

# How Day of the Dead is celebrated

By KORI RUMORE, RICK TUMA and RODOLFO JIMENEZ AND OCTAVIO LOPEZ

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Instructor Laura Neira gives a daily lesson on how to build paper mache skeletons while artist Diana Pietrzyk paints colorful skulls on the window of La Catrina Cafe in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood Oct. 18, 2017, in preparation for the Day of the Dead celebration in Chicago. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

## Anatomy of a Day of the Dead altar

Skulls and skeletons are popping up in stores around Chicago, but they're not your typical Halloween fare. Look closely and you'll see them paired with colorful flowers, dressed as bride and groom, or made from sugar with intricate designs. These are representations of a popular celebration in Mexico and other parts of Latin America called Day of the Dead.

Unlike Halloween, Day of the Dead is not meant to be a sad or frightening holiday, but an uplifting time to remember loved ones who have died.

"Day of the Dead is a very sacred day. It's a day in which we welcome back the memory and the souls of those people who are still — are still — an important part of our family, even though they many not be physically present," Cesareo Moreno, chief curator at Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, told the Tribune in 2015 (read the story [here](#)). "And it's a sacred day in which a lot of people pray. They gather together. We welcome them back. Halloween, you don't want those ghosts around. You're kind of afraid of them. It's a scary time. It is certainly not a sacred day, and I think those are the big differences between the two."

In Latin America, Day of the Dead customs are passed down from generation to generation, but the celebration is a relative newcomer in the U.S. Activists in California began to organize Day of the Dead processions and altar exhibits in the 1960s and '70s as a way to honor Mexican-American heritage. And more recently, Day of the Dead products are popping up at stores like Wal-Mart, Target, and Crate and Barrel.

### Structure of the altar

The altar is one of the most distinctive ways Day of the Dead is celebrated. An altar is made in honor of the deceased and can be displayed at a grave site or in the home.

Offerings of food, beverages and prized possessions are displayed. "The altar is a good example of the fusion of both religions and cultures," said Eric Garcia, Arte Ambulante coordinator of the National Museum of Mexican Art. "These altars pay respect to both the indigenous and the Catholic beliefs of the afterlife and situates them logically."

### The base

An altar can be built using tables, shelves or crates. The order of the three levels references Catholic and indigenous beliefs.

### Top level

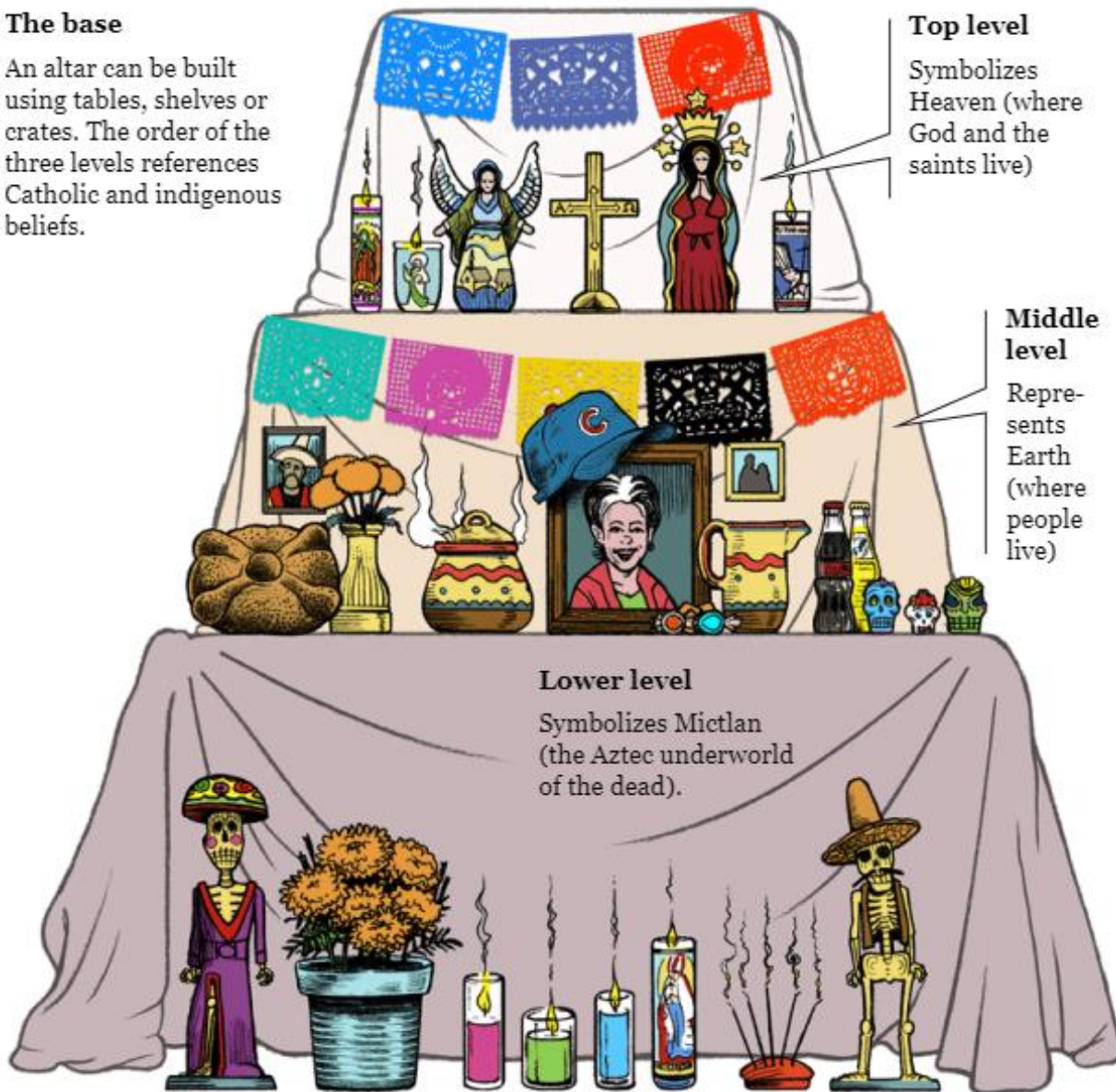
Symbolizes Heaven (where God and the saints live)

