

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Artist: Amalia Mesa-Bains

Subject: El Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead)

Discipline: Visual Art

SECTION I - OVERVIEW	2
EPISODE THEME	
SUBJECT	
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS	
OBJECTIVE	
STORY SYNOPSIS	
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES	
INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	
EQUIPMENT NEEDED	
MATERIALS NEEDED	
INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED	
SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT	3
CONTENT OVERVIEW	
THE BIG PICTURE	
RESOURCES – TEXTS	
RESOURCES – WEB SITES	
VIDEO RESOURCES	
BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS	
SECTION III – VOCABULARY	6
SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK	7



Detail from a Día de Los Muertos altar.
Still image from SPARK story, 2009.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

SUBJECT

Día de los Muertos and Amalia Mesa-Bains

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

- Understand the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art.
- Develop visual, written, listening and speaking skills through looking at, creating and talking about visual artwork.
- Develop an expressive visual vocabulary with which to address personal and/or social themes and ideas.
- Develop observational and representational skills by looking at and reproducing images of people, places and things accurately and thoughtfully.

STORY SYNOPSIS

The beginning of November marks the Mexican holiday of Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. Spark explores the meanings and history of Día de los Muertos with internationally renowned Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains as she teaches a class on the holiday's traditions at Cal State University, Monterey Bay.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing as a group
- Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance
- Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently

- Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another
- Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to El Día de los Muertos traditions and the artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains.
- To provide context for the understanding of cultural traditions and how they are upheld in contemporary societies.
- To inspire students to create their own Día de los Muertos altars and develop a greater understanding of cultural traditions.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Spark story about Día de los Muertos and Amalia Mesa-Bains on VHS or DVD, **or** a computer with Internet access, streaming capability, navigation software, video projector, speakers and a sound card.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
- Pencils, pens, and paper
- Objects gathered by students to create altars

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems

Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on [Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) at www.kqed.org/spark/education.

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

The beginning of November marks the Mexican holiday Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. It is an occasion for people to celebrate and remember friends and family members who have passed on. *Spark* explores the meanings and history of Día de los Muertos with internationally renowned Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains as she teaches a class on the holiday's traditions at Cal State University, Monterey Bay.

The roots of Día de los Muertos combine both pagan and Christian traditions. The celebration can be traced back to a variety of indigenous ancient festivals, including one dedicated to the Aztec queen of the underworld, Mictecacihuatl. It also coincides with the Catholic All Souls' Day, celebrated on November 2, when family members pray for the souls of the dead that have not yet been granted entrance to heaven.

Central to Day of the Dead is the act of remembrance in which loved ones reenact their most cherished memories of the dead. The holiday is joyful and celebratory, but also offers an occasion for participants to connect with their ancestors and the past.

One of the key practices of the holiday is the construction of altars, or *ofrendas*, dedicated to friends and family members who are being remembered. Altars normally include an assortment of offerings to the dead, such as bread, salt, incense, water, candles, and flowers -- traditionally, Mexican marigolds -- alongside photographs of the deceased. Other offerings include cherished items of clothing and other objects reminiscent of those who have passed and brightly decorated skulls made of sugar.

In teaching these traditions, Mesa-Bains helps her students get in touch with their own histories.

Although more than half of Monterey County is of Mexican origin, the tradition of making *ofrendas* for Day of the Dead has been in great part abandoned as families came to the United States. For some, the tradition is even at odds with the practices of the Catholic Church. But by learning the traditions of Día de los Muertos, many of Mesa-Bains's students are able to reconnect with cultural practices and their own past.

Mesa-Bains herself has a special relationship with Day of the Dead altars. In the mid-1970s, Mesa-Bains began making *ofrendas* as fine-art installations dedicated to Latina feminists, including 1940s actress Dolores del Rio, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and her own grandmother. These *ofrendas* can now be found in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Smithsonian as well as in other prominent collections internationally.

