangle. Students can cut various shapes (triangles, rectangles, half circles, leaves, bottom or top half of a star etc.) into these edges.
7. Unfold the short edge of the rectangle so that you now have a long narrow rectangle. First unfold the top long rectangle. Do not glue this strip down in the next step. This is the string fold and will be glued around the hanging string in the last step.
8. You are going to glue the sides of the fan together along that center fold line. You will need to glue all of the rectangles together in one direction, then flip the tissue paper over and glue each rectangle together on that side—always along that center fold line.
9. Take the bottom rectangle and put glue all of the way across it from left to right, then glue the two

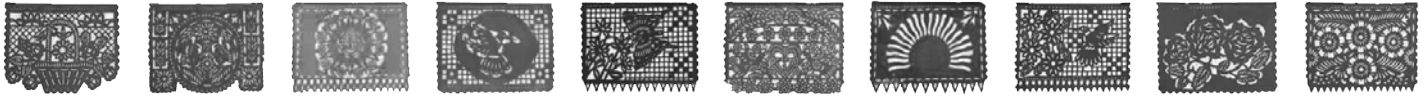


halves of that bottom rectangle together. You should now have a shape that resembles a fan.

10. Take two chairs and place them somewhat far apart. The chairs are going to support the string or ribbon that will create the garland of fans. Tie or tape on end of the string to one chair and the other end of string to the other chair. The chairs should be far enough apart that the string is taut.
11. Take the string fold (the top rectangle that you did not glue down). Place glue on the back of this rectangle, then fold it over the hanging string and press it down onto the top edge of the fan so that the fan is now hanging from the string or ribbon.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Arts Content Standards 1 -5



## PAPEL PICADO II

### INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about papel picado as contextualized by Día de los Muertos celebrations. In the process, they will produce their own papel picado art using the demonstrated techniques further developing their fine motor skills as they design and create more complex patterns applying knowledge of symmetry, lines, and negative and positive spaces.

### BACKGROUND:

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.

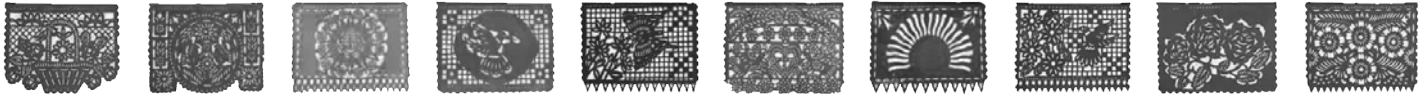
Papel picado decorations are ephemeral, existing only during the celebration. They are typically displayed outside, where their delicate construction will disintegrate naturally in the wind and rain. This transitory existence is repeated in many of the other elements of Día de los Muertos celebrations,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

### RECOMMENDED GRADES:

Appropriate for early elementary.

### ESTIMATED TIME:

60-90 minutes.



## VOCABULARY:

- Papel Picado
- Fold
- Cut
- Line of Symmetry
- Negative Space
- Positive Space
- Contrasting Color
- Color Value

## MATERIALS:

- Multi-colored tissue paper or foil paper. Note: You may want to use double-sided paper with contrasting colors or madras tissue paper.
- Scissors
- String
- Glue Stick

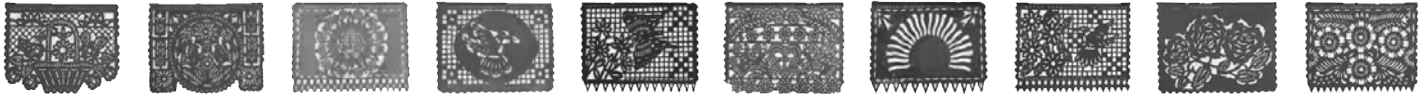
## PROCEDURE:

Version I, II, and III. The multiple versions here all begin and end with the same steps, but the paper is folded differently to create a different end product.

1. Give each student a 9 x 12 piece of tissue paper. If you are using double sided paper or madras paper discuss the concepts of contrasting colors and color value.
2. Position the paper so the long edges are at the top and bottom. Fold the top edge over about an inch. This is what is called the string fold where the papel picado will be attached to ribbon or string. Do not cut on this fold.
3. Next, fold the paper in half from left to right, bringing the two short edges together.

### Version I

4. Then, fold the paper in half from top to bottom.
5. Now students can either begin cutting a design on to the two folded edges (the left and the bottom) or they can draw in a design and then cut. If the design is somewhat complex, students can shade in the region they plan on cutting out. This region is called the negative space. The positive space is the area where the paper remains that has not been cut and removed. Remind students that they are drawing and/or cutting only half of the image—the two folded edges create lines of symmetry. The full image



will appear when the paper is unfolded. Discuss with students the idea of negative and positive space. Remind students not to cut the string fold.

6. When the piece is complete, gently unfold it. Put glue on the back of the string fold and fold it over the string that the banner will be hung with. Press the string fold onto the back of the papel picado so that it is firmly adhered to the string.

### Version II

4. Then, fold the paper in half again, from left to right. You should be left with a long and narrow column. This will produce columns of patterns that go from top to bottom
5. Now students can either begin cutting a design on to the two folded edges (the left and the bottom) or they can draw in a design and then cut. If the design is somewhat complex, students can shade in the region they plan on cutting out. This region is called the negative space. The positive space is the area where the paper remains that has not been cut and removed. Remind students that they are drawing and/or cutting only half of the image—the two folded edges create lines of symmetry. The full image will appear when the paper is unfolded. Discuss with students the idea of negative and positive space. Remind students not to cut the string fold.
6. When the piece is complete, gently unfold it. Put glue on the back of the string fold and fold it over the string that the banner will be hung with. Press the string fold onto the back of the papel picado so that it is firmly adhered to the string.

### Version III

4. Then, fold the paper in half from top to bottom.
5. Next, make a diagonal fold bringing the bottom right corner to the top left corner.
6. Optional: fold in half diagonally one more time—this will give a very narrow triangle to create a design on.
7. Now students can either begin cutting a design on to the two folded edges (the left and the bottom) or they can draw in a design and then cut. If the design is somewhat complex, students can shade in the region they plan on cutting out. This region is called the negative space. The positive space is the area where the paper remains that has not been cut and removed. Remind students that they are drawing and/or cutting only half of the image—the two folded edges create lines of symmetry. The full image will appear when the paper is unfolded. Discuss with students the idea of negative and positive space. Remind students not to cut the string fold.
8. When the piece is complete, gently unfold it. Put glue on the back of the string fold and fold it over the string that the banner will be hung with. Press the string fold onto the back of the papel picado so that





it is firmly adhered to the string.

## STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Arts Content Standards 1 -5



## PAPEL PICADO III

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The papel picado templates on the following pages are reproduced courtesy of these individuals:

- Bird Template (Tacoma Art Museum, <http://tacomaartmuseum.org>)
- Flower Template (Tacoma Art Museum, <http://tacomaartmuseum.org>)
- Sun Template (Tacoma Art Museum, <http://tacomaartmuseum.org>)
- Nada es imposible Template (Yreina Flores Ortiz, <http://www.aymujershop.com/>)

### INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn about papel picado as contextualized by Día de los Muertos celebrations. In the process, they will produce their own papel picado art using the demonstrated techniques further developing their fine motor skills as they design and create more complex patterns applying knowledge of symmetry, lines, and negative and positive spaces.

### BACKGROUND:

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.



## RECOMMENDED GRADES:

High school.

## ESTIMATED TIME:

60-90 minutes.

## VOCABULARY:

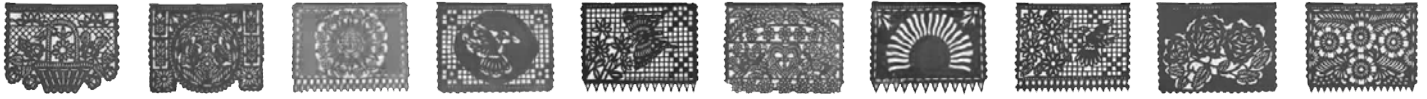
- Papel Picado
- Fold
- Cut
- Line of Symmetry
- Negative Space
- Positive Space
- Contrasting Color
- Color Value

## MATERIALS:

- Multi-colored tissue paper or foil paper. Note: You may want to use double-sided paper with contrasting colors or madras tissue paper.
- Scissors
- String
- Glue Stick
- Papel Picado template (see following pages)
- X-Acto knife, blade #11 or #16
- Surface to cut on (the sides of recycled cardboard boxes work well)

