

## **The Day of the Dead as an Art Form** **The Day of the Dead Enters the U.S. Museum, Gallery and Cultural Center**

Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States have undergone a transformation from those celebrated in different regions in Mexico. The traditional practices of Catholic Mass on November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 2<sup>nd</sup>; cemetery vigils; food offerings; home altar-building with pictures of the deceased, fruit, bread, trinkets, mementos, copal incense, figures of saints and crucifixes, candles and marigold petals; and the church bell ringing to honor and pay homage to deceased ancestors have been imbued with new secular meaning as it moved north across borders to the United States.

From a celebration in the domestic realm of the home to the public space of museums, galleries and cultural centers; from a family-oriented ceremony to honor and pay homage to the souls of deceased ancestors to a larger community celebration of memory and ethnic pride; from a symbol of national identity in Mexico to a symbol of cultural reclamation and identity in the United States, the Day of the Dead as a cultural form has been reclaimed, re-articulated re-contextualized and re-circulated in new environments.

The Latino Virtual Museum and Second Life becomes the perfect medium in which to recreate both worlds, both meanings, both traditions, and both cultures. The possibility to include —processions, candlelight vigils in the cemetery along tombstone cleaning, decoration and the consumption of special food, as well as the construction of a community altar while highlighting the art installations, artworks and sculptures in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution, makes this a unique medium to understand the connections and nuances of the celebrations surrounding the All Saints Day-All Souls Day and the Days of the Dead events in both countries.

Beginning in 1971, the small scale and very local rituals of the Day of the Dead event in Southern Mexico and in towns in Michoacán, Mexico such as Tzintzuntzan and Pátzcuaro and others communities around Lake Pátzcuaro received an impetus from the State of Michoacán institutions such as Casa de Artesanías, Casa de Cultura and the Ministry of Tourism in an effort to promote economic development and the cultural tourism industry in the area during this time of the year. As anthropologist Stanley Brandes notes, these celebrations were altered and shifted from small-scale unelaborated town rituals of the Purépecha descendants to a full-blown two-day 'ritual drama' with theater performances, folk festival with dance groups and musicians, crafts competitions and an open air-market attracting an influx of a multitude of local onlookers and thousands of foreign tourists (Brandes, 2006: 71, 78-80).

In the United States, at least since the 1890's Mexican American and Hispano residents of Southwestern States observed the Roman Catholic religious aspect of the All Saints' and All Souls' Day by attending mass, visiting the cemetery and cleaning and arranging flowers next to the tombstones but did not incorporate the indigenous customs of food offerings, burning copal incense or skulls or skeletons imagery (Marchi, 2009: 34).

However, Chicano and Mexico-born artists in California in 1972 were the first to become interested in the visual aspects of the celebration and its aesthetics. They appropriated this syncretic

religious and cultural practice—a fusion of indigenous pre-Hispanic Aztec beliefs and rituals with Western European Roman Catholic and Christian observance of All Saints and All Souls Days—and transformed its configuration, shape and content to create multimedia art installations that reaffirmed ideology, preserved cultural memory and created community.

In the reenactment of the Day of the Dead, artists stripped it off of its religious meaning albeit keeping the indigenous rituals and made it into a secular commemoration and public celebration of communal cultural memory and political experience. The long tradition of year-round home shrines and altar building found throughout the US Southwest was also integrated as well as contemporary elements such as the ubiquitous educational crafts workshops for teachers and students, processions, poetry slams, Aztec blessing rituals and ceremonial dance performances, music, art exhibitions, calavera puppets, steel drummers, jugglers, etc.

The artistic altars/ofrendas now called “altar installations” exhibitions, in addition to featuring the traditional ofrenda elements, soon came to incorporate offerings in memory and remembrance not of family ancestors but of artists and well-know figures such as Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, José Guadalupe Posada, Cantinflas, Che Guevara, Ruben Salazar, Rudy Lozano, Cesar Chavez, Selena, Celia Cruz and others. Also they served as a site of commemoration for victims, groups and political causes such as the 1980s Central American Civil Wars, indigenous rights, the homeless, the 11 September 2001 attack, the AIDS epidemic, the women of Juárez, Braceros, the Mexico-U.S. border desert migrant crossings, urban and gang violence, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars among others. This wide range of themes for the altar installations transformed the original meaning of vigils for the return of the souls of family ancestors to a political stance that addresses more contemporary social, political and economic local and global issues.