Amalia Mesa-Bains earned a B.A. in painting from San Jose State University, an M.A. in interdisciplinary education from San Francisco State University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the School of Clinical Psychology, Wright Institute, in Berkeley. She has served as a consultant for the Texas State Council on the Arts and the Arizona Commission on the Arts and is a former Commissioner of Arts for the city of San Francisco. Her work has won her many prestigious awards, including a Distinguished MacArthur Fellowship in 1992.

THE BIG PICTURE

The Day of the Dead is a tradition that dates back roughly three thousand years in the festivals of Aztec, Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, Maya, P'urhépecha, and Totonac civilizations.

It is believed that between October 1st and November 3rd the dead are able more easily to visit the living. In most parts of Mexico, November 1st is Día de los Inocentes, dedicated to remembering and celebrating deceased children and infants, while November 2nd is dedicated to adults.

In Mexico, Day of the Dead traditions are focused on two main areas: visiting and decorating the graves of loved ones, and celebrating the dead in the home. Visits to the cemetery are made in an effort to encourage the souls of the departed to commune with the living. In some parts of Mexico, families eat meals and even spend the night by the graves of relatives. In the home, the primary Day of the Dead practice is the creation of *ofrendas* made up of photos, flowers, food and beverage offerings, candles, and various cherished items of those who have passed. Planning for *ofrendas* often begins months before celebrations.

In addition to *ofrendas*, there are a number of artistic traditions associated with el Día de los Muertos, including the representation of *calaveras* (skulls), which is central to many Day of the Dead festivities. Altars often include brightly decorated candy skulls. Also included in celebrations are representations of *La Calavera Catrina*, who is a kind of modern era translation of Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of the underworld. The most famous of these representations was made by the Mexican illustrator and printmaker, José Guadalupe Posada. Posada's image appears in many Day of the Dead art pieces



José Guadalupe Posada, *La Calavera Catrina*.

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ac/Posada2.Catrina.jpeg>



A Mexican sugar skull made for Day of the Dead *ofrendas*.
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Calavera.jpg>

Amalia Mesa-Bains is a world renowned artist, curator, and cultural critic, whose career spans more than three decades. Mesa-Bains was a key figure in the Chicano Art movement of the 1970s, simultaneously addressing issues of culture, gender, history and memory in her work. Her early *ofrenda* installations borrow from the traditions of the Day of the Dead, combining Catholic and indigenous traditions, and often adding a contemporary pop cultural sensibility.

Most of Mesa-Bains's altar installations are dedicated to Latinas/Chicanas who transgressed social boundaries, including Dolores del Rio and Frida Kahlo, though Mesa-Bains has also made *ofrendas* dedicated to religious and mythical figures, as well as little known or anonymous figures, the indigenous Mexican goddesses Cuatlicue and Coyolxauhui, the Virgen de Guadalupe, colonial nun and scholar Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and Chicana farm workers.

Mesa-Bains began making fine art *ofrendas* as a way to recover both personal and cultural history, which she regards as a political act of preserving history in the face of assimilation and cultural colonization. Beyond the women to which the installations are dedicated lie greater preoccupations dealing with femininity, beauty, and racial and cultural identity. While Mesa-Bains's work speaks to the very personal – often including references to the artist's own family and history, it also speaks more broadly to the experience of her generation of Mexican-American women as a whole. By adapting a practice that is normally found in the home to the museum context, Mesa-Bains evokes a domestic – and by extension, feminine – space within the public, male-dominated sphere of fine art production and exhibition, a mode of art-making that Mesa-Bains refers to as *Domesticana*.

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Amalia Mesa-Bains, et al. *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art*. The Mexican Museum, 1993.

Arquette, Kerry, et al. *Day of the Dead Crafts*. Wiley Publications, 2008.

Arredondo, Gabriela F. et al, eds. *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*. Duke University Press, 2003.

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

Gonzalez, Rita, et al. *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*. University of California Press, 2008.

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

Griswold Del Castillo, Richard, et al, eds. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*. University of Arizona Press, 1991.

