Día de los Muertos

Annual Day of the Dead Festival Exhibit
**Día de los Muertos**, or Day of the Dead, is a festival originating in pre-Columbian Mexico that celebrates and honors the dead. Taking place on November 1st and 2nd, this celebration of life honors deceased friends and family members through the creation of an altar and special foods, as well as the decoration of gravesites. This is a joyful time for families and communities to celebrate tradition and heritage.

The creation of an altar to invite and entice the deceased back into the home, as well as honor them, is an important part of the celebration. Traditionally, families create an altar and usually decorate it with flowers, food, and personal objects that have intense and specific meanings. Both objects that remind the living of the dead, like a belonging or photograph, and that the dead enjoyed or prized are used. Papel picado, a thin paper with cut-outs is commonly seen, accompanied by sugar skulls, copal (incense), and candles. Traditional food, like pan de muerte (bread of the dead), mole sauces, and sweets are also shared.

During this celebration, much socializing with friends and members of the community takes place. It is thought that the souls of the dead are all around -- taking part in and enjoying the festivities. Such lively and pleasant interactions demonstrate a unique cultural process of recognizing the cycle of life and death that characterizes human existence.
Día de los Muertos is a celebration that extends into many spaces of cultural life. While there is much local variation in the festivities, it is not uncommon to see street processions accompanied by dance and musical performances, people in ghoulish costumes, religious ceremonies, and the shooting off of fireworks. A feeling of community is fostered by the celebration because of the very public space it occupies.

The Day of the Dead is not only celebrated in Mexico but also in many parts of the United States and Central America. Mexican-Americans have continued this tradition. Many different cultures and ethnicities throughout the United States celebrate Día de los Muertos, particularly here in Arizona, where it is an important part of creating cultural heritage. Day of the Dead festivities are for people of all ages and races to participate in. Each cultural group brings a new aspect to the traditions, which shapes the meanings of this special celebration.
Creating an Altar

Traditional Día de los Muertos altars are colorful and vibrant, paying tribute to loved ones. Some altars are placed on tables or dressers while others are made with crates or boxes. Altars are decorated with flowers, candles, candy, skeletons, and many other things. Some people leave food and drinks at the altars. Some leave personalized gifts specifically for an individual like that person’s favorite jewelry or toy. A picture of that person is usually placed in the altar.

Altars featured in the annual Día de los Muertos Festival Exhibit at the ASU Museum of Anthropology range from traditional to contemporary in style and subject. Size, materials, medium and artistic approach range widely. The Museum’s past exhibits have been themed, and artists are encouraged to utilize specific imagery, forms or ideas in the creation of their altarpieces. Altars can be dedicated to loved ones and friends, address poignant social and community issues, or be an artistic personal expression of this cultural tradition.

ASU Museum of Anthropology
PO Box 872402
Tempe, AZ 85287-2402

www.asu.edu/clas/shesc/asuma
480 965 6224
anthro.museum@asu.edu

Cover Artwork by Erica Flores, 2006