

MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S OFRENDAS:

EXPRESSIONS OF LIFE AND REMEMBRANCE



MINNEAPOLIS  
INSTITUTE OF ARTS

teacher's guide



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



- 3 Introduction
- 4 About the “Young People’s Ofrendas” Exhibition Project
- 5 Using this Teacher’s Guide
- 6 Phase 1: Honor Ancestors
- 8 Phase 2: Turn Ideas into Images
- 10 Phase 3: Create a Personal Ofrenda
- 11 Phase 4: Write an Artist’s Statement
- 13 Phase 5: Exhibit Ofrendas
- 14 Resource List



Karen, El Colegio student, *La Catrina*, 2009, Mixed media



The lessons in this teacher's guide developed by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) are designed to provide a framework for you and your students in grades 6 to 12 to explore the reverence for ancestors as expressed in art by various cultures; to create ofrendas—altars with offerings to the dead—inspired by the style and content of those created in Mexico to honor ancestors during Day of the Dead celebrations; and to share experiences and artwork with others through writing, video, and discussion.

In inviting students from diverse communities to learn about and create their own ofrendas, we acknowledge that the Day of the Dead is a very personal, spiritual tradition. It is important to us that we not ask students to imitate or make Mexican ofrendas. Rather, we envision students paying tribute to this rich cultural tradition by creating their own personal and contemporary ofrendas—in the spirit of the Mexican tradition.

**The process of researching and creating ofrendas that reflect their own personal experience, and talking and/or writing about it for others, will help students to:**

- Understand ancestral veneration in art around the world, and specifically the art of the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition.
- Reflect on the importance of remembering the dead.
- Learn how artists use an array of art elements and materials to express how they feel about someone or something important to them, and apply what they learn.
- Develop communication skills to express personal experiences.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

These overarching questions were developed with staff from El Colegio High School, in Minneapolis, who made and exhibited ofrendas in partnership with the Minneapolis Institute of Arts from 2008 to 2010:

- What are the similarities and differences in how diverse cultures honor ancestors?
- How and why has the process of honoring ancestors in the Americas changed over time?
- How is art a tool for creating community expression, creativity, and self-expression?
- How does honoring our ancestors influence the way we live our lives?

## ABOUT DAY OF THE DEAD

Day of the Dead (in Spanish, Día de los Muertos) is celebrated each year on November 1 and 2. Likely based on an ancient Aztec festival, Day of the Dead is a celebration in which family and friends gather to honor those who have died. On this holiday, the departed souls are believed to return to visit their living relatives. The celebrants create ofrendas, or offerings, for the deceased, which contain favorite foods, mementos, pictures, and flowers. They can also recount amusing family stories or anecdotes. These offerings are meant to welcome the souls, so they can communicate with their living relatives and friends. Images of skulls and skeletons are seen during the festival and in the ofrendas, demonstrating that death is a natural part of the lifecycle. Día de los Muertos is primarily celebrated by people of Mexican heritage living in Mexico and throughout the world. In the United States, many cities with Mexican-American populations celebrate this tradition in the weeks surrounding November 1 and 2.





## ABOUT THE “YOUNG PEOPLE’S OFRENDAS” EXHIBITION PROJECT AT THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Since 2008 the MIA has partnered with El Colegio High School in Minneapolis, an arts high school that integrates research-based teaching strategies with Latino culture and traditions, to create annual exhibitions of student ofrendas.

Students create their ofrendas in nontraditional wooden fruit crates, symbolic of the agricultural work performed by many of Minnesota’s migrant populations. Each ofrenda reflects the student’s own experience.

In 2009 and 2010, a Web site and blog followed the students’ progress as they created their ofrendas. Visit <http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda> to view student videos, in which they relate their perspectives and insights as they honor their ancestors. You can also view their final ofrendas and read about the individuals honored by the students.

In 2011 the project partnership expanded to also include students from Austin High School, in Austin; Thomas Edison High School, Minneapolis; and Humboldt Secondary School, St. Paul.



