Day of the Dead Altar - an Important Cultural Tradition

Day of the Dead altars are built during Dia de los Muertos to honor the lives of those who have passed. They are often quite beautiful creations, constructed with love and care. Creating these altars is one of the most important traditions during Day of the Dead in Mexico and in Mexican-American communities around the globe.

On this page we’ll talk about traditional Dia de los Muertos altars what they look like, what items they include, and what purpose they serve.

Traditionally, every family in Mexico builds an altar on the days leading up to November 1. Some people even start weeks in advance and hire professionals to build elaborate altars. Other altars are more modest, but are still built with sincere, loving intentions.

On top of the altar, offerings are laid out for the dead known as ofrenda in Spanish. These are items that the spirits will enjoy when they come back to earth to visit their living families and friends. People make an effort to lay out the best ofrenda they can afford, consisting of things the dead person enjoyed while she/he was alive.

It is common for families to spend a lot of money for the Day of the Dead, to buy new things to go on their altars. This is because they want the best for their deceased loved ones. They don’t want their loved ones to show up after a long, tedious journey from the Other Side to be greeted by a meager, half-hearted altar!

A Day of the Dead altar is usually arranged on a table top that is used exclusively for the altar, or it is built from stacks of crates. Altars have at least two tiers, sometimes more. The table or crates are draped with cloth (or sometimes a paper or plastic covering). An arch made of marigolds is often erected over top of the altar.

Whether simple or sophisticated, Day of the Dead altars and ofrenda all contain certain basic elements in common. Here are the ofrendas that you will typically see on a Dia de los Muertos altar:

Candles - Candles are lit to welcome the spirits back to their altars.

Marigolds - These yellow-orange flowers, also called cempasúchitl, symbolize death. Their strong fragrance also help lead the dead back to their altars. Marigold petals may also be sprinkled on the floor in front of the altar, or even sprinkled along a path from the altar to the front door, so that the spirit may find her way inside.

Incense - Most commonly, copal incense, which is the dried aromatic resin from a tree native to Mexico. The scent is also said to guide the spirits back to their altars.

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Interpreter Profile: Van Huynh

Van Huynh has joined the MIS Department in December of 2012. Van is an ethnic Chinese living and growing up in Vietnam. Van is fluent in Vietnamese, Cantonese and Mandarin. He is well involved in both Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. In 1998, Van moved to the United States and adopted a new culture here, which is native to him now.

Van attended college and received a BS degree in Computer Science in 2003. While attending school, Van used his language skills to work as an interpreter, volunteering his time for a “Head Start” Program in the City of Oakland, California. In 2004, Van started his interpreting career and has been continuously acquiring new skills through trainings and work experiences. Van also finished the 40-hour “Connecting Worlds” training with the UC Davis Medical Center in the summer of 2013.

“I joined the MIS at UC Davis Medical Center in 2012. I am delighted to have the opportunity to strengthen my professionalism through diversity in medical field and engage in different interpreting methods, such as in person, phone and video interpreting” - says Van. When he has free time, Van enjoys spending time with his family and friends, traveling and exploring different cuisines. He also enjoys learning new languages and studying different cultures. We are happy to have become a part of the Medical Interpreting Services department. He is a great asset to the team.