## PROCEDURE:

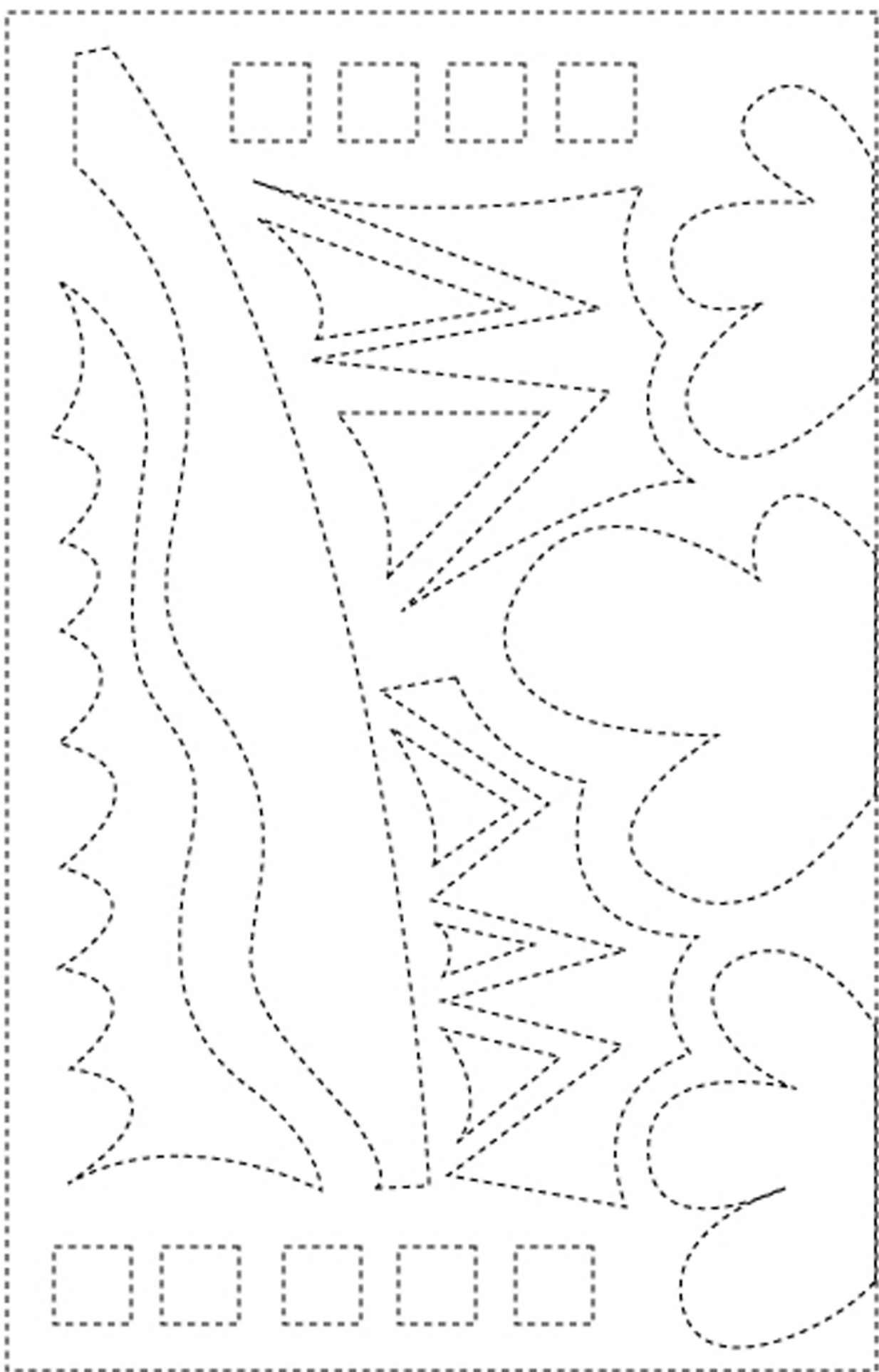
1. Prior to providing the materials to the student, assemble a packet of materials for each one. The packet will include 5 pages of tissue paper (sized approximately 8.5" x 11," or the size of a standard sheet of printing paper) layered on top of one another. The top sheet of the packet will be one of the templates provided in the following pages. Make sure that the template is placed approximately one inch below the top of the paper, so that you have room to fold and glue a string onto the top. Once the template and tissue paper stack is assembled, staple it at each of the four corners. Note that we have also includ-

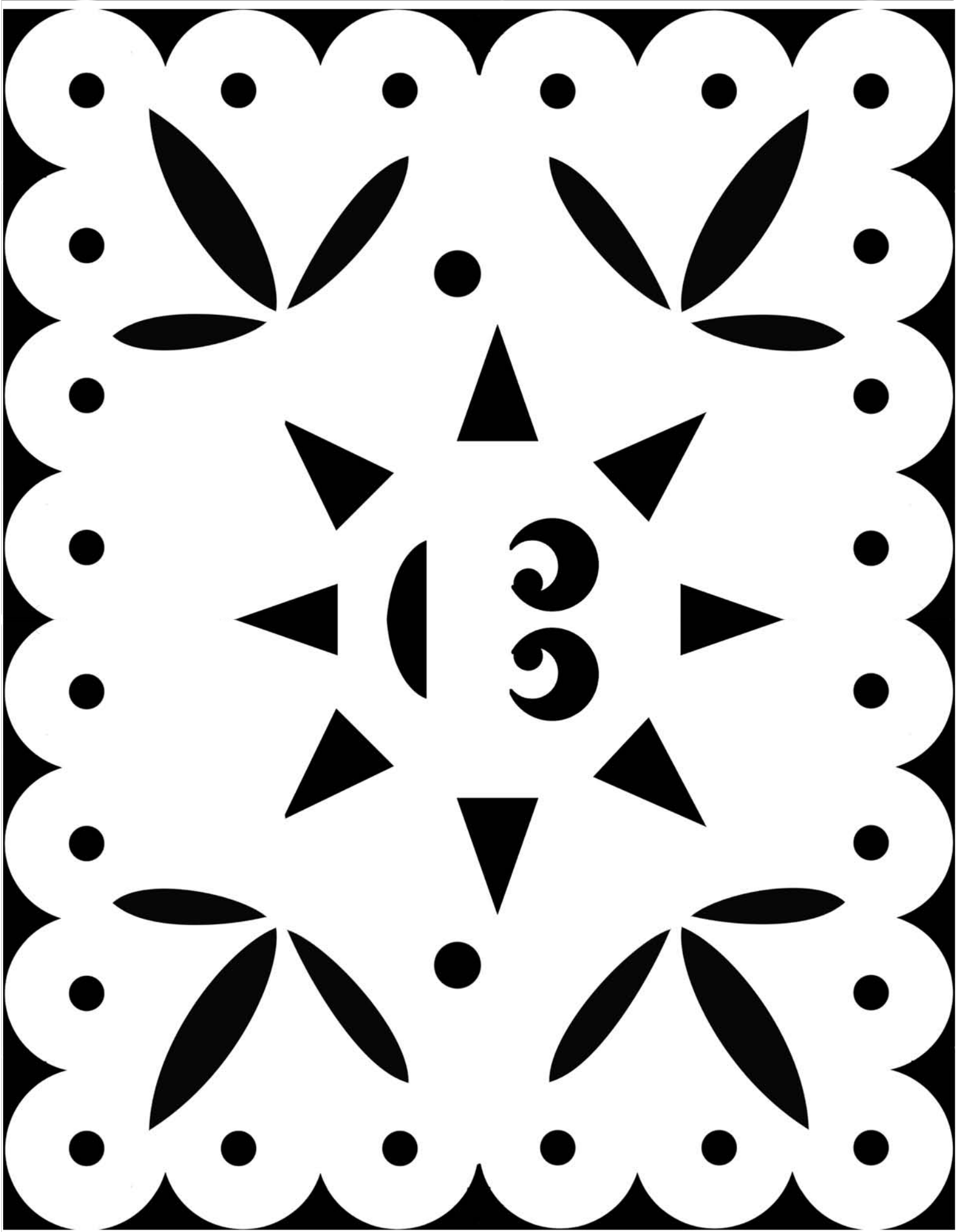


ed miniature templates on the last page, so you have the option of assembling smaller-sized tissue paper packets and thus smaller banners.

2. After the packet is assembled, provide one packet to each student along with an X-Acto knife. Place the tissue paper packet on top of the cardboard and, using the X-Acto knife, firmly and smoothly cut away all areas that are white. Encourage students to cut carefully, as the blades are quite sharp. Use the non-cutting hand to hold the paper in place.
3. After the design is completely cut away, cut away the edges of the design so that the tissue paper precisely conforms to the size of the template on the left, bottom, and right sides (the top should still have the extra inch of tissue paper).
4. The banners are now nearly complete. Remove the staples carefully before placing each tissue paper page side by side on a table. This is the basis of the banner.
5. Finally, fold the top edge down on each tissue paper page. Crease firmly. Unfold the flap and gently apply glue to the fold. Lay the string in the fold and press the flap closed. Press firmly against the closed flap to make sure that the string is glued to the tissue paper.
6. The banner is complete. Choose a space around the classroom in which to display the banners and hang. To most closely mimic their common placement in Día de los Muertos ceremonies, hang away from the wall so that the paper can flutter easily.









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## GLOSSARY

A note on the succeeding terms: The words in this glossary are all associated with Día de los Muertos albeit in different capacities and settings. They come from English, Spanish, and Nahuatl. The authors of this guide assume the reader is proficient in English and Spanish, but recognizes that Nahuatl, the language spoken both among the Aztecs as well as by many contemporary indigenous groups, may be less familiar. For reference, know that in Nahuatl, vowels are pronounced as they are in Spanish and consonants are pronounced as they are in English except for the following examples (Moreno, 2007):

x	as “sh” in shell	Mexica, Xochimilco
z	as “s” in suit	Aztec, Azcapotzalco
hu	as “w” in waste, weed	Huchuetl
ll	as in <i>fully</i>	Ollin, Calli
que, qui	as “kay” or “kee”	Quetzalcoatl
cu	as “kw” in quasar, query	Coatlicue, Cuicatl
tl	as in Tlingit	Tlatoani, Tecpatl
tz	as in pretzel	Tzompantli, Tzitzimime

**ALFENIQUE** - Sugar figures, typically skulls, created and decorated for Día de los Muertos.

**ALL SAINTS’ DAY** – A Roman Catholic holiday traditionally held the first Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints’ Day celebrates the pantheon of Catholic Saints and generally takes place on October 31st and November 1st. In Spanish, it is known as “El Día de Todos los Santos.”

**ALL SOULS’ DAY** – A Roman Catholic holiday traditionally held on the day after All Saints’ Day. It is a time when the living pray for the souls of the departed to pass from Purgatory to Heaven; celebrations are similar to All Saints’ Day and Samhain. In Spanish, it is known as “El Día de Todos los Difuntos.”

**ANCIENT MAYA** – Refers to the ancient civilization in Central and Southern Mexico and Central America which had a Pre-classical period from 2000 B.C.E. to AD 250 and a Classic periods from AD 250-900. They had a written language and were masters of architecture, art, farming, mathematics and astronomy. Note that care should be exercised when using the term simply “Maya” rather than “Ancient Maya” to refer to this cultural epoch and people, as many Mayan peoples are still alive today and practicing their own vibrant, cultural traditions.