Alejandra, El Colegio student, *Mi Familia*, 2009, Mixed media



## USING THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide is designed as a framework for structuring lessons that suit your individual classroom schedules. It is organized in five phases:

**Phase 1: Honor Ancestors**

**Phase 2: Turn Ideas into Image**

**Phase 3: Create a Personal Ofrenda**

**Phase 4: Write an Artist's Statement**

**Phase 5: Exhibit Ofrendas**

We recommend allowing 3–6 weeks for Phases 1 to 4 to give students ample time to research, create, reflect, and communicate. An exhibition (Phase 5) of student ofrendas will ideally be ready by the end of October.



Andrea, El Colegio student, *Ami papá Daniel Alarcón*, 2009, Mixed media



## PHASE 1: HONOR ANCESTORS

### In Phase 1, students will:

- Learn how artists around the world have expressed a reverence for ancestors in artwork.
- Study the importance of Day of the Dead in Mexican culture and the role of ofrendas—altars with offerings for the dead—in the honoring of ancestors.
- Identify the subject of their own personal ofrenda.

### Discussion questions:

- What is an ancestor?
- Who are your family ancestors?
- Whom do you honor? How?
- What is Day of the Dead?
- What is an ofrenda?
- What are some of the key visual elements of ofrendas?

## HOW DO ARTISTS HONOR ANCESTORS?

Explore the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to see how artists from around the world have expressed a reverence for ancestors in their artwork.

If at all possible, visit the MIA to see firsthand works of art made to honor ancestors around the world. To arrange for a docent-led or self-guided tour, download a Tour Request Form at <http://www.artsmia.org/education/tours>.

Unable to visit the museum in person? Then begin your exploration by visiting a collection of images on this theme on ArtsConnectEd <http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/138225/1/honoring-ancestors>.

## STUDENT ARTIST ACTION: RESEARCH

Explore the Web sites and books in the Resource List (pages 14–15) to learn about Day of the Dead and the importance of ofrendas.



## CLASS ACTIVITY: SHARE DISCOVERIES

Ask each student to write three to five questions about Day of the Dead and ofrendas that arise from their research. Use these questions to facilitate a discussion about their research. Encourage students to respond to one another's questions.

Invite students to share their own family traditions for honoring their ancestors and other people in their lives who have died. Encourage reflection on the importance of remembering and honoring the dead.

## STUDENT ARTIST ACTION: SELECT YOUR OFRENDA SUBJECT

Ask each student to select a person, or subject, who inspires him or her. Ofrendas can be dedicated to one person (family member, friend, or someone famous who has died), or a group of people (police officers, teachers, soldiers, etc.).

Have each student respond to these questions:

- To whom do I want to dedicate this ofrenda? (It may be dedicated to one or more people.)
- Why is this person/are these people special to me?
- What more would I like to know about the person/people I am honoring in my ofrenda?
- Who could I talk to in order to learn more?
- What did I learn from my research?
- What do I want people to remember about him/her/them?

## DOCUMENT & SHARE YOUR PROGRESS

Does your school have a blog, newsletter, or other vehicle for students to share their thoughts, experiences, and creativity with others?

### **share**

Invite students to write or record their experiences during this research and brainstorming phase of the project. Encourage them to interview other students and staff as well.

### **join**

Become part of a student ofrenda-artist community. Ask students to connect with MIA partner-school students at the "Young People's Ofrenda" Web site <http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda>. Partner-school students will post their Phase 1 video blogs by the first week in October.

### **interact**

Ask students to comment on these blogs, and/or have conversations with the partner-school bloggers as they develop their own ofrendas. Visit weekly to see new blog posts by different students.

### **link**

If you have a blog or Web site that you would like to link to the MIA blog, e-mail the address to [ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org](mailto:ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org). Please link the "Young People's Ofrenda" Web site/blog to your site.





### PHASE 2: TURN IDEAS INTO IMAGES

#### In Phase 2, students will:

- Apply their knowledge of the symbolic value of ofrendas.
- Consider how visual artists use various elements and materials to express their feelings or moods.
- Conceptualize their personal ofrendas.

### CLASS ACTIVITY: DISCOVER HOW ARTISTS EXPRESS EMOTION

Have students study three artworks included in the ArtCollector set <http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/138225/1/honoring-ancestors>, in posters or books at school, and/or in the MIA galleries or Web site <http://www.artsmia.org>.

