

# This Day in History... November 1

## Day of the Dead

Celebrated annually on November 1, the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) is a time to celebrate lost loved ones. While the holiday is a relatively modern tradition, its origins date back thousands of years.

The holiday's roots extend back 3,000 years to the Nahua people (including the Aztecs) of Mesoamerica. They believed in a cyclical universe and that death was an important part of life. According to tradition, once a person died, they traveled to the Land of the Dead. After several years of journeying through nine challenging levels, their soul could go to the final resting place. In ancient traditions, families left food, water, and other items for the deceased to aid in their journey. Traditionally, this was done in August. After Spain colonized Mexico, they adapted these customs to fit their own Christian traditions. The celebrations were moved to November 1 and 2 to coincide with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.



*Often featured on altars, marigolds are known as the "flower of the dead."*

Most altars consist of three levels. The upper level includes photos of the deceased as well as images of saints, statues of the Virgin Mary, and crucifixes. The second level consists of items to help the dead feel welcome. This usually includes their favorite foods. The bottom level contains several lit candles. It also has soap, a towel, and a basin of water, for the deceased to wash and refresh themselves. They also leave out pillows and blankets for deceased to rest after their long journey.

Altars also include bright orange marigolds, which Mexicans call the "flower of the dead." The flowers' bright color and strong scent help the souls find their way to their altars and symbolize both the beauty and fragility of life. *Papel picado* (perforated paper) are also included in these altars as well as monarch butterflies. Monarchs usually arrive in Mexico around November 1, so they have long been associated with the Day of the Dead. People share happy memories and write short poems known as *calaveras literarias* (literary skulls). These light-hearted speeches can be about the dead or living.



*Monarch butterflies are often associated with the Day of the Dead.*

One of the most recognizable elements of Day of the Dead celebrations, the *calavera* (skull), represents the cycle of life and is usually colorful and full of joy. Altars are also decorated with embellished candy skulls made of compressed sugar and decorated with inedible items such as foil, feathers, and beads. The rise in popularity of skull imagery is often credited to artist José Guadalupe Posada. In the early 1900s, he produced political caricatures of skeletons dressed in the elaborate clothes of the wealthy. The most famous of these was Catrina, a female skeleton wearing a large, feathery hat. At Day of the Dead celebrations, artisans sell skulls made of clay and wood as well as edible candies made of chocolate. Ornate skull designs are also carved into layers of tissue paper to produce *papel picado* (cut paper banners). Skulls and skeletons are shown happy and dancing, symbolizing a joyous afterlife.

Modern celebrations include large parades with people wearing *calacas* (skull masks) or painted faces to resemble skeletons. Wearing colorful clothes and a variety of flowers, they sing and dance, reminding us of the joy and celebration Day of the Dead is meant to represent. In recent years, these celebrations have spread from Mexico to many US cities.



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