



HISTORIC MURPHYS DAY OF THE DEAD Saturday, November 7th 2015

How to make an Ofrenda or Altar for Dia de los Muertos

Origins

The Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico can be traced back to a precolumbian past. Rituals celebrating the deaths of ancestors had been observed by these civilizations perhaps for as long as 2,500–3,000 years. In the pre-Hispanic era, skulls were commonly kept as trophies and displayed during the rituals to symbolize death and rebirth.

The festival that became the modern Day of the Dead fell in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar, about the beginning of August, and was celebrated for an entire month. The festivities were dedicated to the goddess known as the "Lady of the Dead", corresponding to the modern Catrina.

In most regions of Mexico, November 1 is to honor children and infants, whereas deceased adults are honored on November 2. This is indicated by generally referring to November 1 mainly as *Día de los Inocentes* ("Day of the Innocents") but also as *Día de los Angelitos* ("Day of the Little Angels") and November 2 as *Día de los Muertos* or *Día de los Difuntos* ("Day of the Dead").

First off, you can really make the altar any way you want. There's no right or wrong way to do it the idea is that it's something personal that speaks to you. That said, here are some general elements to include if you never built one before.

The most important thing to put on your Day of the Dead altar is a photograph of the person to whom you are dedicating the altar. A large photograph of you loved one is the centerpiece. Smaller, informal snapshots can adorn the lower levels.

1. FLOWERS

Cempasuchil, also spelled *cempoalxochitl* (comes from Nahuatl it means the flower with four hundred lives.) is an orange marigold. It's Mexico's traditional Day of the Dead flower and it grows wild in many parts of the country. During Day of the Dead season. It is customary to include vases of *Cempasuchil*, petals, or rings of flowers on one's altar. Also the flower petals form a path for the spirits to bring them to their banquet. This flower grow and wilt quickly, reflecting the fleeting nature of life. Their aroma helps lure a spirit back.

2. FRUIT

Fresh fruit- whatever is in season oranges, bananas, or the favorite fruit of the person you are making the altar for. It is traditional to have a bag of tejocotes, known in English as Mexican hawthorn apple. Tejocotes are a mild, seeded fruit that taste like a cross between an apple and a pear. No one eats them raw. Instead, you boil the fruit in syrup or cook it to make

Ponche. In the case of the Day of the Dead altar, the fruit, along with oranges and other seasonal items, symbolize the earth's bounty. It's something for your loved ones to eat on their journey into the next world.

3. PAPEL PICADO Which is bright colored tissue paper with cut out designs. The paper can be either handmade or purchased. Three important colors are purple (for pain) white (for hope) and pink for (the celebration) Serves as a colorful and meaningful trim. Black represents death, purple means grief or mourning, pink is for celebration, white symbolizes hope, and yellow stands in for the sun. It also symbolizes wind. It's draped around the edges of the altar, or used to decorate the area behind the altar, if needed.

4. CANDLES

Candles are also placed all over the altar. Purple candles again are used to signify pain. On the top level of the altar, four candles need to be placed, signifying the four cardinal points. The light of the candle will illuminate the way for the dead upon their return.

5. WATER

There is a pitcher of fresh water to quench their thirst and a bottle of liquor to remember the good times of their life. Also water or, more typically, fruit punch is

6. The Day of the Dead Bread, Pan de Muerto, should be accompanied by fruit and candy placed on the altar. Pan de Muerto is plain round sweet bread sprinkled with white sugar and crisscrossed bone shape laid on top. You can also add the person's favorite food. The deceased's favorite knickknacks, food, or tools (if he was a barber, for example, his straight razor, foam brush, and scissors) create a familiar setting for his return.

7. SUGAR SKULLS

Three candy skulls are placed on the second level. These represent the Holy Trinity. On the center of the third level a large skull is placed, this represents the Giver of Life. Sugar skulls, or calaveras, add a lighthearted touch for both the dead and the living.

8. EXTRA ITEMS

A towel, soap and small bowl are put on the altar so that the returning ghost can wash their hands after their long trip. A small cup of salt a symbol of purification, is for the dead to season the food you've offered them.

Burning copal is a holdover tradition from the Aztecs, who used the incense as an offering to the gods. It is still used in Catholic funeral masses.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS FOR YOU TO HAVE A GREAT EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR "OFRENDA" OR ALTAR. TO HONOR THE PERSON/PEOPLE TO WHOM YOU ARE DEDICATING IT TOO. BUILDING AN ALTAR FOR DIA DE LOS MUERTOS DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A TIME-CONSUMING OR EXPENSIVE PROJECT. THE PURPOSE IS REMEMBRANCE.

It can be as elaborate or as simple as you want to make it. By building an altar we are acknowledging that we go on and that not being physically present isn't the same as being gone.