### Middle level

Represents Earth (where people live)

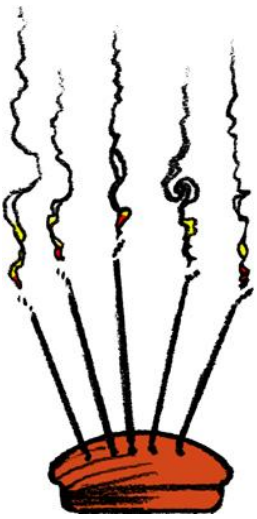
### Lower level

Symbolizes Mictlan (the Aztec underworld of the dead).



## Offerings

On the different levels of the altar, offerings or gifts are placed, usually including favorite items of the deceased intended to honor and welcome them back home.



**Incense (incienso)**

Made of copal, which is pine resin, and used to communicate with the spirit world.



**Marigold (flores de cempasuchil) flowers**

Orange color and penetrating aroma lure heavenly souls to Earth. Petals are sprinkled on the floor leading to the altar to guide the souls to it.



**Bread for the dead (pan de muerto)**

A sweet treat for the spirits. Design on top is meant to look like skull and crossbones.



### **Food (comida)**

Includes a deceased loved one's favorite items to eat and represent the Earth element.



### **Water (agua) and other drinks (otras bebidas)**

Quench the thirst of the spirits who are believed to travel to Earth for one day.



### **Candles (velas)**

Represent the element fire and attract the spirits to the altar.



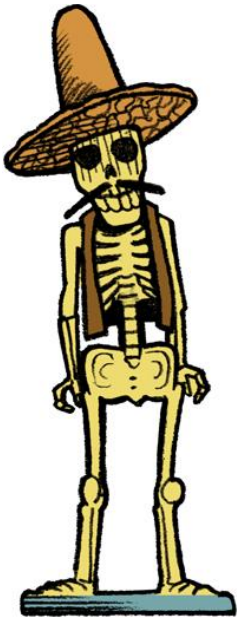
### **Paper banners (papel picado)**

Intricate crepe paper cutouts represent the wind and fragility, and are used as decorations for festive occasions throughout the year. Include images of skulls for Day of the Dead.



**Photos and possessions (fotos y otros objetos)**

Photos of the deceased, as well as personal possessions are included to remember loved ones who have passed away.



**Skull (calavera)**

In the form of puppets, toys, candy made of sugar or little figurines acting out scenes of daily lives (working, marrying, singing), skull art is a reminder of life's brevity and the inevitability of death.



### **Catrina (la catrina)**

A female skeleton figurine wearing a wide-brimmed hat and dress common for upper class Mexican women in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This style satirizes those who favored European culture over Mexican foods and customs. Popularized in graphic images by artist Jose Guadalupe Posada.

#### **The basics**

#### **When is it celebrated?**

The celebration is from Oct. 31 to Nov. 2. Souls of children are believed to visit the Earth Oct. 31 to Nov. 1 and adults, Nov. 1 and 2. The Catholic holidays, All Saints Day (Nov. 1) and All Souls' Day (Nov. 2) take place during this time.

#### **How is it celebrated?**

Customs vary, but can include standard Catholic rituals — including attending Mass and praying for the dead with rosary beads — and folk customs — including cleaning and adorning grave sites of dead loved ones and constructing home altars in their honor.

*Sources: Eric Garcia, Arte Ambulante coordinator, the National Museum of Mexican Art; "Day of the Dead in the USA," by Regina M. Marchi; Smithsonian Latino Center; Epicurious; Tribune reporting*

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