

# THE DAY OF THE DEAD

## *La Muerte, Death & the Dead*

In the pre-Colombian cultures of Meso-America, especially among the Azteca (also known as Nahuas or Mexica, me-shee'-kah), life was seen as a dream. Only in dying did a human being truly awaken. Death was not feared because it was inevitable. The modern view of death derives in part from that of pre-Colombian times. For the Aztecas, as for other ancient peoples, death signified not an end but a stage in a constant cycle. Just as day followed night and spring followed winter, so the continuity of life was ensured by sacrifice or heroic death. Worship of death involved worship of life, while the skull - symbol of death - was a promise of resurrection.

It is believed that in pre-Colombian times the dead made a long and often perilous journey through the eight underworlds before reaching the region of Mictlan (meek'-tlan) ruled over by the forces of the land of the dead as they manifested in their feminine and masculine forms. Mictlantecuhctli (meek-tlan-teh-koooh'-tlee) as the god of the land of the dead and Mictlancuahtl (meek-tkan'-kwatl) the goddess of the land of the dead. The dead person's occupation in life and the manner of death determined which afterworld would receive him or her. Warriors who died in combat or on the sacrificial block went to Tonatihuilhuac (toh-nah-tee-eel'-wahk), the Dwelling Place of the Sun. Women who dies in childbirth went to Cihuatlampa (see-wah-tlan'-pah), the Region of the Women. The rain god Tlaloc (tlah'-lohk) called those whose death involved water (such as drowning) to dwell in Tlalocan (tlah'-loh-kahn), the Paradise of the Rain God. Children went directly to Chichihuacuauhco (chee-chee-wah-kwah-ooh'-ko), the "Wet Nurse Tree".

The festival commemorating dead children was held in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar. It was called Miccailhuitontli (meek-ky-wee'-tohn-tlee). Hueymiccaiuitl (way-meek-ky-eel'-weetl), held in the tenth month, was a celebration to honor dead adults. Warriors were honored during the fourteenth month at the festival called Quecholli (kay-chol'-lee). This fourteenth month coincides with November on the Julian or Christian calendar.

## *Spanish Influence*

The Spanish invaders came from a continent that had been ravished and depopulated by the plagues during the Middle Ages. They came as adventurers in

search of opportunity, gold, land, and to establish Christianity in the Americas. They brought with them a new concept of death; the concept of good and bad; the concept of a final judgment day; the concept of heaven, hell and limbo; and the evangelizing process. During their confrontations with the indigenous cultures, the Spanish witnessed and sensed the power of the celebrations honoring the dead which were at least 5,000 years old. Realizing that (forced) conversion could not obliterate tradition, they recognized them. What eventually developed through this tolerance of the old indigenous religion was a fusion of Catholic symbols, beliefs, and rituals with those of the indigenous cultures.

In the ninth century, All Saints' Day, November 1st, when all saints of the Roman Catholic church are commemorated, became known in England as the Feast of All Hallows. October 31st, the day before, was known as All Hallows E'en, a name later shortened to Halloween. Since the thirteenth century, the Catholic church's All Souls' Day, November 2nd, has been designated as a time to pray for the souls of departed baptized Christians believed to be in purgatory.

#### *El Dia de los Muertos*

The annual reunion, on November 1st and 2nd, of the living with the living, and the living with the dead, merges that of All Saints' and All Souls' Day with Quecholli (the fourteenth month of the Aztec solar calendar that venerated warriors). This day, now known as Day of the Dead, the deceased are given divine consent to visit with their relatives and friends on earth. Beginning in mid-October, children and adults prepare to welcome the souls of their dead relatives, who return home at this time each year to make sure all is well and that they have not been forgotten.

#### *La Ofrenda, The Offering*

At the center of the Day of the Dead observance is an ofrenda (offering) or altar, constructed in the home and/or at the grave site or in business establishments. These altars are always adorned with yellow/orange marigolds or zempasuchitl (zem-pah-zul'-cheel), the traditional pre-Columbian flower of the dead. In addition to flowers, fruit, pan de muerto (bread of the dead), pictures of the Virgen de Guadalupe and other saints, sugar skulls, chocolate, photographs of the dead, alcohol, and candles decorate the altar. For children, toys, and for adults, their favorite foods and items they used or loved in life are also added. An entire meal is

laid out in front of the altar for the dead to eat. The souls are believed to take only the smells and tastes from the food, in some cases the food is given away to friends, neighbors, or the needy the following day. People also bring food to the cemetery and traditionally spend the night in the graveyard by their family members tomb, cleaning it and decorating it. The cemetery itself becomes a site of great celebration on this special day.

*What is the difference between Halloween and the Day of the Dead?*

Halloween is based on a medieval European concept of death, and is populated by demons, witches (usually women), and other images of terror - all of them primarily negative. The Day of the Dead, in contrast, is distinctly different. It is a uniquely Mexican (Indigenous and Spanish) custom that demonstrates a strong sense of love and respect for one's ancestors; celebrates the continuance of life, family relationships, community solidarity, and even finds humor in death - all positive concepts.

