**Dia de Los Muertos: Day of the Dead**

*October 26, 2018–November 11, 2018*

Dias de los Muertos, a holiday celebrated in Mexico and many parts of Latin America, is considered a festive time when family members remember and honor their dead and the continuity of life. At FWMoA, a series of artist, community-made, and family-made altars fill the gallery every year, often honoring deceased loved ones or groups of individuals who have died for a cause or as a result of persecution or injustice.

How to use this resource: This packet is designed to be flexible. Use it to help prepare for a docent-led tour of the museum, to inform a self-guided tour, or to discuss selected artworks in your classroom, whether you’re able to physically visit the museum or not. The suggested activities (page 7) should be used in conjunction with in-depth discussion of at least one related artwork.

**What is Dia de Los Muertos/Day of the Dead?**

Day of the Dead is an international holiday celebrated throughout Mexico, particularly the Central and Southern regions, and the Catholic world including Italy, Spain, South America, and the Philippines. The day represents a reunion between the living and the dead in which the living remember and celebrate their dead, both familial and celebrity. It begins on October 31, or All Saint’s Eve, when the gates of heaven are opened and the spirits of the deceased children (angelitos) reunite with their families for 24 hours. November 1 is All Saint’s Day, commemorating the Saints, and November 2, or All Soul’s Day, is when the spirits of the adults come down to enjoy the festivities. During this time, ceremonies are taken to the cemetery where people clean tombs, lay out favorite food and drink, and remember their loved ones. Day of the Dead celebrations include various traditions, depending on the region where it is being celebrated. The following are universal practices or traditions: the building of ofrendas (altars); papel picado (cut paper); the baking of sugar skulls and Pan de Muerto (Day of the Dead bread); the imagery of skeletons, Calaveras (skulls), and Calacas (skull masks); real or crafted Flor de Muerto (Flower of the Dead) or marigolds; monarch butterflies; and the image of La Calavera Catrina (Lady of the Dead).

**How is it celebrated at FWMoA?**

At FWMoA, Day of the Dead has two components. The first, the community-centered altars, or ofrendas, exhibit in Gallery 1 remembers individual people and groups, from family members to role models. The celebrations at FWMoA feature memorials created by artists, families, and community groups from throughout the region. This year, altars remember artists like Robert Indiana, family members who have passed, and new this year is the Community Altar, an ofrenda that anyone can add photos or memorabilia too in remembrance of a loved one.

The second component are the artworks, hung in the hallway, that are inspired by Day of the Dead celebrations, traditions, and imagery. Various mediums are employed and draw on the symbolism and imagery used in Aztec and Mayan traditions and Spanish Catholicism. Similar to the ofrendas, artworks include skeletons, marigolds, crosses, monarch butterflies, candles, food, and drink. When looking at the artwork, consider their mood. It is important to remember that the Day of the Dead is a celebration! Artworks reflect that by including music, dancing, feasting, and playing.

**Remember!** Even though these altars are made by members of your community we still ask that you keep them safe. They are memorials to love ones who have passed and we ask that you do not disturb them by touching the fabrics or picking up any of the objects on the altar.
Dia de los Muertos: Ofrendas (Altars)

A selection of these works will be discussed during a docent-led school tour. Other gallery resources may be found at fwmoa.org/PreK-12/

**Themes:** Folk Art, symbolism, mood, five senses, traditions, medium, tone

**Essential questions:** (choose 2-3) How can the viewer “read” a work of art as text? (VA: Re8.1.4a); How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented cultivate appreciation and understanding? (VA: Pr6.1.3a); How do people contribute to awareness and understanding of their lives and the lives of their communities through art-making? (VA: Cn10.1.4a); How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures? (Cn11.1.1a)

**Ideas to consider and look for throughout the exhibit**

- **Wait, is that food/drink/candles?** Yes! The food is fake, the beverages are either closed or empty, and the candles are either unlit or battery operated because the museum has rules about food, drink, and lit candles in the galleries.

- **The Five Senses.** Ask students to think about their five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, sound) and how those would be impacted by the altars. Think about the smell and taste of the food, the feel of the burning candles, the texture of the cloth, and the sound of the papel picado.

- **Who is this altar for?** Give students a few minutes to look at each altar and see if they can determine who the altar is remembering. What objects, images, or other items helped them come to that conclusion?

