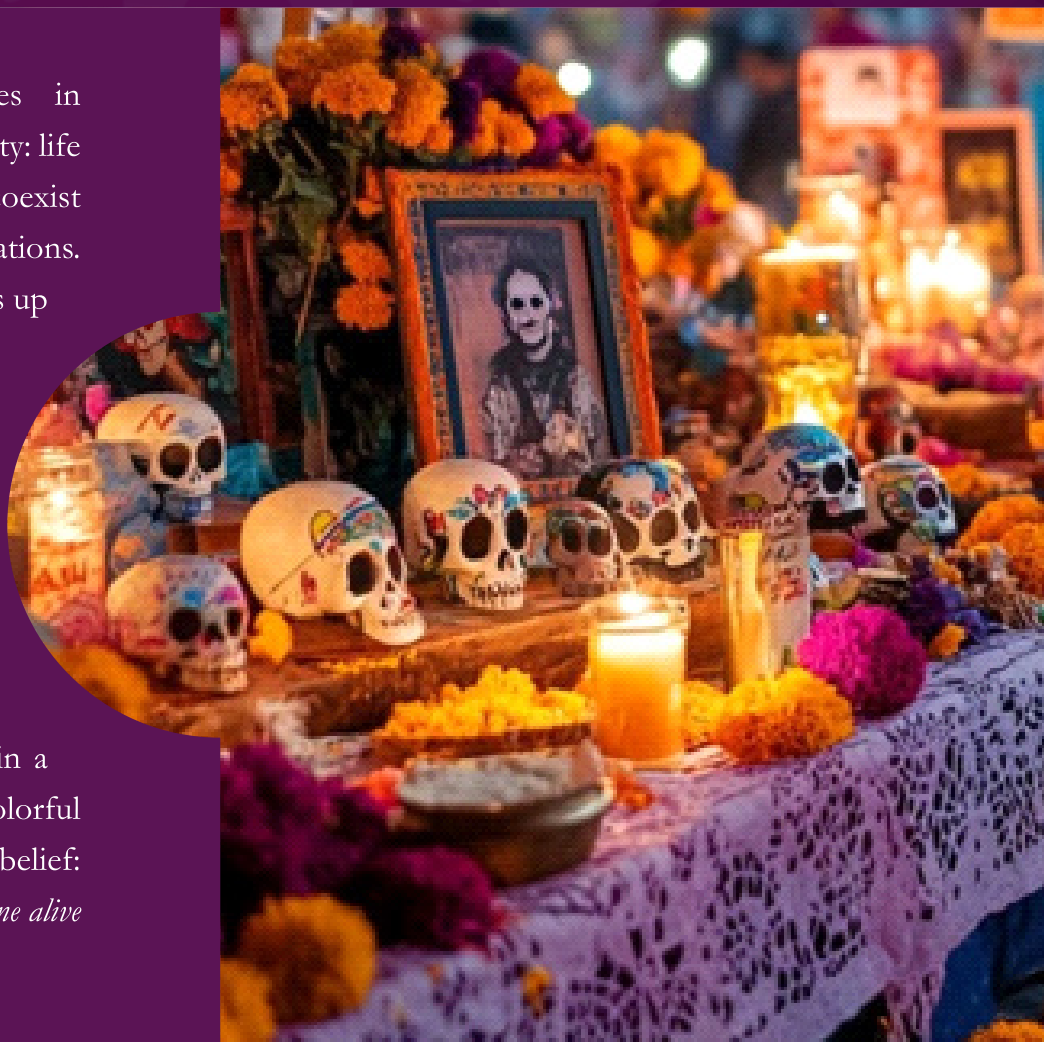




Day of the Dead

A Day to Remember, A Life to Celebrate.