Pérez, Laura E. *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. Duke University Press, 2007.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Amalia Mesa-Bains on Wikipedia:
http://en.wikiDía.org/wiki/Amalia_Mesa-Bains

Día de los Muertos on Wikipedia:
http://en.wikiDía.org/wiki/Day_of_the_Dead

A good guide to Day of the Dead traditions:
<http://www.dayofthedeat.com/>

User-uploaded photos of Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico:
<http://www.mexconnect.com/tags/day-of-the-dead>

Amalia Mesa-Bains's page on the Cal State Monterey Bay site:
http://vpa.csumb.edu/faculty/mesa_bains.htm

Bio of Amalia Mesa-Bains from San Francisco's Galería de la Raza:
<http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/exhibits/archive/artists.php?op=view&id=33&meDía=info>

Amalia Mesa-Bains's Artist's Statement from Zone Zero:
http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/y_mesa2.html

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Day of the Dead celebrations are held every year in the Bay Area. Information on where events will be held can be found at the following sites:

San Francisco, Día de los Muertos Celebrations:
<http://www.dayofthedeat.org/>

Berkeley, Día de los Muertos Celebrations:
<http://www.anotherbullwinkelshow.com/day-of-dead/>

Monterey Bay, Día de los Muertos Celebrations:
<http://vpa.csumb.edu/dead/index.htm>

San Jose, Día de los Muertos Celebrations:
<http://www.sanjose.com/day-of-the-dead-e713521>

A full list of 2009 Bay Area Día de los Muertos events for can be found here:
<http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/2009/10/09/ready-for-bay-area-day-of-the-dead-festivities/>

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND WORDS AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Aztec

Native America people of Mexico who built their empire in central Mexico in the 14th and 15th centuries, before the conquest of the region by Spain. They were renowned for the highly developed civilization they created.

Cempasuchitl

Flor de muerto are marigold flowers, used especially during the Day of the Dead celebrations. It is a Nahuatl word (from the Aztec language) meaning twenty-flower. Cempoa, meaning *twenty* and *xochitl*, *flower* which refers to the numerous petals of the marigold.

Chicanas

A Mexican-American woman or girl. *Chicano(a)* is a term used only of Mexican Americans, not of Mexicans living in Mexico. *Chicano* is a term of pride for many Mexican Americans, and has political resonance since it is not a term which is coined or accepted by all Mexican Americans.

Commemorate

To honor and celebrate a person or event often by holding a memorial service or tribute

Conservative

Traditional, conventional or conformist

Day of the Dead

The Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos) is celebrated in Mexico and Central America and by Latin Americans living in the United States. The holiday takes place on November 1st and 2nd in connection with the Catholic holiday of All Saints' Day. It is a time of remembrance whereby families and friends pray for and celebrate those close to them who have died. Altars are built in their honor using flowers, sugar skulls, marigolds, and the favorite foods and drinks of the departed in order to feed the souls of the dead.

Feminist

A person who advocates for the rights of women and maintains that women are equal to men, having been relegated to an inferior position in many cultures by patriarchy or social systems in which men are the dominant gender.

Garner

Bring together, gather

Icon

Image or symbol

Installation

The combining of elements into a singular artwork that is only located specifically in one place; an artwork that only exists in the place in which it was/is installed, and is not able to be relocated like a painting or a print.

“Ofrendas”

Offering, sacrifice

Prominent

Important or significant in relation to an event, or well-known and famous in relation to an individual

Reenactment

Replay or relive

Remembrance

Tribute, celebration in memory of

Resiliency

Hardiness, ability to surmount difficulty and recover from setbacks

Resistance

Confront, struggle, refusal and defiance

Salad Bowl of America

America has been described as both a “melting pot” and a “salad bowl” and the terms represent different viewpoints. The “salad bowl” is a contemporary reworking of the former “melting pot” metaphor. It reformulates American multiculturalism, acknowledging that different immigrant populations within the United States can coexist and maintain their individual identities rather than being assimilated and blended together (“the melting pot” idea) without recognition of difference in terms of tradition and culture.

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Understanding The Day of the Dead

Play the SPARK video featuring the work of Amalia Mesa-Bains. Ask students to work in pairs and share memories of how they mark the death of a family member or friend in their culture.