**ANGELITOS** - Small children's souls, literally "little angels."

**ÁNIMAS** - Souls, often depicted as figures which in turn represent the souls of the dead.

**AZTEC** – Refers to a group of Nahuatl-speaking indigenous peoples who, through warfare, trade and cultural assimilation, took over neighboring indigenous peoples and created a vast empire. The core of the empire was located in Tenochtitlan—modern day Mexico City. The Aztec reigned from the late 1200s until they were conquered by the Spanish (led by Hernán Cortéz) in the middle to late 1500s. Also known as Mexica.

**CALACAS** – A slang term for skull or death, usually shown as skeletal figure carved from wood, stone or candy. Many times, skeletons depict the joyous and irreverent attitude of Day of the Dead. They are generally extravagantly dressed and shown dancing, laughing, playing music, etc.

**CALAVERAS** – Skulls, generally, but also used to refer to satiric poetry and mock obituaries. This term is commonly used to refer to José Posada's prints of skeleton figures.

**CALAVERA CATRINA** - The name associated with José Guadalupe Posada's most iconic skeletal figure. Also referred to simply as "Catrina."

**CEMPASÚCHITL**—Marigold flowers, also known as "flor de muerto." Marigolds are a commonplace feature among Día de los Muertos ceremonies as their strong scent is believed to help guide the deceased back to the land of the living. Marigolds are often placed in the shape of a cross, displayed across an ofrenda, or used as a path of petals to help the deceased find the home in which they once lived. Also spelled zempasuchitl, cempoaxochitl, and sempasuchitl. The word is derived from the Nahuatl language and means "twenty-flour," which refers to the thick and numerous petals of the flower. Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Aztecs and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures.

**CHICHIHUACUAUHCO** – Also known as TONACACUAUHTITLAN, this is a Nahuatl term whose closest translation is "in the wet-nurse tree." It is used to refer to a paradise orchard in Aztec mythology. It was believed that infants who had died went to this afterlife reserved specifically for them. It was believed that any infant which died while still nursing was innocent, having not yet had the opportunity to eat directly from the earth and thus had no debt to pay to the gods. Because of their innocence, the gods



protected these children and ensured that they would be well sustained by trees whose branches produced breasts that dripped milk to the infants.

**CODEX** - Plural, codices. An English term for the painted hieroglyphic books that were the written documents of Mesoamerican cultures, particularly the Aztec and Maya.

**CONQUISTADOR** – Spanish term for conqueror. In modern context, it is used to describe the Spanish who colonized the Americas starting in the mid-1500s. It should be noted that in some academic circles, this term is considered politically incorrect as it assumes the complete decimation and assimilation of a people whose culture, language and heritage still remain strong to this day.

**COPAL** – Incense made from hardened tree resin. Copal is commonly used in ceremonies of all kinds by indigenous peoples in Mexico and northern Central America. It is used during Día de los Muertos ceremonies because it is believed that the strong smell of copal will help guide the deceased back to the land of the living.

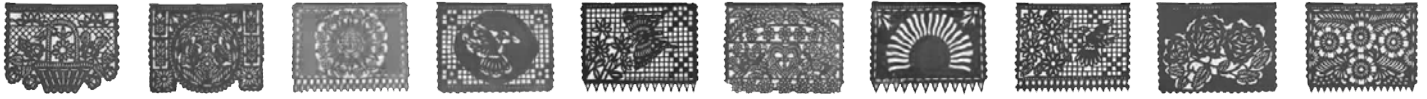
**DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS** - The Latin American term for the combined celebrations on Nov. 1 and Nov. 2. Literally, “Day of the Dead.”

**ESQUELETOS** - Spanish term for “Skeleton,” the definition for which provides more information.

**HUESO** – The Spanish term for “bone.” Huesos appear in Día de los Muertos celebrations in many formats, from the skeletal prints to the bones on the traditional pan de muerto breads.

**JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA**—a major figure (1852-1913) in Mexican media, popular around the turn on the 20th century. Posada is known for his calavera prints that satirized the political, economic and cultural times of the Mexican Revolution. His Calavera Catrina has become perhaps the most popular symbol of Day of the Dead.

**MESOAMERICA** – Mesoamerica, an area that is generally acknowledged to include Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, though several scholars also cite Nicaragua and Costa Rica as part of its boundaries. “Mesoamerica” is an historical term; there is no such region in existence today. Instead, when scholars refer to Mesoamerica, they refer to a historical commonality of culture and language shared by the peoples of the region.



**MICCAILHUITONTLI** - Male Aztec deity presiding over the dead.

**MICTECACIHUATL** - Female Aztec deity presiding over the dead.

**MICTLÁN** – A Nahuatl-term which translates to “the place of the dead,” or what is often understood as the “underworld.” Mictlán was one of four destinations in Aztec culture to which the deceased could go. It was a place described as the belly of the earth. This was not an ethereal or figurative description, but rather a way of describing a very real physical place. Mictlán was the eventual destination for all people who had died of natural causes, diseases, or accidents. Individuals destined for Mictlán had to complete an arduous journey consisting of natural obstacles which had to be overcome through nine separate phases. This travel was thought to take up to four years to complete. In Aztec culture, it was believed that once an individual’s soul had reached Mictlán, then that person’s “essence” would no longer exist in the consciousness of those still living. This was cause for many philosophers and artists to contemplate death and its meaning.

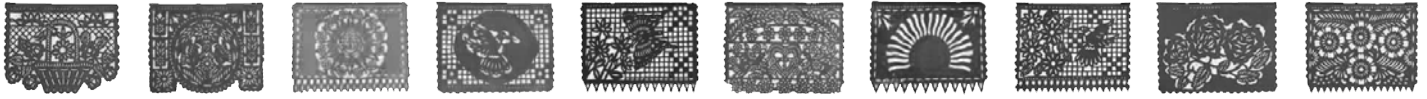
**OFRENDAS** – Spanish word literally meaning “offerings” but more often translated as “altars.” Created during the Day of the Dead, ofrendas are decorated table-top arrangements that offer favorite foods and snacks to the deceased; often elaborately decorated with marigolds, bright paper, lights, candles, cloth and retratos of the departed.

**PAN DE MUERTOS** – Bread of the Dead. Traditionally sweet bread decorated for Day of the Dead celebrations and offerings on the ofrenda.

**PAPEL PICADO** - A Spanish term literally meaning “cut paper.” Papel picado is an art form associated with Día de los Muertos. Traditionally, colorful sheets of thin tissue paper are cut into intricate designs and left to flutter in the wind. Their ephemeral nature (tissue paper dissolves easily in the nature elements) and their vulnerability to breezes ensure that they symbolize not only the natural element of wind, but also humans’ fleeting existence.

**RETATRO** - Spanish term for portrait or likeness. Retratos of the deceased are a common part of Día de los Muertos ofrendas.

**SAMHAIN** – a Celtic festival marking the end of the harvest season traditionally held on October 31st



through November 1st. It was believed that the world opened up enough for the spirits of the dead to come from the underworld and visit the world of the living. Samhain was celebrated with feasts, music and dancing.

**TENOCHTITLAN** - The main city of the Aztec empire and what is now known as Mexico City.

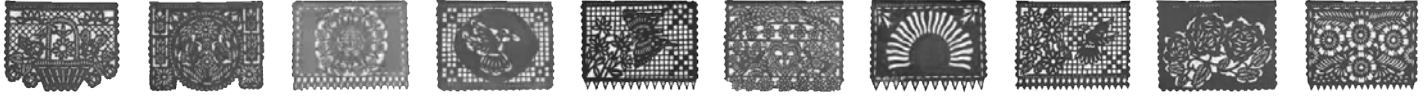
**TLALOCAN** - The realm of the afterlife ruled over by Tlaloc, the Aztec deity of rain, and his consort Chalchiuhtlicue.

**TONACACUAUHTITLAN** - See entry for **CHICHIHUACUAUHCO**.

**TONATIUH** – the Aztec name for the Sun God. Warriors were especially revered in Aztec culture and are believed to walk the eternal life with the Sun God, unlike those who are destined to perish in Mictlán.

**VEINTENA** – Monthly celebrations and rituals held by the Aztecs to honor different elements of their religion and agricultural practices.

**XOCHITL** - A Nahuatl word generally meaning “flower.”



# ANNOTATED K-12 BIBLIOGRAPHY

## ELEMENTARY

Amado, E. and Hairs, J. (1999). *Barrilete: A Kite for the Day of the Dead*. Toronto, ONT, Canada: Groundwood Books.

Appropriate for grades 2-5. This is a photo essay which documents a family's progress as they celebrate the Day of the Dead in Guatemala, where the holiday is celebrated in part by building large kites (some are over seven meters across), also called barilletes. Given that many descriptions of this holiday omit kite-building as one of the practices, this book offers a useful look into the variety of celebrations; however, it is rather scarce in exploring the holiday overall and should be used only when complemented by other texts.

Bracegirdle, P.J. (2012). *The Dead Family Diaz*. New York, NY: Dial Books.

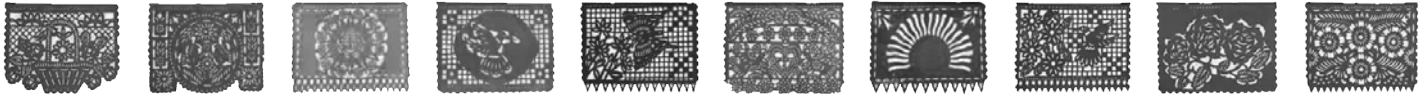
Appropriate for grades 1-2. Fun and engaging imagery akin to that by Tim Burton will ensure that this book draws students into the exciting narrative. Bracegirdle spins the traditional Día de los Muertos around for an imaginary take on what it might be like for a family already dead to celebrate the holiday by calling upon the living.

Freschet, G. (2001). *Beto and the Bone Dance*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Appropriate for grades K-3. With warm, softened imagery, Freschet tells the story of Beto and his family as they work together to craft an altar in honor of Beto's recently departed grandma. Through the simple text, readers learn simultaneously about the reverently serious purpose behind the holiday as well as the enthusiastic celebrations that characterize it.