The indigenous cultures in Mexico perceived death as a duality: life and death, which made Death coexist with all of their cultural manifestations. Therefore, Death's symbol shows up everywhere, it is constantly conjured and represented in a single figure, which is why its celebration has been kept alive through time. Day of the Dead has been celebrated for at least three thousand years, and it is a time to remember relatives and friends in a festive atmosphere, with colorful tradition at the core of the main belief: *nobody is truly dead until there is no one alive to remember us.*





The origins of the Day of the Dead tradition precede the arrival of the Spanish. Within the prehispanic vision, death was the beginning of the journey to the Mictlán - the realm of the dead - which lasted four days. At their destination, the traveller would offer gifts to the lords of Mictlán: Mictlantecuhtli (lord of the dead) and his partner Mictecacíhuatl (Lady of the inhabitants of the abode of the dead). The Lord and Lady of Mictlán would then send them to one of nine regions, where the dead would stay for four years before continuing their life at the Mictlán, their final resting place called “obsidian of the dead.”

In Prehispanic burials, the dead were accompanied by two types of objects: the ones that had been previously owned and used by them and the ones that they might need during their journey to the underworld.

The Colonial period represented a time of syncretism between the Prehispanic and Christian cultures. The christian evangelist efforts had to concede before the deep and steadfast indigenous beliefs and traditions. Therefore, All Souls Day blended in with prehispanic practices, with Mexico being a pluricultural and multiethnic country where each group of indigenous people added different meanings and rituals to their own celebration. This is what makes Day of the Dead so unique, as it is a festivity where ancient traditions are brought to present day celebrations, treating death as a natural continuation of life, rather than a reason for mourning.

During the Day of the Dead celebrations, it is believed that the souls of the dear departed ones come to visit in the course of a seven day period:

🦴 **27th of October** - arrival of the souls of departed pets.

- ☠ **28th of October** - arrival of the souls whose death was tragic or violent (accidents).
- ☠ **29th of October** - arrival of souls of people who drowned.
- ☠ **30th of October** - lonely or forgotten souls, with no family to remember them.
- ☠ **31st of October** - unborn babies and children that passed without being baptized.
- ☠ **1st of November** - All Saints day, also dedicated to children who passed at a young age.
- ☠ **2nd of November** - All Souls Day, where the remaining adult souls arrive. This is the most important festivity in Mexico, with celebrations starting in the early hours of the morning with ringing of bells and the practice of certain rites, like adorning tombs or putting up altars on the headstones of passed family members.





THE ALTAR

The altar for Day of the Dead is an iconoplastic representation of the vision of Death from the perspective of folk culture. It is a fundamental element in the celebration of Day of the Dead, as it is believed that the spirit of our beloved departed ones comes back from the underworld to visit family and friends for one day to comfort them for their loss. Every state in Mexico has its own particular way to set up their altars or ofrendas. It is usually located in one room, on a table or shelf, and it is set up with different levels that represent the strata of existence, or there can also be ofrendas set up on flat surfaces. The most common altars have two levels, which represent heaven and earth. Three-level altars add the concept of purgatory. There are even altars with seven levels that symbolise the necessary steps to reach heaven and be able to rest in peace, which are considered to be the most traditional ones.

There are several elements that make up the altars, which invite the souls to travel from the underworld or Mictlán to the world of the living, and celebrate with the living. Among flowers and ornamental banners made of paper, the most traditional and emblematic are:

☠ **A photograph of the departed.** Usually placed at the topmost part of the altar and backwards, with a mirror in front. Sometimes the photograph is hidden, to imply that the departed can be seen, but they're not actually here.

☠ **A cross.** This symbol was introduced by the evangelizers with the intention of incorporating the catechism into such a deep rooted tradition among the indigenous cultures. This cross can be made of ashes or salt, as well as fruit or seeds.

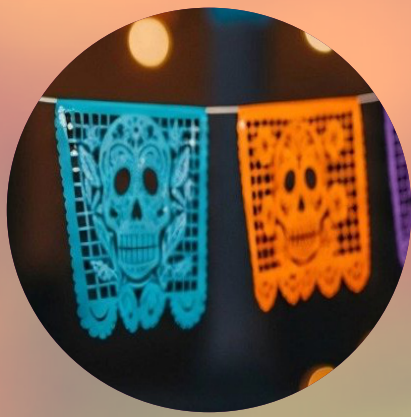
☠ **An image of the Souls of Purgatory.** In case the soul of the deceased is there, so they can obtain permission to leave.

