

Day of the Dead

In Mexico, the tradition of the Day of the Dead is approximately 3,000 years. Some native civilizations, like the Aztecs, tended to worship to their dead in an annual festival that lasted about a month. This celebration was carried out in the 9th month of the Aztec solar calendar, which would correspond to our month of August today.

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in the 16th century, the friar's evangelists tried to convert the Indians to Christianity. Among the traditions they brought to the New World were the festivals held on November 1st and 2nd – All Hallow's Eve and Day of the Faithful Deceased.

The Spanish started to celebrate Christian festivals, but incorporated elements of the pre-Hispanic festivals celebrating the dead into them. They raised altars to honor their dead, a tradition which Mexicans carry on to this day. Some native elements present in the Day of the Dead celebrations are the resin, the traditional small dishes like the pumpkin in powdered brown sugar, tamales, tortillas, and the cempazochitl flowers. In turn, the elements that originated with the Christian and Hispanic culture are the watchman, the images of saints, or the bread of dead that was incorporated when the Spanish introduced wheat in America, and which became a substitute for skulls of human beings that were exhibited in the pre-Hispanic altars.

The most important figure on the altars of the Day of the Dead is The Catrina, a skeleton dressed as a woman that symbolizes death. This character also arose from crossing cultures between the pre-Hispanic and the western traditions. During the 14th century, the numerous wars and the appearance and propagation of the Black Death over all of Europe originated a new culture towards death. The presence of death became a constant in the routine of life, and thus human beings started to see it with both familiar and imminent. This routine contact with death was called the Dance of Death and could be seen in many paintings. In these illustrations, Death

was personified and represented by the figure of a skeleton, scythe in hand, that came to earth to take all those that got in the way, rich or poor, noble or working-class.

The friars that came to the New World in the 16th century brought with them this personage, which mixed with the pre-Hispanic Mictecacihuatl deity, the “Dame of Death,” to give origin to “Catrina.” In the 19th century, this singular woman was immortalized in the engravings of the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada.

The Mexicans followed the tradition of putting alters dedicated to the dead in the living rooms of their homes to honor loved ones who had passed away. This tribute is raised so that family, friends and, most importantly, the deceased themselves are honored with altars when they visit them. It is for these reasons that the altars need to contain items such as a photograph of the person being remembered, a small dish and other objects that are enjoyed in life, water to calm their thirst, candles to light their way, flowers from cempaxochitl, salt, small skulls of sugar, bread of death, some alcoholic drink like aguardiente or mexcal, resin and incense. Another important tradition of the celebration is to write festive verses called “little skulls,” which describe in a funny way, how a friend or a family member will die in the future.

In Mexico, November the 1st and 2nd are the days of festivity in which the Pantheons are filled with people that wish to remember their loved ones. During the celebration, the Mexicans visit their loved ones and take them flowers, food, Mariachi music, and those things that could have made them happy in life. In places like Mixquic, close to the Mexican city and the Island of Janitzio, in the state of Michoacán, thousands of visitors come to enjoy a full festival of flavor and color.