



Dia de los Meurtos

By Jill McWhinnie

For most of us, the sight of skulls, skeletons and coffins evokes Halloween or macabre horror films. In many other cultures, however, brightly-coloured sugar skulls, whimsical skeletons and miniature toy coffins are part of a joyous festival, *Dia de los Meurtos*, or Day of the Dead.

Celebrated on November 1 and 2, the Day of the Dead falls close to Halloween on the calendar, but where the latter plays on our fear of death and the dead, *Dia de los Meurtos* celebrates death as a continuation of life and welcomes the returning spirits of family members for a brief reunion with loved ones on earth.

The origins of the day may be found in the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures of Mexico and Central America. The Aztec people in Mexico held a yearly celebration in summer honouring departed ancestors, at which time they believed that the dead, who continued to exist on another plain, and who preferred to be celebrated rather than mourned, could return at the time of the festival and accept offerings from

the living. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, this indigenous celebration was gradually blended with the Christian All Saints and All Souls Day observances on November 1 and 2.

In modern Mexico *Dia de los Meurtos* is a national holiday. November 1 is generally dedicated to departed children (*angelitos*) and November 2 is dedicated to the spirits of dead adults. Families create altars, called *ofrendas*, in the home to honour and welcome back deceased relatives. The *ofrenda* is draped with colourful cloth, a picture of the relative is placed on it and surrounded by pine resin incense, candles, bright orange or yellow marigolds, (*cempazuchitl*, or *flor de meurto*), intricate cut-outs of coloured tissue paper (*papel picado*), and the favourite food and drink of the deceased.

Pan de Meurtos, a traditional sugar-topped round bread flavoured with anise and orange, is also placed on the altar. Pieces of dough, baked on the top of the loaf are shaped to look like bones.

Artistic sugar or chocolate skulls, decorated with multicoloured icing, are

an important component of the festivities, and may be home-made or purchased in specialty shops leading up to the celebration.

In preparation for the festival, families go to the cemetery to clean and paint the grave sites of departed family members. Candles, incense, flowers, *pan de meurtos* and sugar skulls are also placed on adult graves, while toys are placed on the graves of the *angelitos* (little angels). Marigolds are placed on graves and marigold petals are often strewn in a pathway to the gravesite as the fragrance is believed to attract the souls of loved ones to return.

Families spend the day at the cemetery, praying for deceased relatives, recalling happy times spent with them and reciting humorous anecdotes about the deceased. Picnics are held and relatives also spend the night at the graveside. There are candlelight processions, dancing and music; it is a celebration, not a time of mourning.

Skeleton decorations (*calacas*), designed to look cheerful or humorous rather than scary, are seen everywhere. Often the skeletons are dressed as people would be in life; policemen, farmers, firemen; perhaps a reminder that death comes to us all and is not to be feared.

An iconic skeletal figure closely associated with *Dia de los Meurtos* is *La Calavera Catrina*, based on a sketch created around 1910 by a famous Mexican lithographer, Jose Posada. The zinc etching depicts a female skeleton wearing an elaborate bonnet which would have been worn by upper class women of the day. Those celebrating the Day of the Dead often wear elaborate makeup and costumes evoking

the *Catrina* figure. Celebrations vary among regions in Mexico and in other countries of Spanish colonial heritage. In Guatemala huge, magnificently decorated hand-made kites are flown outside cemeteries on All Saints Day, November 1.

Stouffville resident Juliet Sapalo Totanes recalls the celebration in the Philippines, where it is called *UNDAS*. Graves are cleaned and painted and decorated with flowers and candles.

"Businesses are closed on November 1 and 2," said Juliet. "Some of the roads leading to the cemeteries are closed to avoid traffic congestion, and people often have a long walk to reach the burial ground. On the day of the celebration people put up tents, bring food and stay all night in the cemetery. It's a day of prayer for the souls and also a day of reuniting with the family members. Imagine a hectare of land or more, with lots of busy people eating, chatting, laughing, playing cards and praying, a perfect picture of a feast day. This is how Philippines cemeteries look on November 1 and 2."

While the sorrow of loss when loved ones pass away cannot be denied, *Dia de los Meurtos* reminds us that there is joy in remembrance of their time with us, and that with its colourful customs, humour and affirmation of family and community, ultimately the Day of the Dead is a celebration of life.

This illustration shows a decorative skull which is more whimsical than scary. *Dia de los Meurtos* festivities and activities will be featured at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto on Nov. 8 and 9. See www.harbourfrontcentre.com for details.

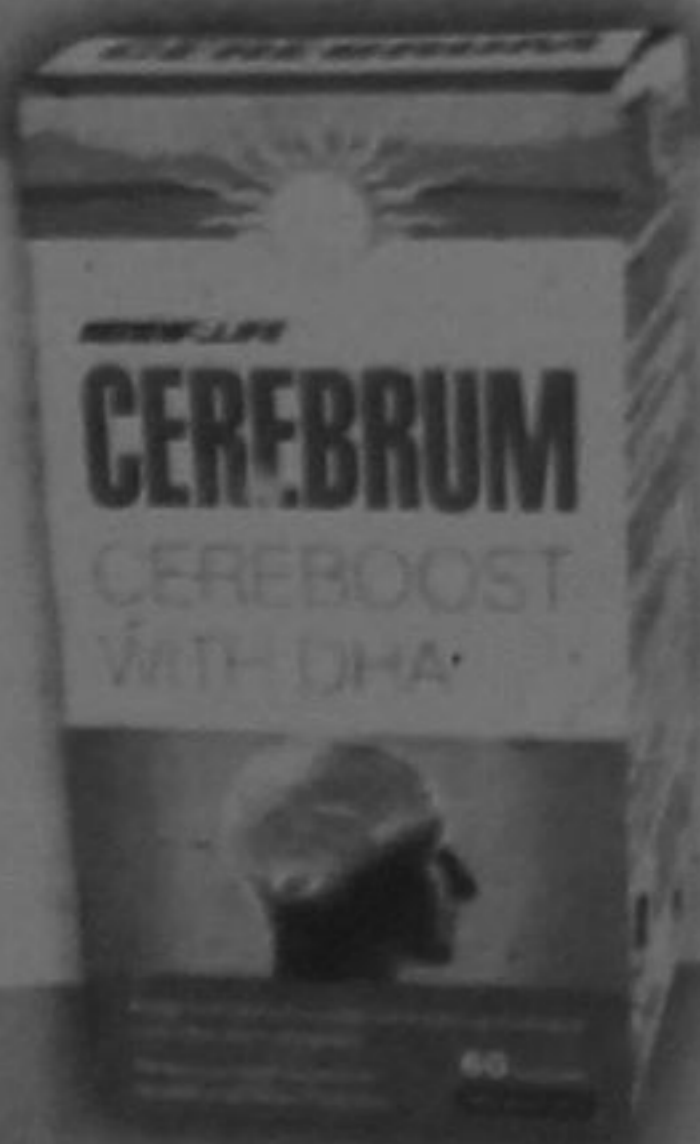


Day of the Dead celebrations at the cemetery of San Antonio Tecómitl, in Mexico City. Photo by Eneas de Troya

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