



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Día de los Muertos: Tradition and Translation



“Día de los Muertos constantly evolves. And it’s a reflection of the community as the Chicano identity has evolved; as the city of Los Angeles has evolved.”

— Betty Avila

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will view Día de los Muertos observances in East Los Angeles and in Teotitlán del Valle, Mexico, and examine the artistic traditions and the translations within and between the celebrations. Students will look within their own communities and consider the varied ways that loved ones are memorialized. In studio work, students will choose a subject and create a memorial assemblage with that subject as the theme.

Grade Level: 9 - 12

Estimated Time: One or two 45 minute class periods of discussion and four 45 minute class periods of research, idea generation, and studio production

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *BORDERS*

Background Information



Craft in America: BORDERS explores the relationships and influences that Mexican and American craft artists have on each other. Ofelia Esparza, educator and life-long artist, is an altarista, a master altar maker who teaches the meaning and history of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and the altars that commemorate loved ones who have passed away. She began this work in 1979 at Self Help Graphics & Art in Los Angeles, CA, alongside founder Sister Karen

Boccalero. Ofelia’s strong commitment to keep the Mexican tradition of Día de los Muertos alive in the U.S. is visible in the heartfelt beauty of the community altars that she designs annually for the celebrations at Grand Park in Los Angeles.

Key Concepts

- Artists design settings for special events.
- Traditions may be adapted and transformed in new places and times.
- People remember loved ones in many different ways.

Critical Questions

- How do artists create settings for special events?
- How are traditions adapted and transformed in new places and times?
- What are some of the ways people remember loved ones?

Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the role artists play in designing settings for Día de los Muertos.
- Examine the way that Día de los Muertos has been adapted and transformed in contemporary Los Angeles from the Mexican tradition.
- Create an assemblage that memorializes someone or something important to the student.

Vocabulary

Día de los Muertos (also Día de Muertos); altarista (altar artist); assemblage; calavera (skull); pan de muerto (bread of the dead); calaca (skeleton); memento mori (a symbol of mortality).

Interdisciplinary Connection

- English/Literature: Students can explore the history of Literary Calaveras; poems written in the late 19th century that accompanied the satirical calavera drawings of prominent individuals.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Visual Arts/Connecting #VA:Cn10.1
Process Component: Interpret
Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Visual Arts/Creating #VA:Cr2.2
Process Component: Investigate
Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Visual Arts/Presenting #VA:Pr6.1
Process Component: Analyze
Anchor Standard: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Visual Arts/Responding #VA:Re8.1
Process Component: Perceive
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.



Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *BORDERS*. Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/borders
- Craft in America website, www.craftinamerica.org
- Additional photos of Ofelia Esparza's altars: www.lataco.com/ofelia-esparzas-dia-de-los-muertos-altars
- Self Help Graphics & Art website: www.selfhelpgraphics.com
- Photos of Día de los Muertos celebrations: www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dia-de-los-muertos
- An article on roadside memorials: southernspaces.org/2009/crosses-flowers-and-asphalt-roadside-memorials-us-south

Worksheets

- *Tradition and Translation*
- *Assembling Memories*

Materials

- Access to online resources for research
- Sketchbooks
- Pencils
- Gathered and found materials: Students' materials will be individually chosen with their memorial in mind, such as photographs in frames and other objects that reflect the subject of the assemblage. However, artists' materials such as colorful papers including tissue paper, fabric, glue, paints and brushes and the like should also be available.
- Options for structures (which students might locate), including scrap wood, cardboard, small used items such as wooden boxes, tables, signs, shelves, and stools, plus hammers, nails, and hot glue.
- In addition; flowers such as marigolds, breads, candies, and the like, inspired by the Día de los Muertos celebrations or related to the subject of the piece may be gathered and incorporated as well.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Students will take notes and make drawings (for later discussion) while viewing the content in the *BORDERS* episode. After a class discussion of the video, students will use the worksheet *Tradition and Translation* to compare and contrast the two versions of Día de los Muertos observations in the segment. Students will consider their own traditions of memorializing within their community. Later, during studio time, students will use the worksheet *Assembling Memories* and generate ideas to plan an assemblage that memorializes someone or something important to them.

