



ALTAR ELEMENTS

An altar is an important part of the Day of the Dead because it honors loved ones who have passed. While each altar is different in style and size, most share symbolic objects such as marigolds, sugar skulls, photos, candles, food, and personal mementos.



SMALL DOG

Aztecs believe that a small dog (itzcuintli) serves as a guide and companion for the dead.



CANDLE

Representing “fire,” one of the four elements of nature, a lit candle helps light the way for the spirit to return.



PHOTOGRAPH

A photo of the person being remembered is an important centerpiece of any altar.



BREAD OF THE DEAD

A sweet bread flavored with anise, orange peel and glaze, the bread of the dead represents the souls of the dead and “earth,” one of the four elements of nature.



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FLOWERS

Flowers mean life. When cut, they remind us that life is short. A loved one's favorite flower is sometimes placed on their altar or grave.



CROSS

The cross is a traditional element of altars. In Aztec traditions it symbolizes the four cardinal directions. In Christian tradition it stands for death and resurrection.



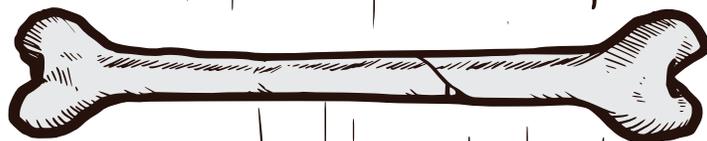
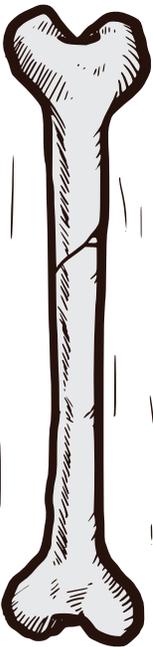
LOTERIA

Loteria is a popular Mexican game played by both children and adults. It is similar to bingo and sometimes is placed on an altar, especially if the loved one played it.



PAPER BANNERS

Colorful hand-cut tissue banners are placed around the altar and many other places during Day of the Dead celebrations. Their movement represents "air," one of the four elements of nature.





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SUGAR SKULL

Sugar skulls are a traditional art from Mexico used to decorate altars and graves. The skull represents the loved one's soul.



FOOD

Every altar displays a loved one's favorite food and drink as a feast for the spirit to enjoy upon their return.



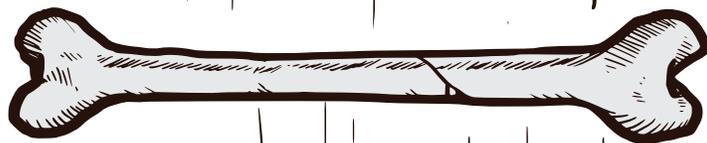
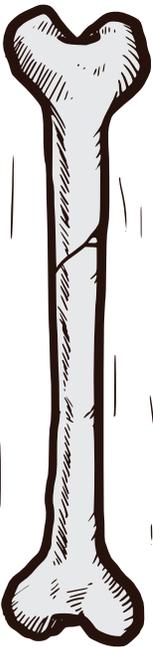
SKELETONS

Skeletons represent the dead living on and carrying out their daily activities.



TOWEL AND SOAP

A towel and soap are left on the altar for the spirits to refresh themselves after a long journey.





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MARIGOLDS

Marigolds are the symbolic “flower of the dead.” Paths of marigold petals combined with their strong smell help lead a loved one’s soul back.



INCENSE

The aromatic smoke of incense is used to help guide a loved one’s spirit home.



GLASS OF WATER

A glass of water placed on the altar awaits a thirsty, travel-weary soul. It also represents “water,” one of the four elements of nature.



TOYS

Toys are used as offerings on altars dedicated to children who passed away. Toys with a death theme also are given to living children during the Day of the Dead as a means of introducing them to the concept of death.

