



# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS BACKGROUND

*El Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) is a Mexican and Guatemalan holiday with roots in ancient Aztec and Spanish-Catholic traditions. For pre-Hispanic cultures, death was a natural phase in life's long continuum. The dead were still considered members of the community, kept alive in memory and spirit, and, during Día de los Muertos, people believed that spirits temporarily returned to Earth. El Día de los Muertos takes place on November 1 and 2 - All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on the Catholic calendar-around the time of the fall maize harvest.

## OFRENDAS & ALTARS

Families set up ofrendas (altars) in their homes and/or in public places to honor their deceased loved ones. Before the ofrenda is built, the house is thoroughly cleaned and a good table cloth is laid. The family decorates the ofrenda with offerings that tell a story about their loved one's life and help to guide their spirits home. Each region has unique traditions and symbolism connected with the holiday.

### LEVELS OF THE OFRENDA

The levels used to build the ofrenda represent different stages of human existence.

#### **Two-level ofrenda**

Represents earth and heaven

#### **Three-level ofrenda**

Includes purgatory

#### **Seven-level ofrenda**

Is the most traditional; it represents the necessary steps to rest in peace

### FOUR ELEMENTS

#### **Earth**

Represented by food such as bread of the dead (*pan de los muertos*)

#### **Wind**

Represented by paper banners (*papel picado*) moving in the air

#### **Fire**

Represented by a candle's flame

#### **Water**

Represented by a glass of water

## ITEMS ON THE OFRENDA

### **Food**

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

### **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 the altar.

### **Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead)**

This traditional bread represents the souls of the dead and "earth," one of the four elements of nature.

### **Flowers**

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

### **Skeletons**

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

### **Cross**

In Aztec tradition, it symbolizes the four cardinal directions. Christian tradition, it stands for death and resurrection.

### **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.

### **Sugar Skull**

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

### **Salt**

Salt is a purifying element that helps prevent decomposition during the journey.

### **Small Dog**

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

### **Towel & Soap**

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

### **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.