Note: The Día de los Muertos segment begins with the celebration in Los Angeles. Following is a segment (approximately 6 minutes) on master weaver J. Isaac Vásquez García, which looks at the family's weaving production and their use of vibrant traditional cochineal (insect) dyes. The third related section covers the Día de Muertos celebration of the Vásquez family in Mexico. You may choose to save the weaving-focused section for a separate viewing and extended lesson. This lesson focuses only on the two Día de los Muertos sections. The three sections total approximately 20 minutes.

(Video and discussion: one 45 minute class period)

Before Viewing

Introduce the scope of the lesson to students, sharing the key concepts, critical questions, and objectives. Post or print the following questions for students to consider as they take notes during viewing. Allow students to work together so they can cooperatively gather the information as the video plays. They will be listening and looking for the following:

- What are the three deaths described by Ofelia Esparza?
- How did she get started making altars for Día de los Muertos?
- What are some of the components, or parts, you see included in the altars?
- What is the purpose of the archways?
- How was Esparza's childhood celebration of Día de los Muertos different from the contemporary celebration?
- What was Sister Karen Bocalero's goal for the Los Angeles celebration of Día de los Muertos?
- Who are all the peoples who originally lived in Los Angeles?
- What does Joel Garcia say is the reason the L.A. celebration had to adapt some new traditions?
- Several of the speakers say something about who celebrates and the interaction between peoples surrounding Día de los Muertos. What did you hear about this?
- What does Vanessa Ruiz gather for the Día de Muertos celebration in Mexico? What else is included on the altars by the Vásquez family?
- What are the differences between the L.A. and Teotitlán del Valle observances that you see? What does Vanessa Ruiz say about the differences?

After Viewing

Begin a discussion of the video. What did students find interesting? What questions do they have? Have students share their notes to add to the discussion. Following are discussion ideas and potential answers to the questions above.

Discussion

- What are the three deaths described by Ofelia Esparza?
She states, "The first death is the day that we give our last breath; the day that we die. Our second death is the day that we are buried, never to be seen on the face of the earth again. And our third death, the most dreaded death of all, is to be forgotten. And that's why I do this."
- How did she get started making altars for Día de los Muertos?
Esparza's mother, also an artist, taught her and urged her to continue to practice the custom.
- What are some of the components, or parts, you see included in the altars?
Various answers: marigolds (real and paper) and other flowers, photos in frames, foods and drinks, objects, fabric, paper decorations, and more.

- What is the purpose of the archways?
They are a passageway or gate for the souls to enter. The bright marigolds (flower of the dead) and candles also mark the path for the souls to return.
- How was Esparza's Los Angeles childhood celebration of Día de los Muertos different from the contemporary celebration?
It was more like the Mexican: The family went to the cemetery. Her mother and aunts decorated the graves simply and then they all ate a picnic meal. It was smaller and not as public.
- What was Sister Karen Boccalero's goal for the Los Angeles celebration of Día de los Muertos?
Linda Vallejo says Sister Karen wanted to "bring art into the community. To bring the community into art experience."
- Who are all the peoples who originally lived in Los Angeles?
Ofelia Esparza states that, "California was Mexico until 1849. Before that it was the indigenous people. Here in Los Angeles it was the Tongva people. It's important to know that history because many people who were here have not been recognized as part of this land." And Betty Avila says of the celebration, "...you have obviously the Spanish Catholic influence, you have the indigenous Aztec influence, and then you have the remix the Chicano community put on here."
- What does Joel Garcia say is the reason the L.A. celebration had to adapt some new traditions?
He says, "The biggest difference is access to the cemeteries at night. Here in the U.S. at sundown they're closed, so that immediately kind of shifts the way you can celebrate it and how you celebrate it."
- Several of the speakers say something about who celebrates and the interaction between peoples surrounding Día de los Muertos. What did you hear about this?
Linda Vallejo says, "Chicano basically is Mexican born in the United States... But now the Chicano movement has also taken on Latinos...from all countries, from all backgrounds from all histories. I would say the Chicanismo has a place for everyone."

Joel Garcia says, "It's our way to connect to other communities. And sometimes it's the only time that we connect with those communities but it's an important opportunity to do so."

Betty Avila says, "Finding ways to go above and beyond borders is something that we're very good at in this community."

