

The Spirit of Día de los Muertos

Faculty Guide

The Spirit of Día de los Muertos highlights the history of the Mexican celebration that honors and remembers loved ones passed. This exhibition presents traditional and contemporary ofrendas created by Knoxville community participants, alongside artwork by local artists, to explore the evolution of the holiday and its traditions. The ofrendas are culturally rooted, highlighting varied personal, traditional, and political aspects of the celebration. *The Spirit of Día de los Muertos* was developed by a special community advisory group.

Before the tour...

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms:

Ritual
Altar
Offering
Afterlife
Identity

Heritage
Celebration
Ethnicity
Community

During your visit...

The Spirit of Día de los Muertos can be explored through one of the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more of these to begin a conversation in the gallery and/or to develop student assignments. Below you will find a summary of each theme, related questions to drive dialogue, and a prompt for consideration that goes beyond the exhibition.

Theme 1: Iconography

Día de los Muertos is rich with visual traditions and symbolism. The celebration combines Catholic imagery with Indigenous, specifically Aztec, visual roots and tradition. Its rich expression blends several other groups' influences as well, including that of the Mayas, Olmecs, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Aymara, Quechua, varying by region and community. Additionally, Día de los Muertos can incorporate satire and critique to question politics, colonialism, and class.

- Within the exhibition, what symbols and images are repeated? How are they utilized physically or emotionally? What might they stand for? How do they vary from ofrenda to ofrenda? Does that change the impact? How?
- Where do you see images that reference Catholicism? Are there Indigenous references that you recognize? Where do you see cross-cultural fusion? Think about Mexican iconography versus that of the United States.
- In the ofrendas that consider larger societal loss or political issues, how do the symbols vary from the personal or group ofrendas? What is similar or different? What is the impact?

- The bright images and traditional symbols are meant to celebrate the deceased. How is this different from or similar to your cultural process of remembrance and mourning?

Beyond the exhibition

Día de los Muertos celebrations are estimated to be about 3,000 years old with roots in Mesoamerican Indigenous cultures. It survived and, in fact, blended with Catholicism during colonialism, combining Christian images with existing visual traditions. One consistent component of its symbols and visual expression is that of change, absorption, and addition. Consider the work of Mexican artist, Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913). Posada originated *calaveras*, playful skeleton imagery, in satirical, humorous prints for political and social critique. His skeletons as personifications of the Dead, became ubiquitous and were appropriated by other artists, including Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. They also became a part of the día de los Muertos celebration. Consider how other types of art and visual culture blend and become ubiquitous in society. Where do you see art being translated into contemporary cultural traditions? What symbols or art forms have a mass appeal to audiences? Think about the work of Keith Haring and compare his imagery, symbols, intention, and impact to that of Posada. What are similarities and differences between the two?

Theme 2: Celebration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans

Much of Mexican culture has been engrained in American pop culture and media. Traditional dress, food, and music are especially prevalent. Famous figures, like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, have become renowned throughout the US and the world. With over 13% of the population speaking it at home, Spanish has become the second most widely spoken language in the US. Mexican holidays like Dia de los Muertos are celebrated in films like Disney's *Coco* and Guillermo del Toro's *The Book of Life*. Coming-of-age stories like *Quinceañera* and *Real Women Have Curves* celebrate the strength of Mexican American women. The resilience of Chicanos are celebrated in *Walkout* and *Cesar's Last Fight*.

- Think about the representation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans on both a micro and macro communal scale. What does this exhibit say about Mexican and Mexican American identity? Why is this exhibition an important one to have at UTK? Think about the wider community of Knoxville and East Tennessee.
- Other than the clear celebration of Día de los Muertos, where are there wider celebrations of Mexican culture and tradition throughout the exhibition? Think on the art its media. Think about the food and clothes. How does this contribute to the feeling of the exhibit?
- Throughout the exhibition, there are celebrations of other communities as well. What larger communities are represented? What larger message does this say about Mexican and Mexican American community? What does this say about their traditions and practices?

Beyond the exhibition

Reflect on how media contributes to our understanding of different cultures. How are pop culture and media linked? How has the spread of social media contributed to information and misinformation? Does media and social media have a bigger impact on certain ages or demographics? How does media form our opinions either consciously or subconsciously? Are there specific groups who benefit more from media? Who benefit less? Who are harmed by media? How does social media contribute to political movements? What kinds of stereotypes form from media representation? How do stereotypes that exist in the mind of an individual turn into a “mediated” stereotype, which exists as public commodity? Look at this report conducted by The National Hispanic Media Coalition.

<https://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/news/NHMCLatinoDecisionsReport.pdf>

Theme 3: Collective Loss and Día de los Muertos

From Spanish conquistadors to American politicians, Mexico has suffered colonialism, forced assimilation, and violence. Disaster and the displacement of thousands of Mexicans and Latin Americans have contributed to the ongoing refugee crisis, further inflamed by the US government – especially where parts of the US used to be part of Mexico. These collective losses could have proven to be detrimental to the Mexican and Mexican American communities, but due to the reclamation of holidays like Día de los Muertos, Mexicans and Chicanos alike have continued to grow and thrive.

- Can you identify any works within this exhibit that either directly or indirectly deal with themes surrounding the US/Mexico border? What parts of the work clue you in to this topic? Does the information on the label add to your inclinations in any way?
- What pieces signal the idea of a fluid border, whether consciously or unconsciously, to you? What symbols and metaphors might the artists have used to suggest this idea? Do any of these pieces feel overtly political, like they are trying to make a statement about the border?
- Where has the collective loss/grief been given meaning and power? How does this explore the idea of community vs. individual? Do you think it is a choice to be a part of a community? What power lies in relying on community?

Beyond the exhibition

Consider the tensions that exist at the US/Mexico border today. What does the current political climate and the political ideology surrounding our understanding of “the border” suggest about our current relationship with Mexico? How might this affect individuals who feel they exist on the “wrong side” of the border? For example, those born in the US to immigrant parents who feel they are more Mexican than American, or those born in Mexico to parents who may hold American citizenship who feel they are more American than Mexican, or even those who grapple with the tensions of their dual identity as Mexican Americans. Consider the work of anthropologist Jason De Leon who studies undocumented immigration across the border and displays his research through art installation projects. How does this visual representation tell a different story of a fluid border? <http://jasonpatrickdeleon.com/>

Additional References

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