



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 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.