

Google Arts & Culture

# Learn Together: El Día de los Muertos



## Using the lesson plan and Google Arts & Culture resources

This lesson plan is designed to support you as you explore Google Arts & Culture stories and exhibits related to the lesson topic. The images you will see here are just a sample of the media—texts, images, audio, and video—available to you on the Google Arts & Culture website. A parent or teacher might be guiding you through the lesson, or you might choose to complete it on your own.

All you need to access the lesson is an internet connection and a web browser. You may want to take notes, whether you do that digitally or with paper and pen.

The lesson plan has an **introduction**, which will describe the topic and provide some background information that will help you understand what you are seeing, hearing, and reading. Then the lesson will take you on a journey from one **Story** or **Exhibit** to another, fill in some details along the way, and pose **questions** that will help you focus on important ideas. Some lesson plans include a **project** related to the lesson topic. All end with a **quiz** and some **ideas for exploring the topic further**.

The lesson plan includes **questions** about the main stories and exhibits, and there is also a **quiz**. You will want to write answers to the questions in a notebook or on a piece of paper. Then you can check all your answers when you've finished the lesson.

**Resources on the Google Arts & Culture** website include Themes, Stories, Museum Views, items, and images.

- ❖ **Themes** bring together stories, exhibits, collections, images, audio, and video files that relate to a topic.
- ❖ In a **Story**, clicking on the arrow on the right side of a slide will move you forward. The arrow on the left side takes you back. Sometimes, clicking on the right arrow will zoom you in on an image. Just keep clicking to keep moving forward. Audio and videos on slides will play automatically. Clicking on an image title will take you to a page with more information about it.
- ❖ In **Museum Views**, you move through a 3D space. Click to move forward. Click, hold, and move the cursor left or right to turn.
- ❖ An **item** will take you to an individual **image**, where you can zoom in and sometimes read more about the artefact.



Skeleton Couple Altar, LVM 2012/2012, Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC)

**In this lesson, you will learn about:**

- ❖ what *el Día de los Muertos* means to Latinos all over the world.
- ❖ the origins of *el Día de los Muertos*.
- ❖ how Latinos celebrate *el Día de los Muertos*.

**You will:**

- ❖ view some stories and exhibits about what goes on at *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations.
- ❖ answer some questions about what you have seen and read.

This lesson will take **30–45 minutes** to complete.



Altar with marygolds, SLC2015/2015  
Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC)

## Learn Together: El Día de los Muertos

*El Día de los Muertos*, which translates to “the day of the dead” in English, is a holiday celebrated each year on November 2<sup>nd</sup> in countries across Latin America. While this holiday comes only days after Halloween, *el Día de los Muertos* is a celebration of the unity of life and death, rather than a holiday meant to be spooky and scary. On this holiday, people remember with joy the loved ones they have lost, inviting their spirits back to celebrate with the community.

*El Día de los Muertos* is not simply a Latino version of Halloween. Often, celebrations begin on October 31<sup>st</sup>, and, as in other cultures, Latino cultures often celebrate Halloween with costumes and parades. But people also begin preparing their offerings to their deceased loved ones in time to welcome them two days later. Celebrating *el Día de los Muertos* each year as its own holiday distinct from Halloween is an important way for Latinos all over the world to embrace and celebrate their unique shared culture.

**As you view the exhibits and stories in this lesson, think about these questions:**

- ❖ How is *el Día de los Muertos* related to but also different from Halloween?
- ❖ How does *el Día de los Muertos* reflect the values of Latino cultures?
- ❖ How can celebrating a holiday like *el Día de los Muertos* help people stay connected to their culture?



Rivera Family Day of the Dead Offering in the Hiastec Tradition,  
Joan D. (Deirdre) Hackett 1992, National Museum of Mexican Art

## Nuestras Historias: Day of the Dead

Celebrating *el Día de los Muertos* is an important part of Latino culture for Latinos all over the world. The traditions practiced on this holiday are derived from several ancient pre-Hispanic cultures, including the Aztecs, Mayans, and Toltecs. Continuing these traditions is a meaningful and joyful way for Latinos to celebrate their culture and identity.

Click [here](#) to learn about traditions practiced on *el Día de los Muertos*.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What is the purpose of the *ofrenda*?
2. Why do many families set up the *ofrenda* before November 2<sup>nd</sup>?
3. How does the *ofrenda* dedicated to a mother who died from breast cancer help you understand the importance of *el Día de los Muertos*?

To learn about the importance of *ofrendas*, click [here](#).



## Honoring Our Ancestors

Although the name of the holiday sounds morbid, *el Día de los Muertos* is truly a celebration of ancestors and a chance to welcome back the spirits of the departed. Today, *el Día de los Muertos* festivities still reflect the Mesoamerican belief that death is a natural part of life, and that those who have died are still a part of the community.

Click [here](#) to learn about how Latinos honor their ancestors on *el Día de los Muertos*.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. Why did pre-Columbian civilizations begin celebrating *el Día de los Muertos*?
2. Why are objects symbolizing water, wind, fire, and earth included on the *ofrenda*?
3. How can *el Día de los Muertos* be a bonding experience for families and communities?



Ofrenda Night, LVM 2012/2012, Smithsonian Latino center (SLC)

## Colorful Calaveras for the Day of the Dead

Hand-crafted art and decorations are staples for *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations all over the world, and the most recognizable symbol is the *calavera*, or skull. People make *calaveras* out of various materials, some for decorative purposes and some for eating. Either way, rather than looking like the frightening displays you might see on Halloween, *calaveras* are colorful and joyful.