While studying the artworks, ask students to consider these questions:

- What is the mood of the artwork?
- What emotions does this artwork convey to me?
- What about the artwork conveys these emotions?  
Consider color, line, facial expression, body language.
- What other aspects of the artwork express feeling?

Invite each student to create an artwork to tell people how he/she is feeling that day. Ask:

- What colors will you include? Why?
- What objects, if any, will you include in the artwork? Why?
- If you incorporate words in your artwork, what will you say?

### CLASS ACTIVITY: CONCEPTUALIZE YOUR OFRENDAS

Review the function of the ofrenda in the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition. View student video blogs <http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda> from 2010 to see how other students have applied their knowledge of traditional ofrendas to the creation of a personal ofrenda.

Identify the type of container or format (e.g., table, stacked boxes) your students will use before brainstorming which elements and materials to include in their ofrendas; the size and format will influence these choices.

Ask students to begin to think about what artistic elements, objects, and materials might go into their ofrendas. Remind students that humor is an important element of ofrendas.

### EDUCATOR TIPS:

- If you will be exhibiting the ofrendas [see Phase 5], be sure to check ahead if food, drink, or live flowers are allowed in the exhibition area.
- The format for the ofrendas created by students at MIA partner schools is untraditional. As containers for their ofrendas, students use wooden fruit crates, which symbolize the agricultural work performed by many of Minnesota's migrant populations. If you would also like to create ofrendas in this type of fruit crate, order them from Crop Production Services: (608) 539-2090.





## STUDENT ARTIST ACTION: BRAINSTORM

**Before you begin to sketch out your design, consider these questions:**

- What photographs or other images of my subject might I want to include?
- What other materials, mementos, objects, or pictures would help tell others about this special person?
- What materials will I need? Consider using fimo or other modeling clays to create a structure for the elements of the ofrenda.
- Which elements of traditional ofrendas might I want to include in my artwork? Why?
- What symbols could I include in my ofrenda to give additional information about the person I am honoring?
- How might I want to arrange these objects in my ofrenda? Consider how the different elements will fit in the space, how they will look visually, and how the organization of the parts will most effectively communicate your feelings about the person.

## DOCUMENT & SHARE YOUR PROGRESS

### **record**

Invite students to write about or record their own experiences during Phase 2. Encourage them to interview other student artists and staff to provide a classroom community perspective.

### **visit**

Contribute to our community of student ofrenda artists.

Ask students to continue to visit the “Young People’s Ofrenda”

<http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda>.

### **interact**

Encourage them to make comments about new blog posts weekly and to ask questions of the student bloggers. The students are excellent resources for one another throughout this creative process.

### **link**

If you have a blog or Web site that you would like to link to the MIA blog, e-mail the address to ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org. Please link the “Young People’s Ofrenda” Web site/blog to your site.



### PHASE 3: CREATE A PERSONAL OFRENDA

#### In Phase 3, students will:

- Complete sketches.
- Get feedback from teachers and others.
- Assemble objects to create the personal ofrenda.

#### Material Suggestions:

Materials will vary by school and individual ofrenda. What follows are ideas to consider.

##### General

- Tissue paper
- Fimo, Model Magic, or Sculpy clay
- Wire or pipe cleaner
- Tempera or acrylic paints
- Fresh, dried, paper, or silk flowers

##### Traditional Elements

- Papel picado banners (handmade or purchased)
- Marigolds
- Incense
- Skeletons (papier mâché, ceramic, paper, etc.)
- Foods such as fruits, vegetables, bread of the dead (pan de muerto), sugar skulls, water, and salt
- Candles (battery-operated available)

##### Personal Elements

- Photograph or artwork of the individual(s) being honored
- Personal items that belonged to or were associated with the individual(s)
- Favorite foods and drinks

### STUDENT ARTIST ACTION: CREATE!

Arrange and assemble all of the materials in a way that expresses your feelings about the subject of your ofrenda.

### DOCUMENT & SHARE YOUR PROGRESS

#### shoot and share

Photograph each *ofrenda* and share with others via social media, student newspaper, or other vehicles.

