

**Traditions of Remembrance:  
*Dia de los Muertos and Memorial Day*  
Lesson Plan**

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Educator Resources and Lesson Plans  
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***Mexican Day of the Dead Figure, Unknown***



Dia de los Muertos, or “Day of the Dead,” is practiced today in Mexico and many parts of the United States. Day of the Dead is a Mexican tradition combining beliefs from Roman Catholics and Indigenous Peoples, including Maya and Aztec. It takes place from October 31 through November 2, during the Catholic holidays of All Saint’s Day and All Soul’s Day. This is when it is said that the souls of the deceased return to visit the living. During the celebration, people honor the souls of the departed with various customs. Families visit cemeteries and decorate graves with flowers and candles, welcoming the returning souls. People build ofrendas or altars, where a collection of objects are displayed to remember deceased family members and ancestors. Families celebrate these loved ones in various ways, for example eating their favorite foods or playing their favorite music.

Calacas, like this one, are wood or clay skeletons that depict the personalities and lives of people through colorful designs, festive clothing, and active poses. They are used for many different Dia de los Muertos traditions, including decoration on ofrendas and gravesites. During parades, calacas are used to act out humorous stories. They set the tone for the holiday, not as a somber remembrance, but as a joyous and festive celebration. “This day is a joyous occasion; it’s time to gather with everyone in your family, those alive and those dead.” - Hayes Lavis, National Museum of the American Indian

Unknown, Mexico  
**Mexican Day of the Dead Figure, 1955-1965**  
Earthenware  
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art  
Museum  
UMFA1996.011.001

## ***Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Washington, D.C., Olive Garrison***

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The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., is the largest military cemetery in the country with more than 400,000 graves. The white marble sarcophagus, as depicted in this photograph, is placed above the grave of a World War I unknown soldier who represents all of the unidentified soldiers who died in this war. The selection of this representative began on Memorial Day 1921 when four unknown American soldiers were exhumed in France. After

testing, examination, and a random selection, the chosen representative was honored in the United States Capitol and then officially buried on Armistice Day. Additional graves were placed, after this photo was taken, for unknown soldiers in subsequent wars.

There are various carvings on the sarcophagus, including six wreaths for the major campaigns of WWI; Greek figures for Peace, Victory, and Valor; and “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God”.

The U.S. Army’s Tomb Sentinels guard the Tomb 24 hours a day every day and are extremely exact and precise. For the many visitors, there are “Silence and Respect” signs and those viewing a formal changing of the guard are asked to remain standing and silent. These traditions and attitudes are one way that respect is shown to fallen soldiers, as honored through the Tomb, Arlington National Cemetery and Memorial Day. “May we never forget freedom isn’t free” – Unknown.

Olive Garrison (20th Century), American  
**Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Washington, D.C.**, ca. 1930s-1940s  
Gelatin silver process on paper  
Purchased with funds from Dr. James E. and Debra Pearl for the Dr.  
James E. and Debra Pearl Photograph Collection  
UMFA2000.26.2.444

## ***Traditions of Remembrance: Dia de los Muertos and Memorial Day***

Katie Seastrand

### **Overview**

Students will utilize two different artworks and readings to compare and contrast Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and Memorial Day, and discuss varying customs and remembrance.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

1. Analyze and discuss two artworks that represent different traditions around death
2. Complete readings discussing Memorial Day or Dia de los Muertos
3. Discuss different perspectives by participating in a creative debate exercise
4. Create their own artwork of remembrance
5. Reflect by writing about their artwork, perspective, and thoughts on the lesson

### **Intended Audiences/Grade Levels** 8-12

**State Core Links** (see State Core Links at the end of this lesson plan)

**Duration** 45 min-1 hour

### **Materials**

1. Image of *Mexican Day of the Dead Figure*, UMFA1996.011.001
2. Image of *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Washington, D.C.*, UMFA2000.26.2.444
3. The two readings (at the end of the lesson plan) printed, one for each student or for each small group to read together
4. Art materials: preferably a selection of mediums and materials. This is flexible and whatever is on hand can be used.
5. Paper and pencils