Gonzalez, E. and Haeger, E. (2010). *Rosita y Conchita: A Rhyming Storybook in English and Spanish*. Muertoons.

Appropriate for grades K-3. A new and lighthearted take on the holiday, marked by illustrations that will surely appeal to the younger readers. While the illustrations are the first element to jump off the



page, the text is not far behind. The authors spent no less time crafting the thoughtful narrative that tells of two twin sisters who, separated by death, try to reunite with each other. The book is neither particularly sad nor scary. Instead, it somehow manages to personalize the meaningful matter of loss and death through humor and endearing relationships. Side-by-side English and Spanish text provides an added benefit for bilingual classrooms.

Johnston, T. and Winter, J. (2000). *Day of the Dead*. San Diego, CA: Voyager Books.

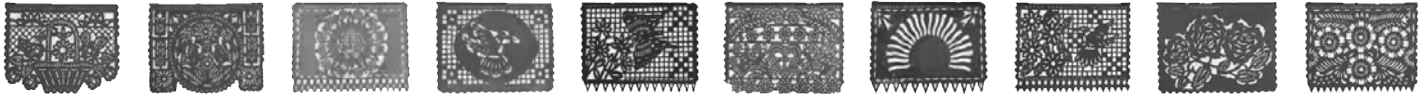
Appropriate for grades 2-4. Absolutely beautiful imagery reminiscent of folk art marks the story of a Mexican family's preparation for and celebration of the Day of the Dead. Through carefully placed Spanish words amid the English, the authors infuse the story with a sense of simple perspective. The short and direct language will help young readers grasp the personal elements behind the holiday without romanticizing or caricaturizing its practices. A rare and lovely resource for teaching about this Mexican tradition.

Keep, R. (2008). *Clatter Bash! A Day of the Dead Celebration*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree, 2008.

Appropriate for grades K-4. Another humorous and inverse perspective on the holiday, author Keep uses the text to depict the festivities of the departed family members whom are celebrated during Día de los Muertos. After the family members leave their offerings at the altars, the skeletons come out to "clatter bash" and celebrate throughout the night. Upbeat rhymes with occasional Spanish words capture the sounds of the evening and the beautiful illustrations based on papel picado designs are engaging without being scary. Despite the lighthearted approach, the story nonetheless manages to convey a good sense of the practices, foods, and images associated with the holiday.

Krull, K. (1994). *Maria Molina and the Days of the Dead*. New York, NY: Maxwell MacMillan International.

Appropriate for grades 1-3. The story follows a fictional family from its life, first, in Mexico and then, afterward, in the U.S. The protagonist is Maria, a young girl in the family, who learns from her mother about how to celebrate Día de los Muertos in honor of a young infant brother and grandmother who have recently passed away. Through the mother's narrative, readers learn about the holiday's customs. A simple tale with a rich palette of illustrations, the story nonetheless



Levy, J. (1995). *The Spirit of Tío Fernando: El espíritu de tío Fernando*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

Appropriate for grades 1-3. This bilingual book traces the story of one family's journey to honor a deceased loved one. The story is told from the perspective of a young boy named Nando who is helping his mother with preparations to honor his favorite Uncle ("Tío") Fernando. Nando buys Day of the Dead treats and trinkets to place on the altar as he and his mother sit and honor Fernando. Easy to read with English text on one page and the Spanish text on the facing page, *The Spirit* tells a more personal story of the Day of the Dead for a younger audience.

Morales, Y. (2003). *Just a Minute!: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle.

Appropriate for grades K-2. This is a vibrantly colored, vivid story of Day of the Dead told through counting in both English and Spanish. Señor Calavera is ready to take Grandma Beetle to the next life, but after he meets her and counts with her, he decides to leave without her. Each number is a different preparation for the holiday, which gives young kids a sense of the culture behind the tradition.

Morales, Y. (2008). *Just in Case: A Trickster Tale and Spanish Alphabet Boo*. New York, NY: Roaring Book Press.

Appropriate for grades K-2. Much like her previous book, *Just a Minute!*, author Yuyi Morales has created once more a vibrant and illustrative book. This one focuses on Día de los Muertos and the alphabet, whereas her previous text focused on numbers. In *Just in Case*, readers take a new trip with Señor Calavera, who is worried and perplexed about what to give Grandma Beetle for her birthday. This heart-warming and award-winning tale explores possible gifts by imagining a different present for each letter of the alphabet. From the good-natured text to the glowing illustrations, this is a lovely Día de los Muertos book for young readers.

Muller, B. (2005). *Felipa and the Day of the Dead*. Chambersburg, PA: North-South Books.

Appropriate for grades K-2. Unlike many of the books for younger readers that use humor to defuse the seriousness of the holiday, this book shows author Birte Muller embracing and elevating the profoundly personal meaning. We follow the young protagonist, Felipa, as she mourns the loss of her





grandmother and as she comes to reconcile that mourning with positive memories of their time together. In passing references, readers gain a glimpse of the customs of Día de los Muertos, but not enough to fully explain the holiday. This book offers a meaningful and necessary glimpse into the holiday's importance for individuals and families, but should be paired with a nonfiction text to explain the customs more fully. Its setting in the Andes is a rarity among Día de los Muertos books, many of which focus on Mexican practices.

San Vicente, L. (1999). *The Festival of Bones / El festival de las calaveras: The Little-Bitty Book for the Day of the Dead*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.

Appropriate for grades 2-3. This book was originally published in Mexico, but it serves well as a bilingual introduction to Día de los Muertos for younger readers. The imagery of the skeletons is irreverent and lighthearted. It is incomplete without additional nonfiction information, so this book is best paired with another text for those previously unfamiliar with the holiday.

Winter, J. (2006). *Calavera abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book*. United States: Sandpiper.

Appropriate for grades K-3. This picture book traces the alphabet through Día preparations. A perfect introductory book for children in the very beginning stages of learning Spanish; the pictures of the preparations are vivid and engaging, sure to delight young readers and give them a sense of joy about the holiday.

## MIDDLE

Alvarez, E.N. (Ed.) (2007). *Día de muertos: ofrenda viva de nuestros pueblos indígenas*. Distrito Federal, Mexico: Programa Editorial Compromiso.

Appropriate for grades 4-9. This Spanish book will appeal to younger audiences because of the vivid photographs and explanations of Día celebrations; older readers will find the Spanish explanations challenging, but understandable. Offers snippets on the historical underpinnings of the celebration as well as modern day festivities.

Ancona, G. (1993). *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead*. New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.



Appropriate for grades 4-6. *Pablo Remembers* is part photo album, part glossary and part story centered on the preparations for Day of the Dead. It walks the readers through the preparations necessary for this elaborate festival. The vivid photographs and simple text will keep children engaged as they spend a day in the life of Pablo, preparing for and celebrating, Día de los Muertos.

Goldman, J. (2008). *Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Bill Publishing.

Appropriate for grades 3-6. This book is a beautiful illustration of how one Mexican family celebrates Día de los Muertos. “When the monarch butterflies return to her Mexican countryside, Lupita knows that Día de Muertos, ‘The Day of the Dead,’ is near.” So we learn about the approaching holiday and receive, simultaneously, a gentle introduction to the cycle of life and meaning of death. The brightly-colored pencil illustrations lend a magical feel to the text.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (1994). *Day of the Dead: A Mexican American Celebration*. New York, NY: Holiday House.

Appropriate for grades 4-6. This photograph and picture book gives a brief history of the roots of the Day of the Dead and discusses how it can be celebrated in the US by following the preparations and festivities of a Mexican-American family in Sacramento, CA. The book offers snippets of information and pictures on ofrendas, Día preparations, food, masks, festivities and the evolution of the holiday. While complete enough for the younger reader (ages 8-9), the 12-year-olds reading this book may be asking for a bit more depth into the cultural significance of the various Día components and the history of the Aztec and Mesoamerican peoples. Overall *Day of the Dead* is an easy to read and concise introduction to the holiday.

Lasky, K. (1994) *Days of the Dead*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.

Appropriate for grades 3-6. Photos accompany text that gives brief, personalized Day of the Dead stories in a few different places around Mexico. If one understands that this book is a story about the life, death and subsequent Day of the Dead celebrations, then it is a nice accompaniment to a lesson on the holiday and will lend a more personal feel. It does not provide much background on the holiday itself, but rather is centered on telling the stories of the lives of the characters preparing for the holiday. It will give kids a better understanding of the different ways in which kids their age live. This book is not



recommended as a stand alone reference, but will nicely complement other texts.

Luenn, N. (1998). *Gift for Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead / Un regalo para abuelita: En celebración del Día de los Muertos*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Publishing Company.

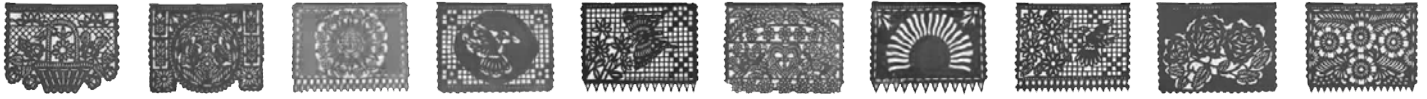
Appropriate for grades 3-6. This bilingual book tells the story of Rosita and her beloved grandmother who taught her how to plant, harvest, weave and cook. When Rosita's abuelita dies, her grandfather teaches her how she can still be close to her grandmother through the Day of the Dead. Some children may have difficulty with the subject matter, but this book presents death in a soft way, bringing the personal nature of Día de los Muertos to the forefront. Bilingual text is easy to understand on the page and the facing pages have very beautiful pictures painted in an almost abstract way - as a result, the book feels vibrant and engaging.

Pons, P.J. (2009). *Los muchos días de muertos en Morelos*. Distrito Federal, Mexico: Fondo Editorial.

Appropriate for grades 4-8. This Spanish language book contains information on Día de los Muertos celebrations in Morelos, Mexico. It offers guides for creating some of the most iconic pieces associated with the holiday and has nice photographs of the celebration in Morelos. Perfect for a Spanish reader looking to study the holiday in Mexico.