Arguably, the first documented public celebrations of Day of the Dead in the United States took place in San Francisco and Los Angeles in November of 1972. At Galería de la Raza in San Francisco Chicano artists René Yáñez and Ralph Maradiaga organized the first exhibition with theirs and works by Carmen Lomas Garza, Yolanda Garfias Woo. In addition to the exhibitions, candlelight night processions were incorporated in 1981 around the Mission District soon evolving into the largest Day of the Dead procession in the United States.

At Self-Help Graphics in East Los Angeles, Mexican muralist Carlos Bueno, Mexican photographer Antonio Ibañez and Italian-American Sisters of St. Francis nun Karen Bocalero introduced artists to this Mexican celebration with a procession from the Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights to Self-Help Graphics Studio where art exhibitions and altars by artists and local youth were displayed. Since then the annual Self Help Graphics Day of the Dead event has become a familiar celebration in Los Angeles. Many artists and artist members of collectives such as ASCO have participated in its celebration infusing it with new meanings and messages. From 1975 to 1982 Self-Help Graphics received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts for its Día de los Muertos celebrations and youth projects.

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s the celebrations expanded to other cities in California such as Sacramento, San Diego as well as to Texas and the Southwest. In the Midwest, Clay Morrison is credited with organizing the first Day of the Dead exhibition in Chicago at West Hubbard Gallery in 1981, where showed large papier-mâché figures, skeletons and other Day of the Dead artifacts. However, the first commissioned altar/ofrenda art installation was done by Mexico-based artist Felipe Ehrenberg who was invited by Marta Elena Ayala and Mi Raza Arts Consortium (MIRA) to exhibit at Objects Gallery in November 1983 with an altar that honored the victims of the El Salvador armed conflict. This exhibition also featured the performance *Velas y calaveras, recuerdos y festejos*. Also, the same year, the first Day of the Dead group exhibition featuring Carlos Cortez and other artists was held at Kalpulli Center. The explosion of Day of the Dead theme exhibitions in Chicago that year also included one at Beverly Art Center and Clay Morrison's exhibition at Northern Illinois University.

For Chicago, this constituted the beginning of cultural encounters and transnational collaborations of Day of the Dead exhibitions and lectures between Mexican and US artists that has characterized exhibitions in Chicago ever since and in particular those of the National Museum of Mexican Arts (formerly the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum) which were instituted annually in 1987. For these installations artists such as Laura González, Carlos Cortéz, José Guerrero, Mario Castillo and many others have paid homage to larger global issues of youth violence, natural disasters, human right abuses, war, oppression and hope for the community future.

In Michigan, the first Day of the Dead exhibitions were held at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids and Dos Manos in Royal Oak in 1987. Detroit had its first Día de los Muertos exhibition was held at Casa de Unidad Cultural Arts and Media Center in November 1989 with a commission of an altar installation by Nora Chapa Mendoza and José Leyva Garza. The Detroit Institute of Arts in turn held its first in 1991 in the inner garden courtyard with an ofrenda to Diego Rivera created by his grandson Juan Coronel Rivera of Mexico and surrounded by his very own *Detroit Industry* mural cycle executed in 1932-1933.

In the East Coast, the first Day of the Dead exhibition was at Fondo Del Sol Visual Art and Media Center in Washington, DC in 1981 featuring artist Felipe Ehrenberg. However, the first pan-Latin American (El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Ecuador) Day of the Dead celebration was held at the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery in Washington DC on October 30-31, 1982 in conjunction with the exhibition *Celebration: A World of Art and Ritual* and as part of the series "Living Celebrations" of the public interpretative programs of the Smithsonian Folklife Program. As event organizer and coordinator Olivia Cadaval writes, the celebration featured "Latino Virgins and Christs, homemade paper crafts, a cemetery complete with earth-covered graves and wooden headstones, and an atmosphere pervaded by bright colors, church incense, votive candles and festival foods" (Cadaval, 1985:180) all set in the 4,300-square-foot French Second Empire-style Grand Salon of the Gallery.

Since the 1990s the United States has seen a proliferation of Day of the Dead solo, group and juried exhibitions in museums art galleries and cultural centers accompanied of ancillary programs such as performances, family days, art workshops and school visits that complement in-classroom school curriculums, processions, and even culinary menus in restaurants. In the 2000s the allure of the celebration has expanded to all corners of the U.S.: New York has seen Day of the Dead celebrations at

the Metropolitan Museum and at El Museo del Barrio; Boston, at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University; and Washington, DC at the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of the American Indian and now at the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum.

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October 2009

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