### **Vocabulary/Key Terms**

**Remembrance** a retained mental impression; the act or fact of remembering

**Calacas** skulls and skeletons that are shown in a variety of activities

**Ofrenda** “offering,” another word for the altar where food, candles, flowers, pictures, and mementos are left for the dead. These aren’t for worshipping but rather to welcome the spirits and remember ancestors and deceased loved ones

### **Activity**

**Part 1:** Comparison and Discussion

1. Display the two images side by side, the *Mexican Day of the Dead Figure* and *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Washington, D.C.* Give students a couple of minutes to examine each artwork. Begin as a class to discuss and compare the two images:
  - What's going on in the picture on the left? The right?
  - What do the images have in common? What is different?
  - What are some of the moods or feelings of each image?
  - What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Divide the class in half, one side focusing on Memorial Day and the other on Dia de los Muertos. Within each half, separate into small groups for deeper discussion. Have each group work together to record previous knowledge about their assigned holiday, and then pass out the appropriate reading. Instruct students to record important information from the reading and then, as a small group, talk about how we think of the deceased on this holiday.
3. Write on the board, "During this holiday, how do people think about those who have died? How do people act or what do they say?" and have each group write a collaborative response to the question.
4. Each group should take turns answering the question. Guide a debate about how people "should" think of those who have died.
  - Why do these different attitudes exist?
  - Can these readings add anything to our discussion of the artworks?
    - Add any relevant information on the artworks to the conversation
  - Did they have any changes in opinion about the artworks?

**Part 2: Art Project**

There are many different ways to remember the dead and both of the holidays discussed are wonderful traditions of respect and remembrance. Thinking about these two different holidays, we will create a work of art and do a writing activity to further explore this topic.

- As there are a variety of ways to remember people, discuss in the class some that are seen in the two holidays they've been studying. A couple of examples that could be used:
  - The symbolic carvings on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier sarcophagus
  - The personality and activity of the individual in the Day of the Dead Figure

- Have the students think about one particular individual who is important to them (living or deceased). Set out the available art materials, preferably a variety, and allow the students to select and create an artwork that acts as a visual representation of their memories of that individual. For students that may want additional prompting, this can be focused on a specific memory, traits, personality, etc. whatever they want to use to represent the individual and how they hold them in remembrance.
- This art activity is flexible and can use whatever craft or art materials the class has on hand (clay, construction paper, 2-d drawing or painting, collage, etc.). While this can take several forms with materials, the students should remain free in their decisions on how to visualize and create their artworks. For examples, please see those at the end of the packet.

**Part 3: Reflection**

- Finally, students will complete a written reflection with two parts.
  - First for their object: How it reminds them of this person, describing the different details, the purpose or meaning behind their creative choices, etc.
  - Second to reflect on the discussions about Dia de los Muertos and Memorial Day: What stood out, what was a surprise, are there elements that impacted their artwork, etc.

**Method(s) for Assessment**

Evaluate the students by assessing their participation, creativity, and their final written reflection.

**State Core Links**

**Visual Arts**

*Strand: CREATE – Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation*

*Strand: RESPOND – Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer, as well as the creator*

*Strand: CONNECT – Students will relate artistic skills, ideas and work with personal meaning and external context*

**English Language Arts – CCR Anchor Standards:**

*Reading:*

- Key Ideas and Details
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

*Speaking and Listening:*

- Comprehension and Collaboration

- Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

### **Additional Resources**

- <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2012/11/01/163549325/day-of-the-dead-decoded-a-joyful-celebration-of-life-and-food>
- <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Tomb-of-the-Unknown-Soldier>
- <https://www.arlingtontours.com/tomb-of-the-unknown-soldier>
- [https://www.army.mil/article/210343/tomb\\_of\\_the\\_unknown\\_soldier\\_had\\_its\\_origins\\_in\\_world\\_war\\_i](https://www.army.mil/article/210343/tomb_of_the_unknown_soldier_had_its_origins_in_world_war_i)

### **Examples of Art Activity**



## DIA DE LOS MUERTOS READING

Day of the Dead by Kathleen Jenks, Ph.D.