- **Isn’t death a time of sadness?** Not here! Day of the Dead is a celebration of the dead by the living. Celebrations include music, dancing, food, and bright colors. Have students see if they can find these aspects on the altars and in the artworks.

**Ofrendas (Altars)**

Ofrendas, or altars, are not for worshipping the dead but for paying tribute to them. They include objects, images, trinkets, and food/drink related to the deceased to welcome them back to the land of the living. Originating from an Aztec ritual of celebrating the return of the deceased spirit, Altares de Muertos show the souls the way home and provide food and drink for them after their long travel from the afterlife. The presence of the four elements are required on the altar: water, earth, wind, and fire. Water is put in a glass to quench the spirit’s thirst; Bread, a product of the earth, satisfies their hunger; Wind moves the papel picado (cut paper) and brings happiness; and Fire purifies and is found in the lit candle.

Other altar elements include pictures of the deceased, flowers, tiered levels, arches, papel picado, pan de muerto, candy skulls, food, spirited drinks, candles, religious elements, ornaments, and personal objects. Common symbols found on ofrendas include colorful skeletal figures dancing and playing music or the glamorous La Catrina, based on a famous etching by Mexican printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada, which depicts a female skeleton dressed in the aristocratic styles of Europeans of her time. This figure satirizes those Mexican natives who Posada felt were over imitating European traditions of the aristocracy in the pre-revolutionary era. See what images are included on both the altars and in the artwork on display in the hallway!
Who is this altar memorializing?

What Day of the Dead symbols/imagery are present on this ofrenda? Marigolds, papel picado, candles, food/drink, pictures of the deceased

How does this altar make you feel (mood)? Is it celebratory? Why/why not?

How would you use your five senses to explore this altar? Remember: without touching!

What else is included on this altar?

How long do you think this took them to plan and install?

Why do you think people choose to remember their loved ones in this way?

Who would you make an ofrenda for?

Who is this altar memorializing? This altar was completed by a museum staff member in honor of Indiana born artist Robert Indiana.

What Day of the Dead symbols or imagery are present on this altar? Papel picado, marigolds, skulls

How has the creator incorporated the artist into the more traditional Day of the Dead pieces? The papel picado are based on his artworks!

Why do you think this museum chose to remember Robert Indiana?

How does the altar make you feel (mood)? Is it celebratory?

How long do you think this took them to plan and install?

What can we learn about other cultures looking at this altar?

Who is this altar memorializing? A husband and father.

Why do you think people make altars? As a way to grieve lost loved ones, as a way to remember loved ones.

What Day of the Dead imagery is included in this ofrenda? Papel picado, skeletons/skulls, marigolds, food/drink.

What objects are included that are personal to the deceased? What can you find out about the person here based on those objects? Stuffed animals, Monster energy drink.

How would you use your five sense to experience this altar? Remember: without touching!
Creative Visions: Day of the Dead

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Ideas to consider and look for throughout the exhibit

- Folk Art: Folk Art is art produced by indigenous cultures, peasants, or other laboring tradespeople that is primarily utilitarian and decorative rather than purely aesthetic. This art is characterized by a naïve style wherein traditional rules or proportion and perspective are not employed.

- Isn’t dying scary or sad? Not in Day of the Dead celebrations! While other cultures view death as a ritual of mourning and sadness, Day of the Dead is about celebrating the return of the dead to the living. Imagery often include music, dancing, eating, and parties as family members and friends are reunited through memory.

- Traditions. Does your family have any holiday traditions? Turkey on Thanksgiving, lighting the Christmas tree or Hanukkah Menorah, 4th of July BBQ? Day of the Dead is a holiday with various traditions as well. When looking at the artwork, see if any of those traditions or traditional symbols are present.

Tim Tadder, Las Muertas—Spring 1, Archival pigment print

What Day of the Dead imagery is present in this work? How do you know the artist was inspired by Day of the Dead.

What is happening in this photograph?

What is the mood in this photograph?

Tim Tadder, Las Muertas—Winter 1, Archival pigment print

What Day of the Dead imagery is present in this work?

This work is part of a series, how do we know what season it is?

Why do you think the artist chose to use photography as his medium?