Rohmer, H. (1999). *Honoring Our Ancestors*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.

Appropriate for grades 2-6. While not focused on Día de los Muertos specifically, author Harriet Rohmer provides a valuable resource here for teaching about the holiday. *Honoring Our Ancestors* is a collection of fourteen renowned artists who remember and honor their ancestors through stories, art, and photographs. The edited and illustrated essays show the artists paying homage either to their family or spiritual ancestors. This text may be used in complement to other Día de los Muertos texts in order to encourage students to think creatively and seriously about how they might honor their own ancestors.



## HIGH

Arquette, K., Zocchi, A., and Vigil, J. (2008). *Day of the Dead Crafts: More Than 24 Projects That Celebrate Día de los Muertos*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc.

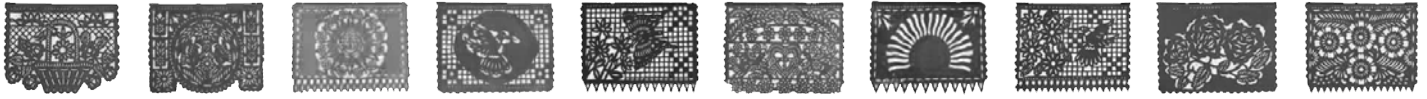
Appropriate for grades 9-12. This informative book consists of instructions for creating many art projects that are based on the customs of Día de los Muertos. Used on its own, it would be insufficient for explaining and understanding the holiday; however, used as a tool to help students understand the artistic elements of the holiday, it is meaningful. Projects include creating calaveras, masks, and skulls from paper mache, gourds, and sugar; ofrendas; jewelry, etc. This book should be paired with a more informative text so as not to risk trivializing the customs associated with this reverent holiday.

Andrade, M. (1999). *Through the eyes of the soul: Day of the Dead in Mexico / A través de los ojos del alma: Día de los Muertos en México*. San Jose, CA: La Oferta Review Newspaper, Inc.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. This is a bilingual text book that offers detailed information about the history of the people of Michoacan in relation to Day of the Dead practices. Offering dense information and pictures taken by the author on her travels, *Through the Eyes* could very easily be the focus of, or a great supplement to, a lesson centered on Day of the Dead. A word of caution with this book is the bilingual text can be confusing as both the Spanish and English are printed on the same page with only a slight difference in background color to distinguish between the two; it can pose a problem for teens that may have a reading or learning disability. Additionally, readers will need to bear in mind that this ethnography is of celebrations in two specific villages of Mexico (two of the most famous for their elaborate celebrations) and Day of the Dead celebrations may vary depending on geographic and cultural specificity.

This is one of four books that Andrade has written on the subject, each focusing on a different part of Mexico. Please see her other texts for examples of how the traditions vary in Mexico City, Mixquic, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxaca, San Luis Potosí, and Hidalgo, among others.

Berdecio, R. and Applebaum, S. (1972). *Posada's Popular Mexican Prints: 273 Cuts by José Guadalupe Posada*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.



Appropriate for grades 9-12. This book can be used as a complement to teaching about Día de los Muertos. Its compilation of nearly 275 woodcuts from José Guadalupe Posada make it an excellent text to introduce students to one of the iconic artists whose work has become so intertwined with Día de los Muertos imagery. The images are separated according to theme and include a special section dedicated to Posada's calaveras, the skeleton images that have become tied to the holiday.

Carmichael, E. and Sayer, C. (1992). *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

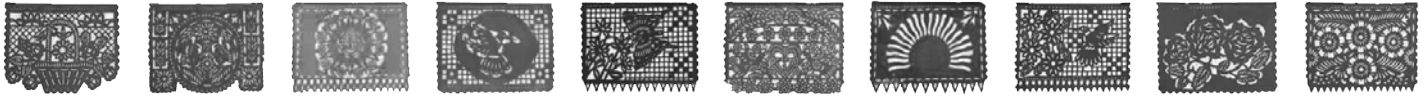
Appropriate for grades 9-12. This informative and lavishly illustrated book provides a valuable reference point for instructors interested in exploring the holiday in a deeper fashion, more attuned to the Mexican culture, art, and folklore that underlie it. The authors Carmichael and Sayer together present background information that begins with the historic origins of the holiday and continues through to various traditional and contemporary practices. Key Spanish terms, including cempasúchil (marigold) and copal (incense) punctuate the text.

Garciagodoy, J. (1998). *Digging the Days of the Dead: A Reading of Mexico's Día de los Muertos*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. Author Garcigodoy takes a unique approach to exploring Día de los Muertos, providing specific and detailed examinations of key aspects of the holiday. Rather than glossing the traditions overall, the text closely considers, for instance, the meaning of calaveras and their implications regarding gender, class, and identity politics in Mexico. Garcigodoy also traces the long chronology of the holiday, touching on the Prehispanic and Spanish-Catholic roots that have historically shaped associated customs. This is a valuable book for those interested in more fully understanding Mexican religion and culture, particularly in regards to Día de los Muertos.

Gutiérrez, R.A. et al. (1997). *Home Altars of Mexico*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. This book, illustrated by Dana Salvo, provides a wealth of factual photography to illustrate the customs of Día de los Muertos. Photographer Salvo traveled extensively through central and southern Mexico and in the process created deep relationships with the families whom she



interviewed. As a result, the photographs in the book are rare and accurate depictions of home altars from throughout the region, including altars constructed by indigenous people such as the Purpechan, Chamulan, and Zinacantan. This incredible book is a meaningful resource to introduce to students and will emphasize the diversity of peoples who celebrate Día de los Muertos and the variations in their respective customs.

Haley, S., Fukuda, C. (2004). *Day of the Dead: When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca*. Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books.

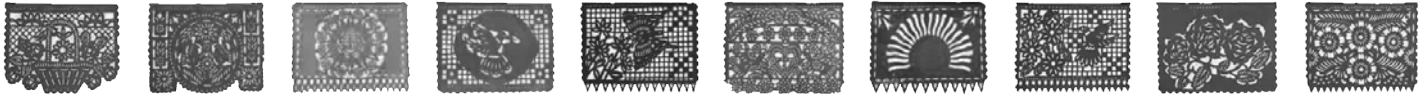
Appropriate for grades 10-12. This book explores the practices of Día de los Muertos through stunning photography, which is only enriched by a skillful and readable text that details extensively Día de los Muertos practices in Oaxaca, with much of the information supplied by individuals who have repeatedly practiced the holiday. The authors bring backgrounds in anthropology, archaeology, and the arts to bring the nuances of the holiday to the surface. Furthermore, because the text is rooted within a given locale, the authors avoid mistaken generalities and misleading blanket statements.

Iglesias y Cabrera, S.C. (2008). *Cuando los abuelos regresan: origen y simbología del Día de Muertos en México*. Distrito Federal, Mexico: Plaza y Valdes.

Appropriate for grades 10-12. This Spanish book offers detailed and lengthy information on the historical roots of Day of the Dead in Mexico from the Aztecs, Maya and Mesoamerican peoples to the current day festivals. It discusses the symbolism of the various celebrations (i.e. altars, bread, etc.). This is a great book for a native or advanced Spanish reader doing a report on Day of the Dead or seeking more in depth information.

López Casillas, M. (2008). *Images of Death in Mexican Prints*. Distrito Federal, Mexico: Editorial RM.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. This book expands the discussion of Día de los Muertos to look at the broader question of how Mexican culture deals and treats with death overall. Expert scholar López Casillas takes a moment here to consider Mexico's unique "blend of respect and irreverence for death and the afterlife" by surveying cultural imagery from Pre-Hispanic to contemporary times. The text is richly illustrated by accompanying depictions of death, allowing the book to serve more than simply an academic audience.



Norgert, K. (2006). *Days of death, days of life: Ritual in the popular culture of Oaxaca*. New York, NY: Colombia University Press.

Appropriate for grades 10-12. This book discusses death rituals in Oaxaca, Mexico, going beyond Day of the Dead traditions to also to discuss funerals, everyday dealings with death, and religious and cultural practices surrounding death. This scholarly book is a great addition to students wishing to delve deeper into the meanings of death in Oaxaca, which will bring them a deeper understanding of death in relation to Day of the Dead.

Ruiz, A. (Ed.) (2001). *La muerte en el espejo de la ciencia: tercer festival estudiantil de Día de muertos*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. This Spanish book is a compilation of the winners from a competition centered on Día de los Muertos. The book includes photos of art installations, the students' original essays and stories. A wonderful book for high school students, which will showcase to them what their peers think and visualize for Day of the Dead.

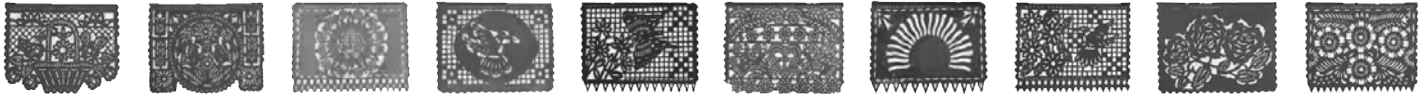
Salinas-Norman, B. (1994). *Indo-Hispanic Folk Art Traditions*. Oakland, CA: Piñata Publications.

Appropriate for grades 8-12. This book offers a set of year-round activities that are based in the customs of Día de los Muertos. All of the activities are meant to promote awareness and understanding of the holiday and its Indo-Hispanic roots. The text offers meaningful explanations of historical and cultural background alongside the art and performance ideas. Available as a Spanish-English bilingual edition.

Sayer, C. (2009). *Fiesta: Day of the Dead & Other Mexican Festivals*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Appropriate for grades 6-9. This book offers a more detailed account of Día de los Muertos and other festivals, tracing them through their catholic and indigenous origins. Photographs add nice visual weight to the text, helping students to visualize something that may be completely unfamiliar. Her chapter on Day of the Dead is elaborate, but easy to understand. This would be a good book to base a small book report or project off of. (Please note this review is only for the chapter pertaining to Día de los Muertos.