Ask them to share:

- Rituals, services or ceremonies?
- Mourning ceremonies or celebrations?
- How death is understood in their culture? For example in Mexico, death isn't seen as the end of one's life. The dead continue to exist and come back to visit the living every year.

Invite students to discuss responses to these questions, if they are comfortable doing so. In the spirit of Amalia Mesa-Bains' multicultural focus, draw out the similarities and differences that emerge between different cultures. Try to capture the ways in which distinctive practices reflect culture and heritage, and explore how students feel about retaining these traditions.

Working in small groups, assign **The Day of the Dead** as a research study for the class. Give each group a different topic to explore, including the Aztec origins, the significance of the altars, the decorative themes such as skeletons and skulls, the food offered to the dead, and the atmosphere or mood of the occasion. Groups can choose additional topics as well.

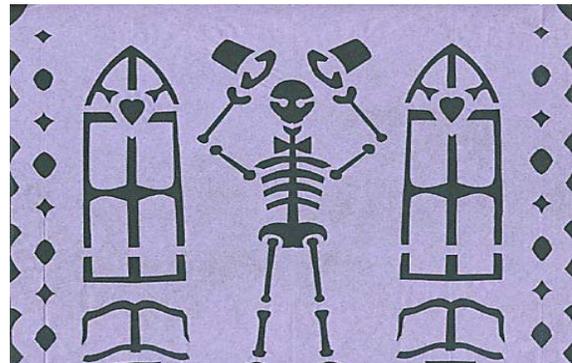
Ask each group to share their findings and allow time for the class to discuss the distinctive traditions. Encourage students who come from Mexican families to add their thoughts and memories and contribute to the discussion in any way they choose. Their perspective will be of interest to other students.

Making Mexican Papel Picado

Suggest the class learns how to make "papel picado" which are popular decorations used on **The Day of the Dead**, **El Día de los Muertos**, and also used as

colorful decorations for other celebrations and festivals. Papel picado is one of Mexico's most popular folk arts and is a special style of paper-cutting with its own history and tradition. On the **Day of the Dead** special colors are used for the paper cuts symbolizing pain (purple), hope (white) or celebration (pink). The sheets of papel picado often portray comic skeletons, representations of the departed or religious icons, and are hung along strings called "banderitas", meaning banners.

Students should follow the instructions for making papel picado by visiting this web page: <http://www.storyboardtoys.com/releases/Papel-Picado-Pattern-Simple.pdf> and string their "papel picado" across the classroom in celebration of their work.



Example of *Papel Picado*

<http://www.storyboardtoys.com/gallery/Papel-Picado.htm>

Creating an Altar or Ofrenda

There are no absolute rules about creating an altar, although certain objects are traditionally included, such as photographs, cempasuchitl (marigolds) or other flowers, incense, water, candles, food, especially the food enjoyed by the departed, soft drinks, toys or candy for children, and religious symbols or icons etc.

In terms of locating the altars, nowadays altars are built not only in homes but in public spaces, such as parks, schools, museums, community centers and even offices.

Begin by asking students to reflect quietly on someone they have lost – a friend or family member. Ask them to free-write for five to ten minutes on their memories of that person, jotting down the images that come to mind when they recall their lost one. What did they like to wear, eat or drink? What flowers did they like? Do they have photos of the person? Encourage students to be creative and construct an altar that captures something of the person they are remembering.

Advise students that they should use a box or table to frame the space on which to build their altar and construct levels for displaying the different objects. They will need to cover their frame with attractive material, paper or a table cloth, and then position the objects in any way they choose. Students may also write a poem or memorial piece to articulate their feelings and memories and place it on the altar.

For a simple guide on *How To Make Your Own Day of the Dead Altar*, visit:

http://gomexico.about.com/od/festivalsholidays/ht/make_altar.htm Students can, however, devise their own memorial without following conventions.

Having assembled the altars, invite everyone to view the work. Ask students who would like to talk about their piece to come forward and present their altar, explaining their choice of objects and how they evoke the person they are celebrating.

