

Dia de los Muertos Lesson

Created by Art in Action



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Background: Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)



- Dia de los Muertos, or “Day of the Dead,” is a Mexican holiday celebrated in early November where families remember their loved ones who have passed away. The holiday is not a sad one, but rather a lively festival to celebrate those who have died.
- The holiday has ancient roots in indigenous cultures, especially Aztec, but it was blended with Catholic traditions when the Spanish arrived in what is now Mexico. Today, people in the US and other parts of Latin America celebrate Dia de los Muertos, but it is still most closely tied to Mexico.
- Traditionally, Mexican families visit the gravesites of relatives on this day. They clean the graves—pulling weeds, sweeping up, and decorating with candles and flowers. Families often bring gifts, such food, to honor their loved ones, and sit around the graves together, in order to feel close to those who have died.
- The art of Dia de los Muertos is bright and colorful, much like the festival itself. Vibrant tissue paper, bright flowers, and colorful fabrics decorate homemade altars that families make for the holiday.
- Art with skeletons and skulls is very common for Dia de los Muertos. Sugar skulls in particular are one of the most well known images associated with the holiday. White sugar is pressed into skull-shaped and hardened. Once dry, the skulls are decorated with colorful icing designs.
- There are many books about Dia de los Muertos written for elementary school students. Some of these children’s books include *Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead*, by Judy Goldman & Rene King Moreno, *Rosita y Conchita*, by Eric Gonzales & Erich Haeger, *The Day of the Dead/El Dia de los Muertos*, by Bob Barner, and *Day of the Dead*, by Tony Johnston & Jeanette Winter.

Art Discussion: Dia de los Muertos



Why do people create these decorations?

Dia de los Muertos is a holiday for people to celebrate their loved ones who have died. Families make art of different types to decorate the graves of relatives as well as altars honoring the dead. The art of Dia de los Muertos is characterized by vibrant colors, skulls and skeletons, and flowers.

What does color tell us about this holiday?

Even though Dia de los Muertos is a holiday about the dead, bright colors let us know that it is a happy celebration. Vibrantly colored blue, pink, and green tissue paper is festive and seems to create energy. Families bring bouquets of fiery orange and yellow flowers, called marigolds, to the graves of their loved ones. People are attracted to bright colors, and so they make us want to look at the decorations.

How do shape and line on the sugar skulls make them seem alive?

Blossoming flowers and curling shapes create movement across the surface of the skulls. These bright, intricate decorations almost make it seem like there is life within the skulls. Skulls represent death, but their lively designs remind us that this is not a time to be sad, but to celebrate instead.

Do the skulls look realistic?

We know that real skulls are plain, and not decorated with beautiful designs. The brightly colored sugar skulls are not meant to be realistic, but to symbolize death in a cheerful way. The abstract designs are eye-catching and fun to admire.

Art Project: Skull Mask (30 minutes)

Materials

- White paper skulls (template below)
- Markers, colored pencils, or oil pastels
- Craft sticks
- Glue
- Optional: sequins, feathers, scraps of colored paper



Instructions

1. Cut out skulls from white paper. Cut out the eyes.
2. Using markers, colored pencils, or oil pastels, draw designs and shapes using bright, vibrant colors. Popular designs seen on Dia de los Muertos skulls include flowers, swirling lines, dots, leaves, and geometric shapes.
3. Optional: continue to decorate the mask with sequins and/or feathers. Use scraps of colorful paper to collage designs.
4. When the design is complete, attach craft sticks to the back of the mask with glue or tape.

Skull Template