#### visit

Ask students to continue to visit the “Young People’s Ofrenda” Web site/blog

<http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda> to exchange ideas and contribute to the student ofrenda-artist community.

#### interact

Encourage them to make comments about new blog posts and to ask questions. The students are excellent resources for one another as they create their personal ofrendas.

#### link

If you have a blog or Web site that you would like to link to the MIA blog, e-mail the address to [ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org](mailto:ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org). Please link the “Young People’s Ofrenda” Web site/blog to your site.



## PHASE 4: WRITE AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

### In Phase 4, students will:

- Think critically about the most important aspects of their ofrendas.
- Write artist's statements about their ofrendas.

Even if you do not plan to exhibit the student ofrendas outside of your classroom, ask each student artist to write a paragraph that explains his or her ofrenda to others.

## CLASS ACTIVITY: CREATIVE REFLECTION

An artist's statement is a brief synopsis of that individual's intent or motivation when she or he created the artwork. It's useful for helping viewers to better understand more about the artist, the artwork, and the subject and approach taken with creating the ofrenda.

In preparation for writing an artist's statement, ask students to reflect on these questions:

- Who does my ofrenda honor?
- Why did I select this individual?
- What do the objects, materials, images, and/or colors I have used symbolically tell viewers about the subject honored in my ofrenda?

## STUDENT ARTIST ACTION: WRITE AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Write an artist's statement in the form of a museum label. Try to keep the statement to less than 200 words.

### Sample label (English):

Domini Cruz Guzman [name of artist]  
Oaxaca, México, born 1993 [where & when born]  
The Eminent Hero of the Americas [title]  
Mud, photos, skulls, paint, candles, silicon [medium]

I dedicate this ofrenda to Benito Juarez, and I do so because he was the first president of Mexico who had indigenous roots. He was born in a very small town in the south of Oaxaca State, called San Pablo Guleatao. He was the president who instituted the reform laws in Mexico: while he was in charge, he had to face the European invasion - whose most noteworthy event was the battle of Puebla, on May 5, 1862. After the triumph of the liberals in the war of reform, he was constitutionally elected to continue as

## EDUCATOR TIP:

- If possible, ask students and staff to help each student translate his or her artist's statement /label into English and Spanish.



## PHASE 4: cont.

president on the 15th of June, 1861. Due to the French intervention in May 1863, he had to leave Mexico City, running the government from various points around the country. He returned to Mexico City on the 15th of July, 1867, after Maximiliano de Asburgo was tried and shot. For this reason, this ofrenda is dedicated to this important personality in the history of my country, with admiration and respect for those who gave us justice and freedom. "Among the individuals as among Nations, Peace is respect for one's neighbor's rights."

### Sample label (Spanish):

Domini Cruz Guzman  
Oaxaca, México, born 1993  
El Benemérito de las Américas  
Barro, fotos, Calaveras, Pintura, Veladoras, Silicón, etc.

Esta ofrenda está dedicada a Benito Juárez. La razón por la que le dedico es porque él fue el primer presidente con raíces indígenas que ha tenido México. Él nació en un pueblo muy pequeño al sur del estado de Oaxaca llamado San Pablo Guelatao. Él fue el presidente que hizo las leyes de reforma en México: estando él al mando, tuvo que enfrentar a la invasión Europea que tuvo como hecho principal la batalla de Puebla el 5 de mayo de 1862. Al concluir la guerra de reforma con el triunfo de los liberales fue electo constitucionalmente para continuar en la presidencia el 15 de junio de 1861. Debido a la intervención francesa en mayo de 1863, tuvo que dejar la ciudad de México ejerciendo su gobierno por diferentes puntos del país. Regresó a la ciudad de México el 15 de julio de 1867 después que Maximiliano de Asburgo fuera juzgado y fusilado. Por esta razón esta ofrenda es dedicada a este personaje importante de la historia de mi país con admiración y respeto a quienes nos dieron justicia y libertad. "Entre los individuos como entre las Naciones, el respeto a el derecho ajeno es la Paz."

## DOCUMENT & SHARE YOUR PROGRESS

### record

For this final phase of the project, invite students to record one another describing the symbols they used in their ofrendas.

