

Sugar Skull Makeup

Dia de los Muertos

By Peggy DiMercurio



Although it sounds like something out of a horror movie, Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is actually a celebration of life and a way to connect with beloved family members who have passed away. Celebrated through Central and Southern Mexico for over 3,000 years, the celebration often gets confused with Halloween, but Dia de los Muertos is not meant to be scary. “Part of our tradition in Mexico is to not be scared of death and to smile at it. It’s a celebration of our ancestors as they were when they were on this earth, alive. It was never a sad thing or scary thing,” Says Artist Gennaro Garcia, who celebrated the holiday as a child.

It is believed that during Dia de los Muertos, heaven opens up and souls of the departed roam the Earth to reunite with family and celebrate. On the 1st, the souls of the children are reunited with family for 24 hours and on the 2nd, the adults join the celebration. The holiday and face painting is often misunderstood by people who haven’t learned about the rich symbolism and traditions:

Calacas (skeletons) – Masks, and now faces, are painted to resemble a loved one or to represent a person’s inner spirit. To honor a loved one, their name is written on the forehead. Faces may also be painted to reflect a living person’s inner spirit. By painting a face with a skull, you put aside your fear of death and can tap in to your mischievous side.

Vibrant Colors – Dia de los Muertos is known for vibrant colors with significant meaning:

Yellow – Represents the sun and unity, because under the sun, we’re all the same

White – Represents spirit, hope and purity

Red – Represents blood and life

Purple – Represents mourning, grief and suffering

Pink – Signifies happiness

La Calavera Catrina (the Elegant Skull) – There was an etching done in 1913 by Jose’ Guadalupe Posada that shows a skeleton dressed in the finery of a wealthy lady as a reminder that death is with everyone. The image is often the inspiration for face painting. “Catrina” figurines are used throughout the holiday.

Calavera (skulls) – The skull is a symbol of death, but also rebirth into the next stage of consciousness. Sugar skulls are created to resemble the deceased. They are made of spun sugar and decorated with beads and icing. It is tradition to write the loved one’s name on the forehead to honor them. The skulls are depicted with bright colors and smiles to represent the happy reunion of the spirit of loved ones.

Marigold Petals – The yellow flower petals are considered the flower of the dead and are spread to guide the spirits to the celebrations. Marigolds and other flowers are also used in face painting and skull decorating.

Cemeteries – Families gather in the cemeteries and hold picnics with the favorite foods and drinks of the family members complete with mariachi bands and sharing of stories of the deceased love ones.

Ofrendas – Alters that are festively adorned with decorations, candles, favorite foods and beverages, calaveras, and photographs

Monarch Butterflies – The monarchs return to Mexico in November and are believed to carry the souls of loved ones (1)

The Day of the Dead was originally held in the summer but was moved to November to coincide with the Catholic holidays, All Saints Day and All Souls Day. The holiday combines Catholic beliefs with the Aztec religion of indigenous Mexican people and uses symbols from both Aztecs and Europeans. Dia de los Muertos and Halloween are often confused because they happen at the same time of year and share many of the same elements such as death imagery, elaborate face painting, skeletons and coffins, but the Day of the Dead is a celebration of family that has passed away and is meant to be a happy holiday.

Sugar art was brought to Mexico by 17th century Italian missionaries. The people of Mexico did not have the money to purchase European religious items for their churches, so the friars taught them how to create them from sugar, which was readily available. (2) Sugar artists craft the sugar skulls by hand in small batches. The process is labor intensive and fabricated and imported candy is starting to push the artisans out.

Dia de los Muertos is a national holiday in Mexico and is also celebrated in Spain, Brazil and Guatemala and even in the United States. Mexican American face-painter Judith Bautista says that she helps to spread the information about the holiday and explains the symbolism to people who want to participate. “I don’t mind people getting dressed up for Dia de los Muertos style for Halloween, but if you’re going to do it, it would be good to know what you’re dressing up as,” she says. (3)

Sources

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