What is the mood in this photograph?
Jeremy Sweet, *Las Bailadores*, Hand painted wood cut out

How do you think this artwork relates to Day of the Dead? Skeletons, dancing, costumes

How does the artist show movement? Swirling skirts, dropped shoulder of the male skeleton, the head turn of the female skeleton, the pointed shoes

What is the mood of this piece? How does that correspond to what we know about Day of the Dead celebrations?

What do you think the artist was inspired by?

Does this artwork employ all five sense?

This is a hand painted wood cut out, why do you think the artist chose this method?

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Eduardo Garcia, *Ya es Tiempo*, Silkscreen

What is the first thing you notice when looking at this work of art?

How do you know this is Day of the Dead inspired artwork? Skeletons, sun and moon represent life and death, the hourglass passing time

The symmetry of life and death is pictured in the work. How do you think that is shown? If you folded this art in half would both sides match up? Why do you think the artist used symmetry to talk about life and death?

What did you expect to see when we said we had Day of the Dead inspired artwork? Did you expect it to be colorful?

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Constance R. Perez-Jones, *Tree of Flowering Wombs*, Silkscreen

This is titled Tree of Flowering Wombs. Why do you think the artist titled it that?

What Day of the Dead imagery is present in this work? Skeletons, Tree of Life,

How does this artwork make you feel? (mood)

What do you think the artist was inspired by?

This artwork and the one previous are both silkscreens. What is similar or different about them? Why do you think the artist chose this medium?
Ramiro Rodriguez, The Earth Dragon Suite (Sol Emergent), woodcut

What Day of the Dead imagery is included in this artwork? Monarch butterflies, skeletons

This is a triptych, or an artwork made up of three panels. Why do you think the artist chose to make three joined panels instead of three separate ones or one large artwork? How do the three pieces help tell the story?

What story is being told?

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Ramiro Rodriguez, The Earth Dragon Suite (Fiesta), woodcut

This is part of the first two panels and continues the story. What is happening in this part? Party, skeleton wedding, baby, riding bikes, playing games, dancing

What Day of the Dead imagery is included in this artwork? Skeletons

Note the skeletons playing music and games, dancing, riding bikes, and having fun. How does this represent the mood of the Day of the Dead?

Are all of the skeletons adults? No, because people of all ages can die so the artwork is representative of that.
**Suggested Classroom Activities:** to be used in conjunction with a visit to the museum and/or an in-class discussion of selected artworks

**Art Projects and Discussion Starters**

- **Design** individual altars or a class altar. What family member, friend, artist, or other person or group that has passed would you like to remember? What objects will you need to collect for the altar? What objects will you need to make for the altar?

- **Practice** your art skills by choosing an artist that is no longer living and make work inspired by them! Use their theme or medium and make it your own! For example, Chuck Close is a painter who makes photorealistic paintings of his subjects. Instead of paints, use pencils, charcoal, watercolor, or another medium to depict an image of the person your altar is dedicated to or something they loved.

- **Create** a skull mask. What Day of the Dead imagery can you include on your mask?

**Extensions**

- **Creative Writing:** Choose someone you know personally or from the media that has died. Write a poem or a letter about them, what can you remember?

- **Journalism:** Day of the Dead celebrations have changed a lot over time, but some core themes remain the same. Research and write an article about Day of the Dead in Mexico. Over the years, as the celebrations have become more well known, how have they changed?

- **Social Studies:** Research other Day of the Dead celebrations! FWMoA’s Day of the Dead is in collaboration with the Hispanic community of Fort Wayne, but celebrations differ over time and by region. How do Latin Americans celebrate similarly or differently from people in Spain?

- **History:** Research the La Catrina image created by Jose Guadalupe Posada. What is the background of the image and how has its use changed over the years?
**Further reading and resources**

- National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago has a large Day of the Dead exhibition and various events and resources: [http://nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/day-dead-chicago](http://nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org/day-dead-chicago).

- Detroit Institute of Arts also has an exhibition of ofrendas: [https://www.dia.org/art/exhibitions/ofrendas-celebrating-el-d%C3%ADa-de-muertos-2018](https://www.dia.org/art/exhibitions/ofrendas-celebrating-el-d%C3%ADa-de-muertos-2018).

- Watch a movie! Disney’s *Coco* is all about Day of the Dead!

- An excellent animated short capturing the spirit of Day of the Dead: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2fSOq6Jxow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2fSOq6Jxow)