Trenchard, K. (1998). *Mexican Paper Cutting: Simple Techniques for Creating Colorful Cut-Paper Projects*.



New York, NY: Lark Books, 1998.

Appropriate for grades 9-12. Anyone who has studied or been otherwise exposed to the practices associated with Día de los Muertos are likely familiar with the common paper-cutting technique known as papel picado. In this book, Trenchard offers a collection of 20 different projects involving papel picado, from banners to luminarias. Alongside the hands-on instructions, Trenchard also provides a detailed history of the origins of the practice. A useful book to accompany other, more broadly informative texts.





## SUPPORTING ARTICLES

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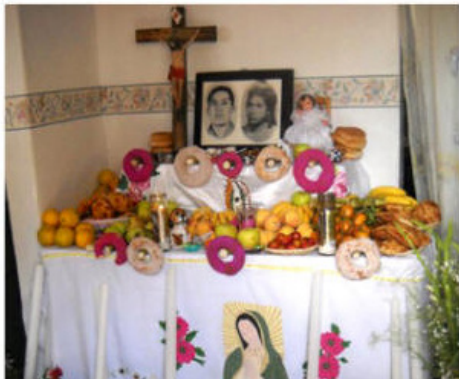
- “The Day of the Dead Ofrenda: A Heartfelt Work of Art” from Inside-Mexico (Article)
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## “THE DAY OF THE DEAD OFRENDAS: A HEARTFELT WORK OF ART”

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Ofrendas are an essential part of the Day of the Dead celebrations. The word ofrenda means offering in Spanish. They are also called altares or altars, but they are not for worshipping. Some people mistakenly think that Mexicans that set up altars for their defunct relatives are actually worshipping them. Nothing further from the truth. The vast majority of Mexicans are Christian Catholics, so they only worship God.



Ofrendas are set up to remember and honor the memory of their ancestors. Before setting an altar, they thoroughly clean their house. We must remember they are going to have very important “visitors”.

The ofrenda is set on a table, covered with a fine tablecloth, preferably white. Then the papel picado, cut tissue paper, is set over the cloth.

Several levels can be set on the ofrendas. Generally on the top level the images of Saints and the Crucifix are set.

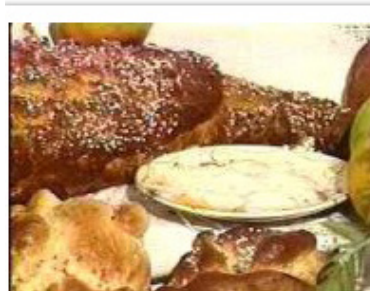




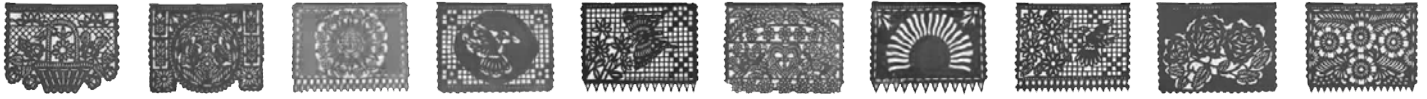
For each deceased relative a candle is set. Their light is thought to guide them on their way back. The light of the candles, also called *ceras* - waxes - symbolize Jesus Christ Reborn and faith.

Flowers, specially *Cempasuchitl* , adorn the ofrenda. Flowers represent the fugacity of life.

Salt and water are also essential; they are set to quench the thirst of the souls, tired from their long trip. Water also purifies and cleanses.



Incense, *Copal*, is burned and thought to elevate prayers to God.



Pictures of the defunct are placed on the ofrenda, as well as some of their favorite clothing, perhaps a hat or a shawl. For the children they place small toys.

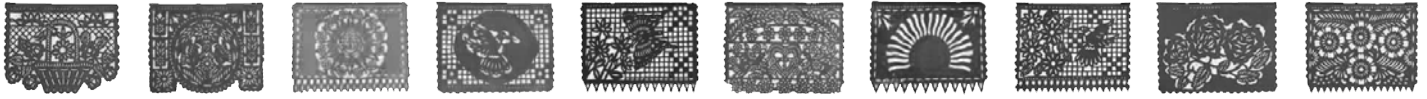
Food is specially prepared for the souls. Their preferred dishes are cooked for them and placed on the altar: mole, tamales, fruits, arroz rojo -red rice-, hot chocolate and dried fruit. Some times cigarettes or liquor if the dead relative enjoyed them when alive. And of course Pan de Muerto.



It is important to mention that they will not eat the food, they only enjoy the aroma.

Sometimes a cross is made with petals of the cempasuchitl flower. Also with the petals, paths are set to guide the souls to the ofrenda.

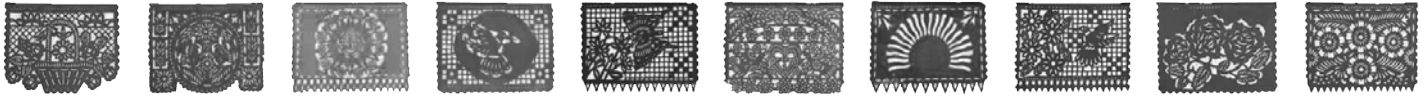




Sugar skulls and calacas -skeletons - are also included. In many towns, there are contests of ofrendas.



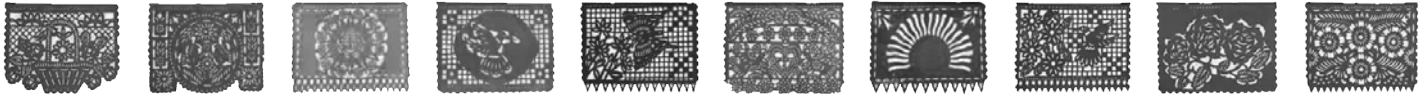
Judges go house by house and elect the three most beautiful altars. Ofrendas are works of art, ephemeral art that is!



## “MISCONCEPTIONS”

Written by May Herz and reprinted here with permission from Inside-Mexico.

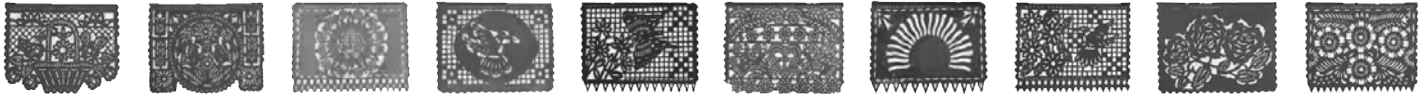
- El Día de los Muertos is not the Mexican version of Halloween. Mexicans have celebrated the Day of the Dead since the year 1800 B.C.
- It is not scary or morbid. There are no pictures or images of dead people, ghosts, witches, or the devil.
- The Day of the Dead is not a cult. This ritual has nothing to do with cults. It is a Catholic Christian ritual intermixed with folk culture. Going to mass is an essential aspect of this celebration.
- It doesn't honor death, but our dead relatives. We welcome the opportunity to reflect upon our lives, our heritage, our ancestors and the meaning and purpose of our own existence.
- Altars or ofrendas are not for worshiping but for offering our love and remembering our departed family members.
- It is not a sad ritual. It's a day of happiness because we will be remembering our loved ones. Although when in the graveyard, people assume an introspective attitude.
- The Day of the Dead is about love not fear.
- It is not a “strange” ritual. It is very similar to going to a grave and leaving flowers or stuffed animals, lighting a candle to remember the deceased.
- It is not a careless or fearless confrontation of death. It is a moment to reflect upon one's life and the cycle of life and death.



## “IDEAS ERRÓNEAS SOBRE LA CELEBRACIÓN DEL DÍA DE MUERTOS”

Written by May Herz and reprinted here with permission from Inside-Mexico.

- El Día de los Muertos no es la versión Mexicana de Halloween. Los Mexicanos han celebrado el Día de los Muertos desde el año 1800 A.C.
- No es una celebración que provoca miedo ni es mórbida. No se ponen fotos de la gente muerta, ni de fantasmas, brujas o demonios.
- El Día de los Muertos no es un culto. Es un ritual que no tiene nada que ver con cultos o sectas. Es un ritual Católico mezclado con el folklore popular. La celebración de la misa Católica es una parte esencial de esta maravillosa fiesta.
- No se honra o adora a la muerte, se honra la memoria de nuestros familiares que han muerto.
- Es una oportunidad para reflexionar sobre nuestra vida , nuestros familiares, sobre el sentido y el propósito de nuestra existencia.
- Los altares y ofrendas no son para adorar a los muertos sino para recordar a nuestros familiares difuntos y ofrecerles nuestro amor y recuerdos.
- El Día de los Muertos no es un día de tristeza, al contrario, ese día estamos contentos por que estamos recordando a nuestros seres queridos. Sin embargo cuando estamos en el cementerio nos volvemos pensativos y reflexionamos en una actitud de introspección.
- El Día de los Muertos está dedicado al amor no al miedo.
- No es un ritual “raro” o “extraño”. Es muy similar a la costumbre de ir al cementerio y dejar flores, muñecos de peluche, globos o velas para recordar a los difuntos.
- El Día de los Muertos no es una confrontación con la muerte, es un momento para reflexionar sobre nuestra vida y el ciclo de la vida y la muerte.



## “DAY OF THE DEAD: CELEBRATION, HISTORY & ORIGINS”

Written by May Herz and reprinted here with permission from Inside-Mexico.

From the beginning of time, man has felt the need to explain the mystery of life and death. Many civilizations and cultures have created rituals to try and give meaning to human existence.

- Where do we come from?
- Why does life end?
- Is there “life” after death?
- If so, what kind of “life”?
- Can we do something while alive so we can enjoy “life” after death?

These are some of the questions man has asked himself in order to understand our finite existence on this earth.

To the indigenous peoples of Mexico, death was considered the passage to a new life and so the deceased were buried with many of their personal objects, which they would need in the hereafter. Many times even their pets were sacrificed so they would accompany their masters on their long journey.