☠ **Copal or incense.** A prehispanic element that cleanses and purifies the energy of a place, believed to sanctify the surroundings. It symbolizes the transformation of the physical - the tree from where the copal incense originates - to the supernatural, the perfumed smoke, which rises with the prayers to the gods.

An arch. Placed at the top of the altar, symbolising the entry to the world of the dead.



*Nobody is truly dead until
there is no one alive to
remember us.*



💀 **Papel picado.** Ornamental banners made of decoratively cut paper with intricate designs and lively colours. These represent the festive joy of the Day of the Dead, as well as the wind, since the four elements are also represented in the altar.



💀 **Candles.** Considered to be the light that will guide the souls to the altar. In some altars they can be purple and white, representing grief and purity.



💀 **Water.** Of great importance within the configuration of an altar, as it represents the purity of the soul and the continuous regeneration of life. A glass of water is also used so that the soul can alleviate their thirst after their long journey. Sometimes water is placed along with soap and a towel, for the cleansing of the visiting souls.

💀 **Flowers.** They are the usual ornamental element in the altars and tombs. The scent of the marigold - or cempasúchil, as it is known in Mexico - is what guides the spirits to our world, and its color brings joy to the visiting spirits. In some places, flower petals are set on the floor to guide the visiting souls to the altars.



💀 **Petate.** A mat made from dried palm leaves or grass, usually laid out for the souls to rest, or it can also be used as a table cloth to place the food at the altar.

💀 **Skulls.** These are distributed throughout the altar and can be made out of sugar, clay or plaster, considered to be a reference to death, ever present. Sometimes the name of the departed person is written on their forehead.



💀 **Food.** Traditional dishes that were once preferred by the departed. Some of the most traditional ones include mole, a type of sauce served with chicken or pork and rice. Chocolate with water can also be included, as well as pumpkin candy and apples. All the food is laid out so that it can be enjoyed by the visiting soul.

💀 **Bread.** It is a representation of the Eucharist, added by Spanish evangelists. It can be shaped like a round dome, adorned with bone-shaped strips of bread, sprinkled with sugar and baked with anis.

Alcoholic beverages. Drinks that were preferred by the deceased, generally tequila, mezcal or pulque.

💀 **Personal objects.** Belongings that the deceased used in their life, with the purpose of reminding them about moments in their life.

💀 **Salt.** It is a purifying element that helps in the preservation of the body during their journey.

Different regions create their ofrendas in different ways. Some examples of these regional variances are in Oaxaca, Michoacan, Veracruz, Puebla, and Mexico City. In the state of Oaxaca, ofrendas are usually

decorated with paper mache decorations called alebrijes. In the coastal region of Veracruz, seashells, fish, and seaweed are often added to ofrendas to represent the significance of the sea in the lives of the local communities. Veracruz also has the Guinness World Record for Largest Day of the Dead ofrenda.[2] The culinary heritage of Puebla plays a big role in the decoration of the ofrendas in the region. Traditional foods such as mole poblano, a flavourful sauce, are commonly used. In large cities like Mexico City, ofrendas can be influenced by both modern and traditional items. The urban setting facilitates a dynamic fusion of historical homage and present-day creative expression, showcasing the city's cultural evolution.

Death is represented, it no longer takes us by surprise. Mexicans appreciate death - not as an absence - but as a new phase. When the deceased come, they are not an outsider, but a live presence, and their death is a constant rebirth, an infinite process that makes us understand that someday we will be the ones invited over to the party.



USEFUL LINKS:



Symbols and Traditions.

<https://thegracemuseum.org/learn/2020-11-4-dia-de-los-muertos-symbols-and-traditions/>



How to Build a Day of the Dead Altar and Meaning Behind the Altar.

<https://mexicoinmypocket.com/blogs/blog/how-to-build-a-day-of-the-dead-altar?srsltid=AU7gw4UQE9VGr8AMx-Cm929iaZAgfmzPDKcGNFrPK4pYKAUzTBJEt-wF>