

Day of the Dead: Sugar Skulls

Objective: Students will create an original tile reflecting the representation of a mermaid in Mexican folklore. Students will apply underglazes to enhance design.

Vocabulary: pinch pot, coil, slip, score, underglaze, cone, fire

Materials: White clay, cone 05, variety of colored underglazes, examples of Mexican skulls and images of Day of the Dead displays.

Tools: needle tool, slip, texture stamps and sticks, paper, pencil, brush

Historic/Cultural Background: Discussion about “Day of the Dead” and significance of skulls in Mexican culture.

Day of the Dead is a pre-Hispanic ritual commemorating the departed. Practiced for over 3000 years by many Mesoamerican civilizations, the custom included placing skulls at grave sites as trophies to symbolize both death and rebirth. The concept of duality, such as represented by the link between death and rebirth, has been present in Mexican indigenous cultures throughout history. Death is not viewed as a life ending, but a continuation of life in another form.

The Spanish conquistadors who took over Mexico during the early 1500s considered the ritual to be sacrilegious and pagan. To make the ritual more Christian, they moved it to coincide with All Saints’ Day (November 1st) and All Souls’ Day (November 2nd). In most regions of Mexico, November 1 is to honor children and infants, whereas adults are honored on November 2. Today, *Día de los muertos* is celebrated in Mexico, Central America, and certain parts of the United States. In contrast to solemn and somber mourning rituals practiced by many cultures, the festivities are celebrated with joy and humor. Family graves and altars are embellished with *ofrendas* (offerings): candles, photos, foods, flowers, and music to commemorate the dead.

However, the traditions of the holiday are not universal, as exemplified in the state of Michoacan. In Michoacan, the celebration is very different if the deceased is a child rather than an adult. On November 1, the godparents would set up a table at the parents’ house with sweets and fruits to honor the child’s life in respect for the parents. At midnight of November 2, people light candles and ride on winged boats (*mariposas*) to Janitzio, an island located in the middle of a lake where there’s a cemetery, to celebrate the souls of the dead.

What do sugar skulls represent? Each skull represents one departed soul, whose name is written on its forehead. The skull is placed in the family’s home, on the altar or on the gravestone to honor the spirit’s return. Skulls are customized with characteristics of the deceased.

Why sugar? The tradition began because it was too expensive to imported European church decorations. They learned how to make sugar art for religious festivals and quickly adopted the medium for the Day of the Dead festival. However, today skulls are made from different media such as clay, paper Mache, wood, etc.

Instructions: Skulls

1. Make two equal size pinch pots. Set aside allowing them to set up some before joining.



2. Cut or pinch an assortment of flowers and/or culturally appropriate objects.
3. Score, slip and join the two hemispheres. Indent the eye sockets with thumbs. Squeeze the base, forming the chin
4. Cut heart shape and attach upside down to form nose. Roll a slab and cut a long rectangle for the mouth/teeth. Either depress or add teeth shapes. Score, slip and attach to mouth area.