From pre Columbian times, El Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead has been celebrated in Mexico, and other Latin countries. This is a very special ritual, since it is the day in which the living remember their departed relatives. Sometimes, when people of other cultures hear for the first time about the celebration of the Day of the Dead, they mistakenly think it must be: gruesome, terrifying, scary, ugly and sad. Nothing further from the truth, Day of the Dead is a beautiful ritual in which Mexicans happily and lovingly remember their loved relatives that have died. Much like when we go to a graveyard to leave some lovely flowers on a tomb of a relative.

On November 1st and 2nd Mexico celebrates the Day of the Dead, and there are two very special places where this ritual is specially impressive: Mixquic, a small town in Mexico City, and in Janitzio, a charming





little island in the state of Michoacan.

The first inhabitants of Michoacan, the state where Janitzio is located, thought that because of the extraordinary beauty of this lake, it was the door to heaven and that through it the gods used to come down to earth.

One of the vastest and richest kingdoms of pre-Hispanic times was established in this Mexican state, the Purepecha Empire, which was able to maintain its independence from the powerful Aztecs, who at the time had control over most of Mesoamerica, Middle America.

Like the rest of the pre-Hispanic civilizations, these people succumbed to the Spanish conquerors, which imposed their customs, their language and their Catholic religion. The natives acquired these new cultural elements but blended and adapted them to their own culture; from this fusion new beliefs and ritual were born, such as the Celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Michoacan is probably one of the most representative of the merging of the two cultures, observed in their magnificent Spanish architecture, its spacious plazas or squares, and their folklore and religious fervor of their traditions.

Towards the last days of October, the entire region prepares for the great fiesta of Los Días de Muertos, the Days of the Dead. The square fills with stands that offer all types of colorful figures allusive to death, the most popular made of sugar.

Markets are filled with the cempasúchil flower; this orange marigold was the flower that the Aztecs used to remember their dead by. Its color represents the tones of earth and is used to guide the souls to their homes and altars.

Many families grow their own cempasúchil, believing that doing so is more appropriate for their offerings. Through their work and their care, these flowers grow and will finally adorn their ofrendas and their tombs.

Very early in October, all over the country, bakeries offer the delicious Pan de Muerto, Day of the Dead bread, made with flour, butter, sugar, eggs, orange peel, anise and yeast. The bread is adorned with strips of dough simulating bones and at the top a small round piece of dough that symbolizes teardrops. These breads are placed on the altars or ofrendas, and are also taken to the tombs in the graveyard.



Another traditional dish prepared for the celebration is the tasty Calabaza en Tacha, Sweet Pumpkin, a dessert prepared with pumpkin, cinnamon, and piloncillo, dark sugar cones.

Janitzio is one of the islands on lake Patzcuaro, with 1,500 inhabitants. Little white houses all with red tile roofs crowd the island, and at the summit the stone statue of one of the fathers of Mexico's Independence, José María Morelos, dominates the view.

To get to the island it is necessary to take launches that constantly go to and fro Janitzio, carrying and bringing passengers as well as provisions and merchandise.

There is no busier times for the launches than on the days of the dead.

On the eve of El Día de Muertos, the boats are loaded with people that are very busy taking the flowers and essential articles for the celebrations.

The island is dressing up with beauty and mysticism!

On the lake, one can also see the fishermen with their traditional nets that grace the view. They are called Butterfly Nets. Watching the fishermen go out in groups is a bewitching spectacle, particularly during the early hours of the morning, with the mist and the calming stillness of the lake. The people of Janitzio have conserved this form of fishing, as well as other millenarian customs and traditions that are part of the enchantment of this island. Especially distinctive is the way in which the women dress, and their methods of cooking.

In addition to fishing, they complement their economy with the production of handicrafts for sale to the many visitors that come to Janitzio, and in many small inns they offer the delicious pescado blanco, white fish, unique to Lake Patzcuaro.

Many of the locals work and study outside the island. Since there is only an elementary school on the islet, when the kids go on to high school they have to attend schools in Patzcuaro. You can imagine how striking it is to see the young students on their rowboats, crossing the lake early in the morning to get to school.

By October 31st, all the houses and shops, as well as the docks are decorated with cempasuchil flowers and



fruits from this region. The whole community participates enthusiastically in the preparations of this festivity!

Ofrendas are set up in the houses for their dead relatives. Generally ofrendas are set up on a table covered with a tablecloth and papel picado. They are decorated with sugar skulls, candles, cempasuchil flowers, and paper mache skeletons. Plates with the favorite foods of their dead relatives are also set on the ofrenda. Some have also liquor and cigarettes. On the ofrendas for the deceased children they place toys in addition to the food.

Characteristic of this region are the wooden arches that the families create and adorn with cempasuchil and fruits for the tombs in the cemetery. A very interesting tradition is that for the first three years that follow the passing away of a person, every November first, it is the godparents of the deceased who decorate the arch. When they finish, they go to the parents' house and lovingly offer it to them. During the morning of November 1st, the ceremony in honor of the Angelitos takes place in the cemetery.

The little angels or angelitos are the children that died and that could never experience the happiness and sorrows of adulthood.

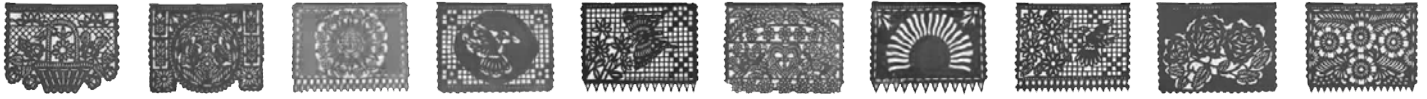
Very early the bells of the church start ringing, calling children's souls and the living relatives that will attend the ceremony.

At 6:00 A.M., in the small chapel of Janitzio, mass has already begun. Remember, this is fundamentally a Catholic ritual. After mass, the women and children go to the graveyard to clean and decorate the tombs. They bring with them flowers, bread and fruits in baskets covered with napkins that they embroidered themselves, as well as the copal, incense, that they will burn so that the aroma will help guide the returning souls.

Each family brings with them in honor of their deceased relatives.

A beautiful view enriches this mystical moment... in the distance, from the graveyard the fishermen can be seen with their canoes starting their working day. The lake is so peaceful, as if welcoming the spirits that are returning home.

Slowly, and quietly, the cemetery begins to fill up. The music of a band can be heard slowly approach-



ing the graveyard. It is a family that is carrying an arch accompanied by the band. Their son died a few months before, and this morning is the first Day of the Dead that they will be honoring him. This is why they have brought a band with them.

Music resonates fills the burial ground.

Around nine in the morning the ritual in honor of the deceased children ends. In a couple of hours, at nightfall, the most impressive celebration will begin, the ritual in which the souls of the deceased adults are honored.

It is surprising how in such a little island, thousands and thousands of visitors will arrive in order to witness this beautiful rite.

In the preceding hours, the carpenters laboriously work to set a stage for the folkloric dances that will be performed as part of the celebrations.

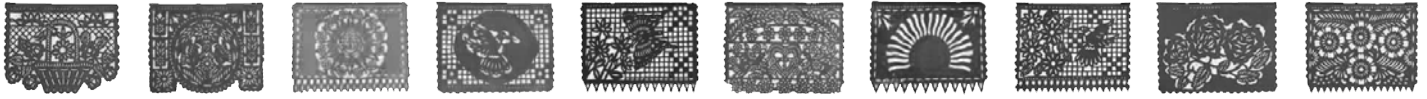
At night, with everything ready, the dances begin. The Danza de los Viejitos, Dance of the Old Men, representative dance of this region. In pre-Hispanic times this dance was performed as a ritual honoring the Sun.

Another popular dance is the Pescado Blanco, White Fish, through which the inhabitants of Janitzio express their gratitude to the lake, since fishing is their most important economical activity.

Also at night, as a way of expressing their gratitude to God for all the blessings they have been given, the fishermen go out to the lake with their canoes, lighting the way with torches and carrying out an impressive ritual with their butterfly nets.

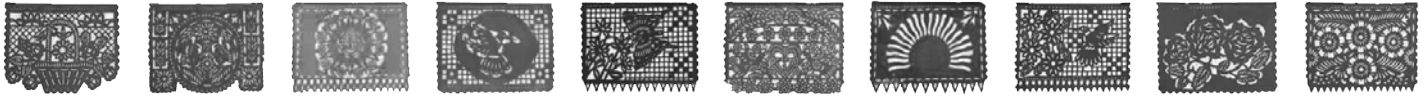
At midnight it is the graveyard of the island the place in which living and dead will reunite once again.

The bell at the entrance rings all night long, calling the souls to return and enjoy the splendid ceremony. It is mainly the women and children who silently find the tombs of their relatives, on which they place the lovely embroidered napkins and set candles, the flowers and food that their dead so much enjoyed when alive. This is how the night goes by, with prayers and chants from the women and children, while the men silently observe what goes on. Their songs and prayers are elevated to the sky, begging for the eternal rest of the souls and for the happiness of the living.



The essence of this beautiful ritual is to lovingly and happily remember the dead relatives, their life, and in this way, give meaning and continuity to human existence.

The Day of the Dead is a grand celebration of life itself!



## “THE DAY OF THE DEAD OFFERING”

Written by by Oscar Guzmán and reprinted here with permission from Inside-Mexico.

*“I am so accustomed to being alive  
I didn’t realize I had turned into a vulture”.*

Jorge Reyes  
(Mexican Composer)

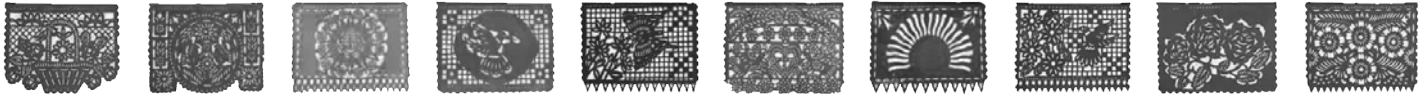
The sound of the rain, the smell of wet earth, the heat of fire, the color of the sky glowing in the afternoon and the taste of hot coffee: all sensory experiences that we keep with us and that accompany us as we go through our life on earth.

