

DAY OF THE DEAD

The Day of the Dead—in Spanish, *El Día de los Muertos*—is celebrated principally in Mexico and in Central and South America. The holiday has an increasingly strong presence in parts of the United States such as Texas and the Southwest, as well as in many other urban areas where Latin American cultures thrive.

Officially November 2nd is the actual date for Day of the Dead. It is, however, celebrated between the end of October and November 2nd.



Although the Day of the Dead is a celebration honoring the deceased, it is not a depressing occasion. It is, rather, a time full of life, happiness, color, food, family, and fun. The celebration has many modes of expression which vary somewhat from vicinity to vicinity. The principal modes of expression include the creation of an *ofrenda*, or altar, in honor of a deceased loved one; parades and other public events, such as a parodic display of a notable deceased citizen; cleaning of tombs; and spending a special evening in the graveyard with music, food, and the spirits of loved ones.

La ofrenda

The *ofrenda* is a display honoring the memory of a loved one. Its offerings are designed to lure the spirit of the deceased back to earth, so that s/he will again spend the day with those honoring him or her. The *ofrenda* has nine principal elements:

1. **A picture of the honored person** -- The person is usually deceased, but in recent times some have honored persons who are living far from their families and friends.
2. **Candles** – Candles light the way for the returning spirit.
3. **Skulls** -- Skulls or other skeletal representations serve to remind that although death awaits us all, our focus should be on life.
4. **Item of significance to the deceased** – These items evoke fond memories for the person paying tribute and also entice the deceased spirit to return.



5. **Flowers** – *Cempasúchil*, a type of marigold, whose bright yellow flowers are strewn to form a path to guide the spirit back to the memorial site.
6. **Food** – After a long journey back from the dead, the deceased will need the sustenance of their favorite foods.
7. **Fruit** – More sustenance.
8. **Water** – Vital to life itself.
9. **Salt** – Salt, too, is essential for life.

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The images on this sheet are some of the thousands produced by the great Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), whose art has come to define the Day of the Dead.



Skeletons with familiar human foibles and conceits serve as whimsical reminders that death awaits us all—and that underneath our skins we are strikingly similar.

Posada's images account for one reason the holiday is so closely linked, in the popular imagination, with Mexico. But this celebration is every bit as native to many other Latin American countries. People in Guatemala, Peru, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Ecuador pay tribute to their dead at this time of year. Their ways of doing so range from the Venezuelan's quiet, contemplative visit to clean a loved one's grave, to Ecuadoran indigenous people's custom of having a feast at the gravesite with the departed's favorite foods shared by those in attendance; the deceased guest of honor gets to eat first, of course.



Many lands have traditional foods associated with the celebration—including Bread of the Dead (*pan de muerto*), which can be had in Reading at El Gallito, a bakery and market at 350 N. 10th Street (610-372-7075).



Rohrbach Library is pleased to present this Day of the Dead exhibit in support of the work of Dr. Dawn Slack, whose displays for *El Día de los Muertos* have for many years graced the Department of Modern Languages. Please don't miss her 2009 exhibit in deFrancesco Room 109 and the corridor facing Room 107.

Les damos las gracias a Ms. Yolanda Reyes, to Prof. Kevin McCloskey of Communication Design and to Dr. Kim Shively of Anthropology/ Sociology; thanks also to students Lydia Smith and Laura Mounts; to librarians Mike Weber and Bruce Jensen; and to Voices and Choices Director Dr. Linda Matthews for contributions to this exhibit.

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For a wide-ranging Day of the Dead guide & bibliography: <http://libguides.kutztown.edu/muertos>
<http://tr.im/DaKa> leads to a rich digital archive of Kevin McCloskey's ASARO prints from Oaxaca
Visit a colorful and informative set of links at <http://www.mexconnect.com/tags/day-of-the-dead>