

History and Facts of Dia de Muertos

The holiday of dia de Muertos is celebrated on November 1st and 2nd throughout Mexico. This sacred holiday has been traced back to Aztecs summer celebrations. This ancient holiday celebrates the life and memory of loved ones while also embracing death as a part of life. Originally celebrated during the summer, the holiday was later shifted to a date closer to All Saints Day after colonization. Although it is celebrated around the same time of year, dia de los Muertos is not associated with Halloween.

Each year an altar or ofrenda is built dedicated to loved ones who have passed away. These tributes include photos, personal items and most importantly food and drink. After building an altar, family and friends gather to welcome the spirits of their loved ones and await their annual return. Each item placed upon an altar is symbolic and is thought to help guide the deceased or difuntos back to the living world. Salt is set out on a dish as a way of ensuring the spirit remains pure throughout their travels. Another important symbol of the holiday is the butterfly. According to traditional belief, the monarch butterfly is thought to be the souls of our ancestors who are returning from the afterlife. The butterfly is a symbol of the connection between the living and the dead. Traditionally, there are four elements used to create an altar which include air, earth, wind and fire, in addition to the three tiers of an altar representing heaven, earth and the underworld.



Water

As one of the four elements of nature, a glass of water is placed on day of dead altars. Spirits are thought to travel from far away to join us on dia de Muertos, so a glass of water is often placed on an altar to help quench the thirst of these weary travelers.

Altars are often adorned with papel picado which is used to represent the second element, wind. Although the living is unable to see their loved one's spirits, it is believed that the wind blowing through papel picado is symbolic of their presence. Papel picado which is typically made of colorful tissue paper and includes intricate designs. Each color is symbolic and carries a different meaning.

Orange: Grief and respect for those who have passed
Red: Soldiers and Women who died during childbirth
White: The Purity of Children
Blue: Death caused by water
Purple: Represents the catholic church and can be used even if one does not follow that specific religion

Black: Underworld
Green: young lives
Yellow: Elderly
Pink: Our country



Wind



Fire

The third element represented on an altar is fire. Represented by the use of candles, they symbolize grief and are used as a guiding light for a spirit's return to their altar. Incense or copal is placed upon an altar and burned in an effort to ward off evil spirits and to purify the souls of the deceased. Copal is an incense once used by Mesoamericans during rituals and sacred ceremonies.

The fourth element is earth. There are several items that can be placed on an altar to signify this element including food, pan de muerto and flowers. The marigold (cempasuchil) is a traditional flower used in dia de Muertos celebrations. The vibrant colors and potent aroma of this flower are believed to help lure the spirit's back home. The deceased's favorite foods and drinks are placed upon an altar as an offering to loved ones. Food is often a focal point of altars because after all, dia de Muertos is a celebration!



Earth