Day of the Dead in Mexico

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The Day of the Dead (known as Día de los Muertos in Spanish) is a holiday celebrated throughout Latin America where people honor their dead ancestors and celebrate the cycle of life. While the meaning of the holiday is the same across countries, it is celebrated differently in different countries.

The celebration of the dead in Mexico takes an especially humorous twist: people confront death by making jokes and laughing at it, painting skulls in bright joyful colors, and personifying death with skeletal figures called calacas. The printmaker José Guadalupe Posada’s colorful representations of skulls and skeletons in the late 1800s made skeletal images the hallmark of the Mexican celebration that it is today. His prints, as well as fellow Mexican artist Frida Kahlo’s artwork, are central to the festivities in Mexico and are often displayed as offerings. November 1 is especially dedicated to the spirits of deceased children (called los angelitos) whereas deceased adults are honored on November 2.

Locals begin the celebration by building altars to honor their deceased relatives in their homes, at the church, or in the cemetery. Altars are unique to each person they honor; they are laid with offerings including photographs and favorite foods of the deceased, flowers, candles, salt, water, sweet breads, and incense. Paths of bright orange marigolds guide the dead home with their powerful fragrance. Known as cempachuchil, or 20-petals, in the native Nahuatl language, marigolds were used to honor the dead in Aztec and other native celebrations of death. The rich smell of copal (incense) also attracts the
dead, candles light the way, and salt and water purify the souls of returning spirits.

In smaller towns and large cities, people process to the cemetery for picnics at the gravesites of their beloved, converting the cemetery into a grand fiesta with music and dancing. Families decorate their relatives’ graves with brightly colored papel picado (tissue paper cut-outs) and other offerings such as atole (a corn-based beverage with spices), tamales, chocolate, and fruit. The festivities continue into the night, with many keeping candlelight vigil by the graves until morning. Throughout the day and night, people celebrate with and talk about their deceased loved ones as if they were alive, and thus erase the divide between death and life.

Other important traditions in Mexico include pan de muerto, an oval-shaped sweet yeast bread decorated with crossed bones or a skull and dusted with sugar, and calaveritas (sugar skulls). Handcrafted calacas depict skeletons in a variety of activities of the living, representing the hobbies and work of deceased loved ones. In Mexico City, a custom of writing and publicly displaying short poems called calaveras that mock the police, government, and priests has continued since the 19th century.