



# Días de los Muertos

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## Los Días de los Muertos

Mexican people have honored their dead with ritual since pre-Hispanic times. Archaeological excavations have unearthed burials with offerings of pottery, food, toys, and household objects. Pre-Hispanic Mexican art also show examples of death rites. The cultural belief that death is an important part of the cycle of life is an ancient one, and contrasts with the modern American concept of death as the absence of life. The unity of life and death has continued in Mexico as the theme of art and customs associated with the festival of Los Días de los Muertos, or Days of the Dead.

All-Saints Day (All Hallows) was established in Catholic tradition in the 9<sup>th</sup> century to be celebrated on November 1. The evening of October 31, prehistorically a time for the gathering of dead souls, later came to be known as Halloween. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, November 2<sup>nd</sup> was established as the feast of All Souls, a day to recall the dead with prayer. When the Spanish conquered Mexico in 1521, their priests merged the Catholic All Souls' Day with the native Indian rituals of death, creating the unique Días de los Muertos festival.

Although the original traditions of this festival may today be obscure, the belief that the spirits of dead relatives return on the evenings of November 1 and 2 are still held by many cultural groups. Family altars are refreshed. New altars known as *ofrendas* are built, decorated with marigolds, candles, toys, religious pictures, cut tissue paper designs, and personal momentos and photographs. Incense, beverages, food, candies, sugar skulls, and *pan de muertos* are offerings at the *ofrendas*. Graves are cleaned and decorated.

Customs vary from region to region in Mexico and in Central and South America, but the pre-Hispanic philosophy that death is a part of life is the central framework for the celebration of *Días de los Muertos*.