### visit

Contribute to building a community of student artists. Ask students to continue to visit the "Young People's Ofrenda" <http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda> and to read student artists' statements.

### interact

Continue to encourage them to make comments about new blog posts and to have conversations with the student bloggers.

### link

If you have a blog or Web site that you would like to link to the MIA blog, e-mail the address to [ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org](mailto:ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org). Please link the "Young People's Ofrenda" Web site/blog to your site.

### post

If you have not yet linked your students' work to the "Young People's Ofrenda" <http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda>, consider creating a photo essay in Flickr or another photo-hosting site and sending a link to your album to [ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org](mailto:ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org) to get connected to the MIA blog.





### PHASE 5: EXHIBIT OFRENDAS

By creating an exhibition of their artwork, students will:

- Think critically about the most important aspects of their ofrendas.
- Contribute to a greater cultural understanding about the Day of the Dead in their school and community.
- Encourage reflection on the importance of honoring ancestors.
- Create a place for exchange of ideas and learning more about one another.
- Provide an opportunity to openly discuss loss and dealing with death in an affirming way.

### SIMPLE STEPS FOR EXHIBITING OFRENDAS

- Identify a space for your exhibition.
- Hang or display the ofrendas next to their artist's statements.
- Consider hosting an opening reception.
- Encourage students to discuss their ofrendas in the exhibition with their families, friends, and the community.

### DOCUMENT & SHARE YOUR PROGRESS

#### **visit**

Ask students to visit the “Young People’s Ofrenda” Web site to see and comment on the ofrendas created by students in MIA partner schools.

#### **link / post**

If you have not already linked your students’ ofrendas to the “Young People’s Ofrenda”

<http://www.artsmia.org/ofrenda>, consider creating a photo essay in Flickr or another photo-hosting site and sending a link to your album to ClassroomMaterials@artsmia.org to get connected to our blog and Web site.



## RESOURCE LIST

Explore these Web sites and books to learn about Day of the Dead and the importance of ofrendas:

### Web

>> <http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/>

This site, promoting Day of the Dead events in Arizona, includes images, a documentary, and information about foods, ofrendas, and crafts associated with the celebration. It also features an interactive educational package for teachers and students with an extensive bibliography for further research.

>> <http://www.ddfolkart.com/articles/misconceptions.htm>

Included on a Web site that sells Day of the Dead folk art, this page succinctly states and refutes common misconceptions about the holiday. Also, check out a refreshing first-person account of the meaning of Day of the Dead symbols: >> <http://www.ddfolkart.com/articles/thedayofthedeadoffering.htm>.

>> <http://www.youtube.com/user/HoustonChronicle#p/search/1/HCFxlvZH5IU>

This short video shows three people with their altars talking about their experiences.

>> <http://www.youtube.com/user/HoustonChronicle#p/search/0/roXMvbAqfqM>

This version of the video (see above) features Spanish subtitles.

>> <http://www.inside-mexico.com/Catalog/CatalogPages/1.htm>

The short video clip (a preview for a longer video) presents the narrator's personal experience of Day of the Dead. Good video footage of celebrations.



## RESOURCE LIST cont.

### Books

Stanley Brandes, *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.

Discussion of Mexican attitudes about death, the difference between funerals and Day of the Dead, and the relationship between Catholicism and Day of the Dead.

Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, University of Texas Press, 1991.

Photographs and essays exploring history and traditions of Day of the Dead as well contemporary adaptations of traditional celebrations.

John Greenleigh, *The Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed*, Pomegranate Communications, 1998.

A look, through the lens of San Francisco-based photographer John Greenleigh, at the diverse and colorful images of Day of the Dead in four Mexican towns.

Oakland Museum of California, *El Corazón de la Muerte: Altars and Offerings for Days of the Dead*, Heyday Books, Berkeley, California, and Oakland Museum of California, 2005.

Traces the holiday's roots from pre-Hispanic Mexico through Mexico under Spain, into the twentieth century, and into the United States. Richly illustrated with photographs of artworks, including ofrendas and personal stories.

Dana Salvo, *Home Altars of Mexico*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1997.

A beautifully illustrated study of home altars in rural Mexican communities with extensive cultural and historic background on the practice of creating domestic altars.