

History of Day of the Dead ~ Dia de los Muertos

Mrs. Callahan 301

Art 7/8: Close Reading

Day of the Dead is an interesting holiday celebrated in central and southern Mexico during the chilly days of November 1 & 2. Even though this coincides with the Catholic holiday called All Soul's & All Saint's Day, the indigenous people have combined this with their own ancient beliefs of honoring their deceased loved ones.

They believe that the gates of heaven are opened at midnight on October 31, and the spirits of all deceased children (*angelitos*) are allowed to reunite with their families for 24 hours. On November 2, the spirits of the adults come down to enjoy the festivities that are prepared for them.

In most Indian villages, beautiful altars (*ofrendas*) are made in each home. They are decorated with candles, buckets of flowers, mounds of fruit, peanuts, plates of turkey, stacks of *tortillas* and big Day-of-the-Dead breads called *pan de muerto*. The altar needs to have lots of food, bottles of soda, hot cocoa and water for the weary spirits. Toys and candies are left for the *angelitos*. Little folk art skeletons and sugar skulls are purchased at open-air markets.

Chocolate sugar skulls are hand molded & decorated and sold by the thousands at the Sugar Skull Fair. Candy makers work for 4-6 months to have enough merchandise for the sale. Sugar skulls are sometimes eaten, but their main function is to adorn the altars and tombs

Day of the Dead is a very expensive holiday for these self-sufficient, rural based, indigenous families. Many spend over two month's income to honor their dead relatives. They believe that happy spirits will provide protection, good luck and wisdom to their families. *Ofrenda* building keeps the family close.

On the afternoon of Nov. 2, the festivities are taken to the cemetery. People clean tombs, play cards, listen to the village band and reminisce about their loved ones. Tradition keeps the village close. Day of the Dead is becoming very popular in the U.S., perhaps because we don't have a way to celebrate and honor our dead, or maybe it's because of our fascination with its mysticism.