SPARKLER* (More activities to extend learning)

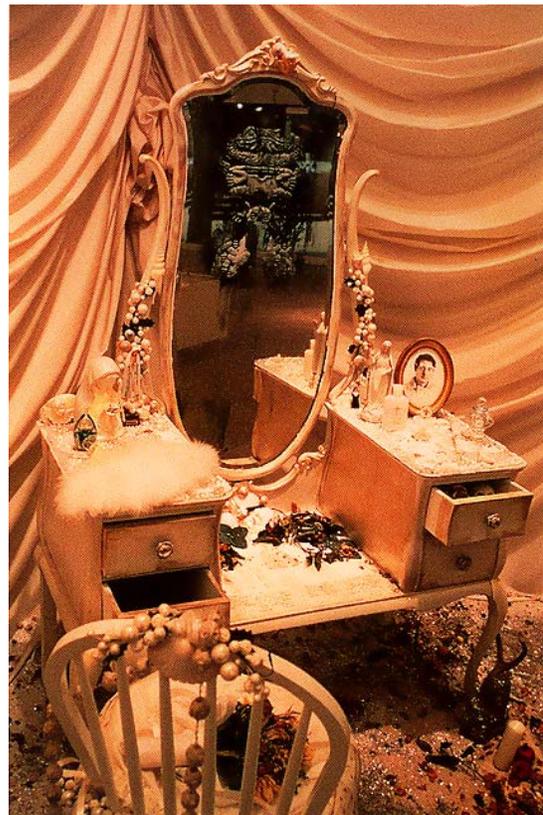
For students who enjoy baking, visit

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/chngmexico/212> and follow the recipe for Pan de Muerto (All Souls' Bread). They could then bring the bread to class and place it on the altars, or share it with other students.

Creating an Altar in the Spirit of Mesa -Bains

As an alternative activity to **The Day of the Dead** altar, screen the last section of the SPARK video and ask students to think about the Amalia Mesa-Bains' installations that honor feminist icons. How do students respond to these pieces? How does the work offer a cultural critique?

Visit this web page for images of Mesa-Bains's work: http://vpa.csumb.edu/faculty/mesa_bains.htm and project these images onto the wall in the classroom for further in-depth discussion of her ideas.



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy, Chapter I: The First Holy Communion Moments Before the End* (detail), 1993.
http://vpa.csumb.edu/faculty/mesa_bains.htm

Focus on the meaning of an icon in the context of Amalia Mesa-Bains's work, and ask students to identify people who have inspired them in a similar way. What is it that was inspirational about this person? What ideals do (did) they represent that students hold to be important?

Suggest students construct an altar or installation honoring an ideal – freedom, friendship, community, peace, sustainability etc. In this instance there are no conventions to shape their work and they are free to choose subject and materials; found objects, domestic objects, memorabilia, newsprint, images from the internet or anything that feels appropriate to them.

Allow students time to gather materials and create their installation or altar and then invite each student to present their work to the class, explaining their thinking and choice of materials. Encourage the class to ask questions and discuss the ideals and the artwork as an expression of these values.

SPARKLERS*

*Suggest that students take photographs of their installations and post them on a class Flickr site or blog for other students to view by invitation.

* Suggest students host an open studio of their work in the classroom or other suitable space and invite other classes, specifying a window of time during which the work will be available for viewing. After school would be the best time to host such an event. Students could post flyers round the school promoting their show and, on the day, provide simple snacks to welcome guests.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at

<http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/>.

RELATED STANDARDS - VISUAL ARTS

Grade 8

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.

4.5 Present a reasoned argument about the artistic value of a work of art and respond to the arguments put forward by others within a classroom setting.

Grades 9-12, Proficient

1.0 Artistic Perception Impact of Media Choice

1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.

1.0 Artistic Perception

1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.1 Articulate how personal beliefs, cultural traditions, and current social, economic, and political contexts influence the interpretation of the meaning or message in a work of art.

Grades 9-12, Advanced

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Identify the intentions of artists creating contemporary works of art and explore the implications of those intentions.

5.2 Compare and contrast works of art, probing beyond the obvious and identifying psychological content found in the symbols and images.