But it isn’t always like that. Some day, sooner or later, we cross the threshold that divides life and death, and then our perception of the world as we know it changes. And red after red is perhaps a more surprising color than any other shade that has ever been seen or imagined; we hear the sharpest sounds that have ever been heard and we discover the hidden beauty of the odors that are hidden from our earthly noses...Or perhaps, we won’t even need our senses -- sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch -- for we will have the new sensory experiences that our soul never used while life flowed by day to day.

What experiences manifest themselves in that moment? What new textures do we learn? What new senses do we discover? Until now, no one has been able to answer these questions that are as unsettling as they are old.

But there is a moment where simple belief is confused with faith, a magical moment in which whatever’s out there and our world reconcile, and crying and pain suffered in the wake of irremediable loss of a loved one is transformed. And body and spirit are reunited, the world of the alive and the kingdom of the dead, color, magic, tradition, mysticism untie to form one of the most celebrated parties in Mexico: the Day of the Dead.

The Day of the Dead offering is a living hope to spend just one more day with our loved ones from far away, from a remote place that allows them to return to earth, to the land of tastes, smells, colors, sounds



and textures...where they must relearn about senses and experiences that are no longer useful to them. They come back to share our elements, those which surely they also had at one time, and it is our only way to ensure communion in the festivity.

It is because of that that the flower zempaxochitl is yellow, so that it can be seen from far away. And therefore the trail of flowers is the first guide that shows the guest to the home, where the altar is awaiting his arrival. And it is also necessary to be able to recognize the aroma of the house, so the guest feels at home, so that he can identify and enjoy his stay in the place that holds so many memories. It is because of this that incense is used. It should be lit in the house to blend both aromas, so that later, when the guest comes, he won't get lost on the way. It is also said that smell is the only one of the five senses that is used after death. It is developed in order to make the return home a little easier.

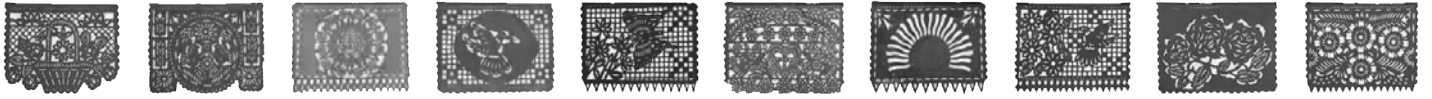
But it isn't only the memory of the senses and eternal life that allows the communion. It is also necessary to remind them of the world as they knew it, the world that they left behind, so full of material things, so sensory.

The presence of the four elements is required: water, earth, wind and fire. No offering can be complete if one of those elements is missing, and their symbolic representation is a fundamental part of the offering.

Water, the fountain of life, is put in a glass so that those who come thirsty can relieve their thirst after a long journey. Bread, made with products of the earth, is there to satisfy their hunger. Wind, which moves the colored papel picado that decorates and brings happiness to the table. Fire, which purifies everything and for this occasion comes in the form of a candle that is lit in their name so that we can invoke our dearly departed.

Later comes the banquet with all its specially prepared delicacies, the most splendid part of all the party. Depending on the resources and the geographical zone, there are tamales and buñuelos, coffee and atole, beans and corundas, mole and enchiladas -- all the food that the visiting loved one once enjoyed. It is a must to serve the food while it's hot so that it puts off a stronger aroma.

Other key items are the picture of grandma, uncle's hat, the rattle that the baby never played with. Sugar calaveras with the deceased's name on the forehead, and little pumpkins are all typical of this time of year. Images of saints are also present to guide and accompany our beloved back to their new home.



For the children there are candies and fruits; for the adults, cigarettes and tequila. For everyone there is the hope of having our loved ones at our table once again, sharing for a brief moment of our time as we know it...





## “OFRENDA DE DÍA DE MUERTOS: CONJUNCIÓN DE ELEMENTOS”

Written by by Oscar Guzmán and reprinted here with permission from Inside-Mexico.

*“Estoy tan acostumbrado a estar vivo que ni me di cuenta cuando me volví zopilote”*

Jorge Reyes

(Mexican Composer)

El sonido de la lluvia, el olor de la tierra mojada, el calor del fuego, el color del cielo arrebolado en la tarde y el sabor del café caliente: sensoriales experiencias que guardamos y nos acompañan a través del recorrido por la vida terrena que transitamos.

Pero no siempre es así. Algún día, tarde o temprano, cruzamos el umbral que divide la vida y la muerte, y entonces cambia nuestra percepción del mundo tal y como lo conocemos. Y el rojo después del rojo es un color quizás más sorprendente que cualquiera de las tonalidades que se hayan visto o pensado jamás, los sonidos más graves quizás se hacen audibles y descubrimos la belleza escondida de los olores ocultos a nuestro débil olfato terrestre... o tal vez, muy probablemente ni siquiera son nuestros sentidos, vista, oído, olfato, gusto y tacto, necesarios ante las nuevas experiencias sensoriales que registran aquellas áreas que nuestra alma nunca utilizó mientras la vida fluía día a día.

¿Qué experiencias se manifiestan en ese momento? ¿qué texturas nuevas aprendemos? ¿qué sentidos nuevos descubrimos? Hasta ahora, nadie nos ha de dar respuesta a esas preguntas, tan inquietantes como antiguas para las culturas precolombinas.

Pero hay un momento donde la simple creencia se confunde con la fe, un momento mágico en el que el más allá y nuestro mundo se reconcilian, y el llanto y el dolor sufridos ante la irremediable pérdida del ser querido se transforma, y se vuelven a unir la carne y los espíritus, el mundo de los vivos y el reino de los muertos, color, magia, tradición y misticismo vertidos en una de las fiestas más celebradas por los mexicanos: El día de muertos.

La ofrenda del día de muertos es la esperanza viva de convivir al menos por un día con quienes desde lejos, de un lugar muy lejano y remoto, se les permite regresar a la tierra, aquí, a esta tierra de sabores, olores,



colores, sonidos y texturas... donde tienen que reaprender los sentidos y experiencias que ya no les son útiles, o al menos, compartir con nuestros elementos, aquellos que seguramente también tuvieron alguna vez como nosotros, y es nuestra forma, única posible conocida, de asegurar la comunión en la festividad.

Por eso el color amarillo de la flor de zempaxochitl, para que puedan verlo con su mínima vista, y es entonces el camino de flores la guía primera que conduce al convite en la casa, donde el altar espera su llegada. Y necesario es también reconocer el olor de la propia casa, para que se sientan a gusto, para que se identifiquen y puedan disfrutar la estancia en el lugar de sus recuerdos. Por eso se recurre al uso del somerío o incienso, que debe ser encendido desde la propia casa y fundir ambos olores, para luego ser llevado al exterior, y así evitar que se pierda en el camino que ha de traerle de vuelta al hogar. Se dice además que el olfato es el único de los sentidos que se utilizan en el más allá, y se desarrolla para facilitar el regreso guiado por el aroma de la propia vivienda.

Pero no es solo el recuerdo de los sentidos y la vida terrena lo que permite la comunión. Es también necesario recordarles el mundo tal y como ellos lo conocieron, el mundo que abandonaron, tan lleno de materia, tan sensorial.

Se requiere la presencia entonces de los cuatro elementos con los que todo está formado, en conjunción: Agua, tierra, viento y fuego. Ninguna ofrenda puede estar completa si falta alguno de estos elementos, y su representación simbólica es parte fundamental de la ofrenda.

El agua, fuente de vida, en un vaso para que al llegar puedan saciar su sed, después del largo camino recorrido. El pan, elaborado con los productos que da la tierra, para que puedan saciar su hambre. El viento, que mueve el papel picado y de colores que adorna y da alegría a la mesa. El fuego, que todo lo purifica, y es en forma de veladora como invocamos a nuestros difuntos al encenderla y decir su nombre.

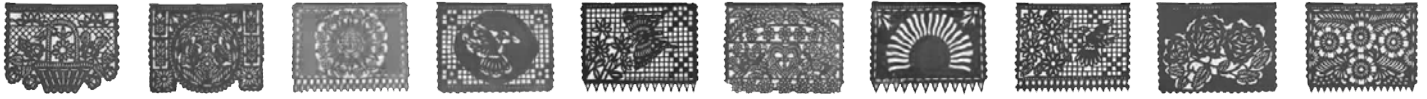
Luego, presentar los manjares que se preparan especialmente es el ágape en mayor esplendor de toda la fiesta. Dependiendo de los recursos y la zona geográfica, rondan los tamales y los buñuelos, el café y el atole, los frijoles y las corundas, el mole y las enchiladas, comida que el difunto acostumbraba y “que no se te vaya a olvidar aquel guisado que tanto le gustaba a tu abuelo, ya ves que siempre se lo hemos puesto en su altar”. Hay que servir los alimentos calientes, para que despidan más olor, y puedan así disfrutar del banquete.

No puede faltar la foto de la abuela, el sombrero del tío o la sonaja con la que el bebe no jugó. Calaveras de



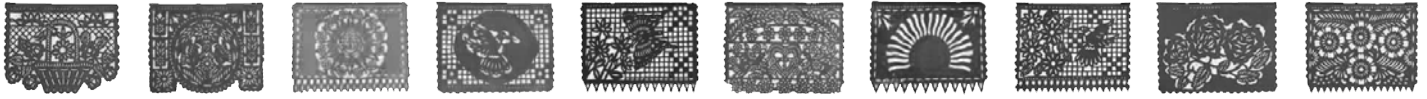
azúcar con los nombres de los convidados y calabaza en tacha, dulce típico de la época. Imágenes de santos, para que los acompañen y guíen por el buen camino de regreso.

Para los niños, dulces y fruta, para los adultos, cigarros y tequila. Para todos, la esperanza de tenerlos en la mesa una vez más, compartiendo un breve instante de tiempo, de nuestro tiempo como nosotros al fin lo conocemos...



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