

Ancient Ofrenda

Elements of an Altar

9th Annual Día de los Muertos Festival Exhibit

presented by the
ASU Museum of Anthropology
in collaboration with **CALACA** Latino Cultural Arts Collective

For the past nine years, the ASU Museum of Anthropology has hosted an annual ***Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) Festival Exhibit***. Traditionally, the museum has featured a gallery filled with individual altars. This year, the gallery will be transformed into **one altar** through individual works of art. Each piece of art in the exhibit will represent one of the many offerings that compose a traditional altar. Emphasis will be placed on the **four elements** (earth, wind, water and fire) found on traditional altars that tie this celebration to its Aztecan roots.

We ask for artists and community members to create works of art that embody one offering of the traditional altar. Offerings include but are not limited to: representations of **water, fire, earth** (stones, plants), **wind** (movement, papel picado), calaveras (skeletons, calacas), traditional foods (chocolate, corn, chilis, squash, pan de muerto), flowers, butterflies, alcohol (tequila, mescal, tesgüino), tobacco, incense and the four directions. Though the subjects are ancient, we encourage artists to work in a variety of traditional and contemporary media. Artists are welcomed and encouraged to incorporate personal and symbolic imagery into their work. Anyone may submit a digital photograph honoring the dead that will be projected in a slide show in the gallery.

About Día de los Muertos and the *Ancient Ofrenda* exhibit:

The theme of this year's exhibit, an emphasis on the four elements of a traditional altar, asks artists to draw inspiration from pre-Columbian rituals and practices associated with death. Día de los Muertos, more than any other Mexican celebration has remained strongly aligned with its indigenous roots. Though it incorporates Catholic beliefs, Día de los Muertos remains festive holiday of celebration and communion with the dead.

The practice of Día de los Muertos has been transformed through the social and political relationships between indigenous peoples and the Spanish conquerors and continues to change through forces of economic and cultural exchange and migration. Many scholars argue that this celebration finds much of its imagery and expression from the rituals of pre-Columbian peoples including the Aztec, Maya,

Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, P'urhépecha, and Totonac. However, we cannot say with any certainty that this celebration is a direct continuation of pre-Columbian festivals and rituals, with only a Christian overlay. In this exhibit we hope that artists will find inspiration from the imagery and folklore of pre-Columbian peoples and transform the four elements, important in many cultures, into a contemporary expression of this significant cultural festival.

The people of the pre-Columbian world were ones of great cultural diversity, religious practice and belief. Many people believed in a world of dualities, where life and death were interconnected. Octavio Paz, distinguished Mexican poet writes,

“The opposition between life and death was not so absolute to the ancient Mexicans as it is to us. Life extended into death, and visa versa. Death was not the natural end of life but one phase of an infinite cycle. Life, death and resurrection were stages of a cosmic process which repeated itself continuously. Life had no higher function than to flow into death, its opposite and complement; and death, in turn, was not an end in itself: man fed the insatiable hunger of life with his death.”

Anthropologist Dr. Arturo Oliveros Morales places the beginnings of this celebration in the small villages surrounding Michoacan around the fifteenth century B.C. Prior to the Spanish conquest, the celebration for the dead, honoring the Aztec goddess Mictecacihuatl, lasted for over two months – one month for adults and one for children.

Mary J. Andrade, who has documented the diversity of this practice throughout the area of Michoacan, writes about the materials that are commonly seen in altars.

“The purpose of the altar and the offering is to welcome the spirit. They are dedicated in memory of the deceased. Favorite culinary dishes and treasured items are placed at the altar or around its foot for the souls to enjoy when they return. The four main elements of nature—earth, wind, water, and fire—are always included:

Earth is represented by crop—Natives believe the souls are fed by the aroma from special dishes prepared using food from a new harvest.

Wind is represented by a moving object—papel picado or tissue paper is commonly used.

Water is placed in a container in order for the soul to quench its thirst after the long journey to reach the altar.

Fire is represented by a wax candle—one lit candle represents a soul. An extra candle is usually placed for a forgotten soul.

Furthermore, cempasuchitl flowers are spread to make a path to the altar; salt is included on the altar for purification; and copal is burned to guide the souls with its aroma. Lastly, a mat is placed at the foot of the altar for the soul to rest after his or her journey.”

The connections between pre-Columbian cultural beliefs, imagery, and practices and the celebration of Día de los Muertos not only in Mexico, but in the United States, are part of a broader relationship between politics and identity. Through this exhibit, we wish to not only create a sacred space to commune with the dead but also to emphasize tradition and heritage in contemporary life.

Sources and Further Reading:

Andrade, Mary J. 2006. *Day of the Dead: A Passion for Life*. San Jose: La Oferta Publishing Company.

Brandes, Stanley. 2006. *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Sayer, Cholë. 1994. *The Mexican Day of the Dead*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.