The Day of the Dead is a uniquely Indo-Hispanic custom that demonstrates a strong sense of love and respect for one's ancestors; celebrates the continuation of life, family relationships, community, solidarity and even finds humor after death—all positive ideas!

The Day of the Dead offers us the opportunity to examine this universal experience in the context of a family tradition, illuminated by the hope of an afterlife. In this way, it loses some of its terror and becomes more meaningful, even beautiful. This is an ancient festivity that has been much transformed through the years, but which was intended in prehispanic Mexico to celebrate children and the dead. Hence, the best way to describe this Mexican holiday is to say that it is a time when Mexican families remember their dead, and continuity of life. The original celebration can be traced to the festivities held during the Aztec month of Miccaihuitontli, ritually presided by the goddess Mictecacihuatl ("Lady of the Dead"), and dedicated to children and the dead. The rituals during this month also featured a festivity dedicated to the major Aztec war deity, Huitzilopochtli ("Sinister Hummingbird").

The ancient festival was originally celebrated in late July/early August. Spanish priests moved the feast to All Hallows' Eve, but the original tone and exuberance, despite the best efforts of those priests, remained the same. To the indigenous peoples of Mexico, death was considered the passage to a new life and so the deceased were buried with many of their personal objects, which they would need in the hereafter. Sometimes, when people of other cultures hear for the first time about the celebration of Day of the Dead, they mistakenly think it must be: gruesome, terrifying, scary, ugly and sad. Nothing further from the truth, Day of the Dead is a beautiful ritual in which Mexicans happily and lovingly remember their loved relatives that have died.

Living alongside death means that Mexicans have to learn to accept it within their lives. Death is apparent in everyday life. It is in art and even in children's toys. It is not respected as it is in other cultures. Children play "funeral" with toys that are made to represent coffins and undertakers. Death is laughed at in its face. Many euphemisms are used for death, *La calaca* (the skeleton), *la pelona* ("baldy"), *la flaca* ("skinny"), and *la huesada* ("bony").

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<http://www.peoplesguide.com/1pages/chapts/viva/dodead/1dodindex.html>

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rjsalvad/scmfaq/muertos.html>

<http://www3.niu.edu/newsplace.nndia.html>

## MEMORIAL DAY READING

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary

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For Immediate Release

May 2, 2000

Memorandum on the White House Program for the National Moment of Remembrance  
Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies

Subject: White House Program for the National Moment of Remembrance

As Memorial Day approaches, it is time to pause and consider the true meaning of this holiday. Memorial Day represents one day of national awareness and reverence, honoring those Americans who died while defending our Nation and its values. While we should honor these heroes every day for the profound contribution they have made to securing our Nation's freedom, we should honor them especially on Memorial Day.

In this time of unprecedented success and prosperity throughout our land, I ask that all Americans come together to recognize how fortunate we are to live in freedom and to observe a universal "National Moment of Remembrance" on each Memorial Day. This memorial observance represents a simple and unifying way to commemorate our history and honor the struggle to protect our freedoms.

Accordingly, I hereby direct all executive departments and agencies, in consultation with the White House Program for the National Moment of Remembrance (Program), to promote a "National Moment of Remembrance" to occur at 3 p.m. (local time) on each Memorial Day.

Recognizing that Memorial Day is a Federal holiday, all executive departments and agencies, in coordination with the Program and to the extent possible and permitted by law, shall promote and provide resources to support a National Moment of Remembrance, including:

- Encouraging individual department and agency personnel, and Americans everywhere, to pause for one minute at 3:00 p.m. (local time) on Memorial Day, to remember and reflect on the sacrifices made by so many to provide freedom for all.
- Recognizing, in conjunction with Memorial Day, department and agency personnel whose family members have made the ultimate sacrifice for this Nation.
- Providing such information and assistance as may be necessary for the Program to carry out its functions.

I have asked the Director of the White House Millennium Council to issue additional guidance, pursuant to this Memorandum, to the heads of executive departments and agencies regarding specific activities and events to commemorate the National Moment of Remembrance.

William J. Clinton

Note: This memorandum was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 3.