

Dia De Los Muertos

Written and Photographed by Elizabeth Boerner
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A woman dressed as Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec priestess of The Dead, at a Día De Los Muertos celebration in Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, the Mexican holiday Dia De Los Muertos or Day of The Dead celebrated in neighborhood communities is becoming more and more common. Like many, I love Halloween and I find myself strangely drawn to this Mexican version of it. The imagery is fantastic, the altars thought provoking, and community events exhilarating. It is a holiday for young and old alike to honor and celebrate those that have died.

The Day of the Dead holiday dates back to pre-Hispanic times in Mexico. The Aztecs revered the dead as Gods and in August celebrated this special holiday dedicated

to The Dead and the God of Death, Mictlantecuhtli. (Gnojewski p.15) The Aztecs considered Death a part of the process of life, and also a release from the harshness of it. They believed death allowed the soul to move into a world suited to the individual and tailored to how they died. (Lasky p.14) The Aztecs had a great reverence for the skull, viewing it as the symbol of death and rebirth. They also erected altars, in honor of the dead, made from a bark paper called amatl, covered it with piles of freshly harvested fruit and burned copal incense. (Gnojewski p.17)

After the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, they sent their missionaries to convert them to Christianity. The Spanish achieved some success with their mission but were unable to eradicate this holiday from the people's culture, and therefore combined the Aztec holiday with their Euro-Christian holidays of All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day, which were also concerned with the dead (Miller and Gnojewski p.23). This holiday is what is now commonly known as Dia De Los Muertos.

One of the most important facets of this holiday is to erect an altar, called ofrenda, which means offering, (Hoyt-Goldsmith p.15) to recognize and honor the life of a loved one who has died. What fascinates me about these altars is how each one is unique. Walking from altar to altar at a community event, or an art gallery, a thoughtful observer notices the details of the person's life through the objects and mementos on the altar. Quite often the creator/artist is there beside the altar and will share stories about their loved one while explaining the significance of particular objects in the altar. Sometimes an altar is made for others besides family and friends. It can be made to honor a loved pet, to be a political statement to showcase a cause such as AIDS or to recognize victims of a recent natural disaster. Whenever I attend one of these public events in town, I leave feeling full of deep thoughts. For instance, once I went to an art gallery reception in Pasadena to see a friend's painting in exhibit at a Dia De Los Muertos show. I was looking longer than usual at this particular one. A woman sitting in a chair next to it asked me what I found so interesting. I told her I liked seeing the photographs of the woman from when she was a baby through childhood and adulthood. And, the hand made jewelry, I said, was awesome. She told me she made the altar and her sister had made the jewelry until she died of breast cancer. She went on to tell me a little about her sister, and then told me why she made this altar. For many years the sisters didn't get along and hadn't spoken. As they reached their forties, they contacted one another and were in the process of reconciling when the one sister became ill and died. The surviving sister went on to tell me that she hoped making this altar for her sister would somehow bring reconciliation and peace to the unresolved issues of the relationship. The openness of her life and her sister's life was so loving, so human, I was deeply touched. As I moved on to the next altar, I not only enjoyed the visual beauty and the arrangement of nick-knacks but peered through to a deeper depth in this tradition. The diversity of individualism was refreshing and it was interesting to see how others lived having different priorities than myself. These altars were also meeting the needs of the survivors. I found many of the creators of the altars wanted to talk about their loved one. I found that they were all different and their perspectives unique. I was inspired.

Over several of these seasons, I observed and asked questions. I discovered that anyone can make a Day of The Dead altar even those who are not Hispanic or Catholic. Making one can be a healing experience and an excellent way to celebrate the life of a beloved person who has passed away. There are no specific rules for making one but

there are traditions and specific traditional items used, often dating back to ancient Aztec times. A simple family altar in the home can be set up in any available space but usually on a table. The table is covered with a cloth and a photo of the person to be honored is positioned prominently on the altar.

Traditional Altar Items

- *Candles- at least one for each dead loved one, if possible
- *Copal Incense- used since Aztec times
- *Skulls- often made of sugar
(Sugar skull molds and recipes can be easily found online)
- * Papel picado- (cut paper mat or flag)
- *Flowers- marigolds are most common
- *Water, bread and salt – food for the dead
- *Soap and small towel- for the visiting dead to wash up with
- *Chocolate

For me, it is the addition of the Deceased's personal items that give this tradition its depth and relevance. Selecting the items for the altar is part of the process. The chosen items are usually representations or actual items the Dead possessed or used in their life. Often, they are items that brought the departed joy or were meaningful to them in some way. For instance, if the loved one enjoyed playing a cello, the altar could include a miniature cello or a photograph of them playing the cello or the altar could even be made on the cello.

One of my favorite altars I remember seeing was made on an vintage stove beautifully decorated with cooking pots, spoons, all kinds of vegetables, lots of garlic and cook books. In addition, it had a witty biography of the person who died. It was in a celebrity section at an event and was made for Julia Child. Being creative and capturing the passions, interests and accomplishments of the loved one, not only can have a healing aspect to the grieving process but also honors the life and memory of that person. It is traditional for the family to gather and talk about what the dead loved one enjoyed such as food, movies, clothing, activities and also to tell stories of things they did or how they are missed.

Making an altar can be a very personal, rewarding experience and a positive way to celebrate the lives of those whose souls have moved on. It is a tradition anyone can adopt if they so chose. Personally, I embrace this Mexican tradition and delight in its bitter-sweetness. Also, in a way, I believe it brings me in connection to my spirit of place. Though I am of European ancestry and embrace my Celtic origins and traditions, it

somehow feels natural to adopt and become sensitive to the native culture of this place where I live, America.

A public ofrenda honoring a dead loved one.



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Miller, Carlos, <http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/history/>
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