Ofelia Esparza says, "We're sharing Día de los Muertos with the rest of the world. And the more we understand why we celebrate a certain way; it gives you a whole insight about each other."
- What does Vanessa Ruiz gather for the Día de los Muertos celebration in Mexico?
Bread, flowers, fruit, nuts, seeds and chocolate.
- What else is included on the altars by the Vásquez family?
Reeds, candles, and water. The reeds are used to make arches for the entrance and exit of the souls. The candles help the souls find their way. We see Mr. Vásquez García create a path before the altar with seeds.
- What are the differences between the L.A. and Teotitlán del Valle observances that you see?
The L.A. celebration is public, the Teotitlán is a family dinner. In Teotitlán, the altar is private. They also visit the cemeteries.

- What does Vanessa Ruiz say about the differences?
She says, "They (L.A.) have the same food, same kind of altars, but here in Teotitlán this is serious. This is not like a game. Dia de muertos is a really really heart to heart celebration."

Joel Garcia says of the celebration in East L.A. that it is "very much in line with the spiritual tradition" of the Mexican version.

- As a final question, ask students in what ways the title "borders" fits the video they watched. They might discuss the border between the U.S. and Mexico, between people who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico and those who stayed in Mexico, between the old and the new customs, between artists and non-artists, between the ways different artists work, and between their own customs and those they have viewed. Finally, how are these borders broken down or bridged?

Further Discussion: Examining local practices

"My grandmother would say they were with us because look, the bread is drier, they sucked the life out of it, and the water is a little lower. So you could see how we can't stop doing this. We can't. We have to keep the third death from ever occurring."

– Elena Esparza

Continue the discussion with students by eliciting sharing of local customs of memorializing.

- Do students celebrate Día de los Muertos?
- What kinds of memorials have they attended?
- What kinds have they seen in the community?
- What kinds of memorials are visible? The class might note roadside memorials, tombstones, spontaneous memorials (when people leave mementos including signs, flowers, toys, balloons, etc. at a specific location) formal memorials (such as the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Memorial) as well as newspaper and online memorials. Which customs do students imagine are newer, and which traditional? Students can discuss what meaning or purpose they believe these memorials serve, and which have particular resonance for them.

After Discussion: Investigation

Worksheet: *Tradition and Translation*

Worksheet: *Assembling Memories*



Studio Production

(four 45 minute class periods)

“Culture is an evolving thing, and when you mix art into culture and artists into culture then anything goes; it’s open. Anything can happen.”

– Linda Vallejo

The suggested studio work is meant to encourage students to apply their own artistic abilities to creating a meaningful memorial to someone (including pets) or something (a beloved former home; an experience such as saying goodbye to childhood; a memorial to a public event; etc.). The studio work is also intended to have students consider their role as artists in designing visual symbols that can convey meaning and emotion, and the role this can play in the community. Encourage students to gather items from home and elsewhere to suit the theme of their assemblage. Provide materials as listed for embellishment of the works. Some students may choose to work together as a community to create a collaborative piece. Encourage students to offer each other feedback as they build their memorials.

CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection:

“They took Día de los Muertos from something that was very intimate, very familial, and ‘blew it up’– with the purpose of building community.”

– Betty Avila

Students can work together to plan how to display their memorials and share them with the school or larger community. Photographs or a video may work well for sharing the images, particularly if the assemblages feature any fresh materials such as flowers and foods.

Assessment:

In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; by examining the students’ worksheets; and by witnessing the students’ studio work, it should be evident that the student:

- Understands the role artists play in designing settings for special events.
- Examined the way that Día de los Muertos has been adapted and transformed from the traditional Mexican to the contemporary Los Angeles celebrations.
- Created an assemblage that memorializes someone or something important to the student.

Extensions:

- Students may explore the work of late 19th century printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, whose political cartoons of skeletons including La Calavera Catrina (the elegant skeleton) are associated with Día de los Muertos celebrations.
- The *Craft in America: NEIGHBORS* episode features several artists who craft figures inspired by the Día de los Muertos traditions.

