

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS *DAY OF THE DEAD*

November 2, 1991

“Dia de los Muertos” as we know it today began hundreds of years ago in the valley of Southern Mexico where the Mayas, Zapotecas, Mixtecas, and Aztecas honored their dead with elaborate ceremonies, dances, and rituals. In the 16th century when Cortez conquered Mexico and Catholicism was introduced, the religious All Saints Day and All Souls Day coincided with the indigenous celebrations, giving us the altars with food, art, candles, incense, flowers, and photographs of the deceased alongside those of saints. Day of the Dead began in Los Angeles in 1972 after the East Los Angeles riots left the Chicano community feeling angered because of the negative stereotype the media had portrayed. A group of artists at Self Help Graphics then decided that not only did the community need to be united in a positive project, but the society in general needed to see a very real, very positive celebration coming out of East Los Angeles and the Chicano community. In 1984 Day of the Dead was introduced to the Los Angeles Photography Center by Self Help Graphics. It was in these galleries where contemporary “fine” art became a major component of the celebration.

Art through its various interpretations has always played an important role in the Mexican/American community. We find artistic designs in our gardens, our kitchens, our diverse style of dress and in the many ways we celebrate our culture. There is no other day, however, in which all aspects of “art” are so fully explored as in “El Día de los Muertos”. On this day (traditionally) November 2nd, our community abounds with art. Detailed arrangements made with colorful flowers, foods adorned, sprinkled, colored and laid out in an aesthetically pleasing manner, altars composed with personal mementos, candles and the above mentioned items, and people with painted faces and beautiful costumes can be found throughout at various galleries in which contemporary art, created specifically for this event, is exhibited.

Dia de los Muertos is rich in both theme and culture and can be interpreted from the most immediate, to the most abstract, to the most sublime of manner. The artist has been given the opportunity to realize the depths of fear, passion, love, life, reason, sanity and death. For example: How can death and fear be translated on canvas or clay? Is there a rebirth associated with this phase of life? How can death be a celebration? The artist helps us to visualize the reality of this event in our personal lives and has the ability to interpret it any way he/she chooses because of the unknown factor involved. However intangible love may be, we all have a sense of what it is. Even if we are to experience a rebirth, those who have not, know its meaning. Death however, does not allow us the luxury of knowing. Therefore, the artist runs the gamut of emotion, and however real or unreal death is to us, “Día de los Muertos” is one of the most positive methods of coming to terms with it.

Artists having come to fully embrace this particular event from Mexican history, not only for the vastness of its theme, but more importantly because of its non-political, richly cultural contribution. This is not a celebration of wars fought and won, but in a rejoicing of the gift of life and in the manner each person has chosen to live it. It is said in Mexico, we know when and where we were born, but we will never know when and where we will die. It is up to each individual to make decisions that will enhance or disrupt their lives. What, if anything, should be made clear by this exhibit and the different ways death is interpreted and life is celebrated within these walls, is that we are all going to pass through that final threshold. We will all willingly or forcibly accept our personal invitation to death.

Consuelo F. Norte, Curator

[Note: Consuelo Norte was a parent at Pacific Oaks College & Children’s School at the time she wrote this informational page for our families at the school. She also helped many families that year come to place a of healing after the sudden loss of loved ones in the fall of 1991. I am forever grateful to Consuelo for bringing a deeper understanding of this “Celebration of Life” to the Pacific Oaks College & Children’s School community. Chris Lamm, Dean of Children’s Services, Pacific Oaks College & Children’s School, 1988-92].