

El Día De Los Muertos

El Día de los Muertos is one of Mexico's most widely celebrated holidays, and is an incredibly important ritual in honoring the dead. Thanks to movie interpretations like *Coco* and *The Book of Life*, the Mexican celebration of death has become widely known in the United States. Each year on November 2nd, the dead come to the world of the living for a reunion between ancestors and their descendants. Today, El Día de los Muertos incorporates rituals that honor the historical traditions and modern Mexican culture. The Mexican understanding of death is a cause for celebration as it recognizes death as a natural part of the cycle of life and allows for the people of Mexico to reconnect with their loved ones.

The roots of the El Día de los Muertos go back 3,000 years to indigenous traditions of the Aztecs and Mesoamericans. The face of death in Aztec religion was the goddess Mictēcacihuātl, who guarded and watched over the human remains in the underworld. Rituals such as creating altars with offerings for the goddess were ways that the Aztecs honored her and the deceased ancestors. Many of the modern day rituals that take place during El Día de los Muertos are inspired by original indigenous practices of deathcare.

When Catholic conquistadors from Spain came to Mexico, they implemented the use of the Gregorian calendar, and required the Mexican people to move their celebrations to coincide with All Saints Day. From then on, many indigenous practices were adopted to include the traditions imposed by the Catholics. The mix of indigenous traditions along with Spanish Catholic influence, bred what is known as the modern day festival of El Día de los Muertos.

El Día de los Muertos begins at midnight on November 1st. The first day of the holiday is known as Día de los Angelitos which translates to Day of the Little Angels. This first part of the holiday honors any children who have died. Families make ofrendas, (which means altars in Spanish), and fill them with toys, favorite snacks of the child, family photographs, and plenty of candy. A special candy called calaveras de azucar are also placed on the ofrendas. Calaveras de azucar are also known as sugar skulls, and are a popular treat during the holiday. Sometimes, the names of the children are etched into them before they are placed on the ofrendas. The children are guided to the home by the ofrendas and are reunited with their family for twenty-four hours.

El Día de los Difuntos, (Day of the Deceased), is the next part of the Mexican tradition, and begins on November 2nd at midnight. This time is specifically to honor the adults who have died. It is similar to the celebration for the children but the ofrendas take on a more adult theme.

Toys and candy are replaced with tequila, mezcal, and pan de muerto (bread of the dead). On this night, stories of those who have passed are shared, families gather together, and dancing takes place in the town. This celebration leads into the main event, El Día de los Muertos.

El Día de los Muertos begins at noon on November 2nd. This day is the most community centered day and often features public displays of celebration such as public parades. People will often dress up as calaveras (skeletons), by painting their faces and adorning colorful costumes. Another important aspect of the celebration is the visiting of graves and burial sites. Families all travel together to clean and restore the graves of their deceased loved ones. After the graves are clean, they will make offerings at the grave and decorate them with marigold flowers. Marigolds are the iconic flower associated with El Día de los Muertos because they symbolize both the beauty and frailty of life. They are also believed to attract the dead with their vibrant colors and fragrant scent.

It is important to point out that El Día de los Muertos is not a somber occasion. In fact, it is considered the opposite. The faces of calaveras are painted with smiles to laugh in the face of death, and each aspect of the occasion takes on a celebratory and jovial attitude. Sweets, tequila, mezcal, and baked goods are plentiful throughout the holiday. Although it is a time for remembering the dead, it is thought more of as a reunion and a cause to rejoice with the community. Humor is one of the key characteristics associated with El Día de los Muertos.

El Día de los Muertos is one of Mexico's most beloved traditions and offers a glimpse at how they understand the relationship between life and death. The celebratory nature of the holiday shows that Mexican culture facilitates the opportunity for a meaningful and lasting relationship between the living and the dead. The cultural blend of indigenous, Catholic Spanish, and modern traditions have created a nation-wide celebration that honors the importance of caring for the dead and the beauty of keeping a cultural heritage alive.

Citations

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