Authors:

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Worksheet: Tradition and Translation

“She really wanted me to carry on not so much doing altars like I do today, but to carry on the tradition of remembering— And it ties in with what I do today with the Día de los Muertos.”
— Ofelia Esparza

Work with partners to share ideas and thoughts for this worksheet. Find a circle shape to trace, such as an empty yogurt cup. Think about how to explore the following topics using Venn diagrams (use the yogurt cup for circles) or create diagrams of your own design:

- The similarities and differences between the Día de los Muertos observances in East Los Angeles and in Teotitlán del Valle, Mexico.
- The parts of the celebrations that have visual art aspects, and the parts that do not.
- Similarities and differences between local practices of memorializing and those on the video.
- The different appearances and uses of calaveras (skulls) and calacas (skeletons) in contemporary U.S. culture (such as tattoos, tee shirts, in cartoons and movies, fashion dolls, etc.) and what meanings and purposes they appear to have.
- Any traditions in your own family that have changed over time (such as sharing special foods, how and whether you celebrate holidays, attending certain events, traditions associated with seasons, those still present and those gone, etc.)

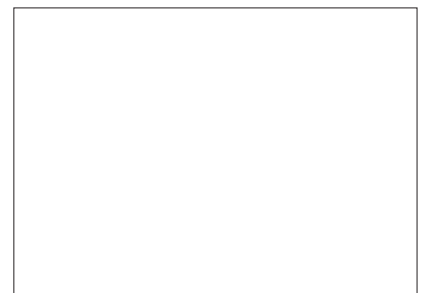
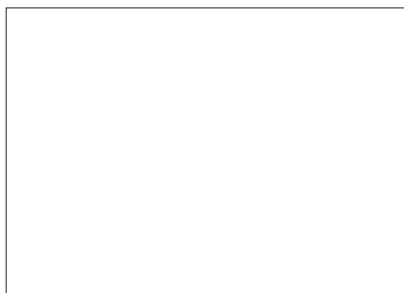
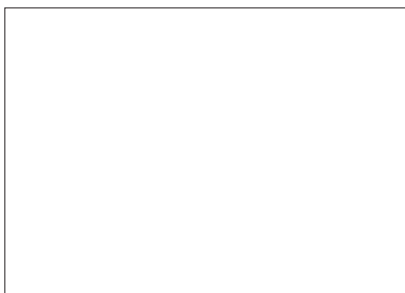
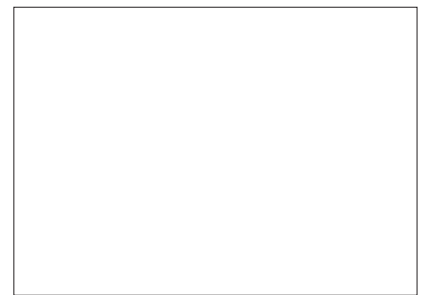
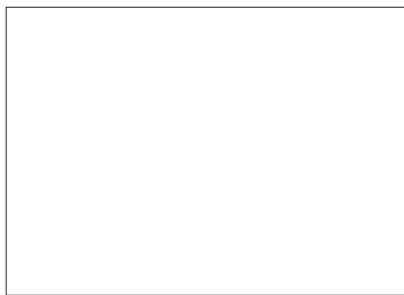
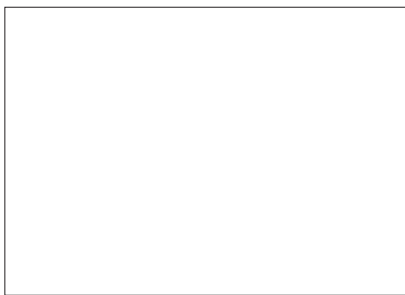
Worksheet: *Assembling Memories*

"For Day of the Dead we don't celebrate death, we celebrate life. We invite the souls to come and visit us."
– Ofelia Esparza

Use this worksheet as a brainstorming sheet for your assemblage. Sharing thoughts and research with a partner may help to generate more ideas. Start with any of the following lists:

- A list of people (known or famous) you might want to memorialize.
- A list of animals—such as pets—that might be your subject.
- A list of places you would like to remember in a special work (such as a place you used to live.)
- A list of events you might consider for a memorial subject (such as a war in which a relative served.)

Do an online search of memorials, including roadside and other spontaneous memorials, formal public memorials, messages and artworks on sympathy cards, etc. Sketch examples on this sheet. Add notes to assist you as you think about your design.



Worksheet: *Assembling Memories*

Generate images of ideas for your own assemblage, including images that inspired you and materials you can use. Narrow down your ideas; then share with a partner to get their feedback on your designs.