Click [here](#) to learn about the purpose of *calaveras* on *el Día de los Muertos*.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What is the significance of the *calaveras de azucar*?
2. How do *calaveras* contribute to a festive atmosphere on *el Día de los Muertos*?
3. How can *calaveras* represent both pre-Columbian culture as well as present-day culture?

## La Catrina: Lady of the Dead

Most *calaveras* are not meant to represent any one person, but the *calavera* Catrina, which can be seen many times in many places on *el Día de los Muertos*, seems to have a personality of her own. Like all other *calaveras*, Catrina is a skeleton, but she is depicted as beautiful and elegant. She symbolizes the idea that whether a person is beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, smart or not so smart, we will all return to the earth one day.

Click [here](#) to learn about the origin of Catrina and her role on *el Día de los Muertos*.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. How was the character of Catrina created?
2. Why is Catrina depicted as dressed in fancy, European clothing?
3. How does the figure of Catrina represent the theme of *el Día de los Muertos*?



## Quiz

Read the questions and write your answer in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. Why are marigolds often included in *ofrendas*?
2. How is Catholicism reflected in *el Día de los Muertos* traditions?
3. What is one dominant theme of *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations?
4. Why are music and dancing part of *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations?
5. How is Mexicanidad related to *el Día de los Muertos*?
6. Why is the monarch butterfly an important symbol of *el Día de los Muertos*?
7. How was *La Catrina* a satire of the upper classes?
8. How do *calaveras* represent the values of the time in which they are made?

## Explore Further

This lesson has given you some vocabulary to talk about *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations. It has also introduced you to some basic ideas that are relevant to this topic. To learn more about *el Día de los Muertos*, click [here](#).



## It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned about how Latino cultures all over the world celebrate *el Día de los Muertos*. Now it's your turn to do something. Here are some ideas for projects that you can do at home or in the classroom.

- ❖ Make your own *calavera* and decorate it. You can make a *calavera* out of wood or papier-mâché. Decorate your *calavera* with flowers, painted designs, or any symbols that are meaningful to you or your community.
- ❖ Think about your own ancestors. What would you include in an *ofrenda* for your ancestors? Make a poster showing what types of food and decorations your *ofrenda* would have.
- ❖ Do some research about the origin of *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations in Mesoamerican cultures and how those cultures were impacted by the Spanish Conquest. Make a timeline showing how *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations changed over time.

## Answers

### Nuestras Historias: Day of the Dead

1. The *ofrenda* is an altar with offerings, such as food and flowers, to the souls of the deceased. Its purpose is to welcome back the spirits of the dead.
2. Many families want to ensure the *ofrenda* is ready before November 2<sup>nd</sup> to give plenty of time for their deceased loved ones to return.
3. The *ofrenda* dedicated to the mother who died from breast cancer has offerings for the mother but also pink ribbons that symbolize the fight against breast cancer. The daughter's story and the *ofrenda* help us recognize what we can learn from the mother's story, which is an important part of *el Día de los Muertos*.

### Honoring Our Ancestors

1. They believed that death is a natural part of life and even integral to life since crops can grow from ground where the dead are buried. For this reason, they believed it was important to honor the dead by welcoming them with offerings and celebrations.
2. Water, wind, fire, and earth are the four elements of life. In Latino cultures, death is seen as a natural part of life, so the dead value these elements as much as the living.
3. Families come together to tell stories, dance, make art, and remember their loved ones. These activities can help people bond more than most other holidays.

### Colorful Calaveras for the Day of the Dead

1. The *calaveras de azucar* represent the sweetness of life. They can also be used as an offering of food for the spirits of the dead.
2. The *calaveras* are decorated brightly and often adorned with flowers, which makes them festive instead of frightening.
3. The *calaveras* date back to pre-Columbian cultures, but they can be decorated to reflect the values and current events of today.

### La Catrina: Lady of the Dead

1. An artist first made *La Catrina* as a satire of Mexican society in 1910.
2. Catrina is dressed in fancy, European clothing to show that even the rich and beautiful will one day die.
3. The theme of *el Día de los Muertos* is that death is a natural part of life. A character such as Catrina, who is depicted as rich and beautiful, shows that death does not discriminate based on class or appearance.

## Answers

### Quiz

1. Marigolds are known as the flowers of death in Latino cultures, but they are also included on *ofrendas* because their brightness can help light the way for the spirits of the deceased to the altars.
2. The *calaveras de azucar* are part of a tradition from the Catholic religion in which religious altars were decorated with sugar art.
3. A dominant theme of *el Día de los Muertos* celebrations is the unity of life and death.
4. Music and dancing were ways to welcome back deceased spirits in pre-Columbian cultures. Today, people still celebrate with music and dancing to honor the spirits and create a festive atmosphere.
5. The word *Mexicanidad* means “Mexicanness” or what makes up a Mexican identity. Because *el Día de los Muertos* originated and evolved from Mesoamerican cultures, it is an important part of Mexican history and therefore a way for Mexicans on either side of the US-Mexico border to connect with their culture.
6. Monarch butterflies are orange, so, like marigolds, they can guide spirits to their loved ones. Monarchs also symbolize the return of the loved ones’ souls, as Monarchs return to Mexico around the time of *el Día de los Muertos*.
7. The figure of *La Catrina* was a satire of the upper classes because she is dressed in clothes that seem ridiculously opulent for a skeleton. The artist used her to point out that no amount of riches can prevent death.
8. The *calaveras* can depict politics and current events of the times in which they are made, giving them even more significance in regard to the impermanence of life.



**Death among dualities, Hector Bayona Acosta, 2007/2007. MUMEDI**