LET'S BUILD AN ALTAR WITH THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICAN ART
LET’S BUILD A DAY OF THE DEAD ALTAR!

THE CELEBRATION OF DAY OF THE DEAD HAS ROOTS IN BOTH THE ANCIENT AMERICAN RELIGIOUS RITUALS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF MEXICO, CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA AND IN THE CATHOLICISM BROUGHT TO MEXICO BY THE SPANISH.

THE 2 RELIGIONS MIXED TO CREATE A UNIQUE BLEND OF BELIEFS & RITUALS WHICH INCLUDE THE FOLK TRADITION OF HONORING THE DEAD. AN OFRENDAS IS AN ALTAR OR SHRINE DEDICATED TO THE SOULS OF THE DECEASED. ON OCTOBER 30, 31 OR EVEN EARLIER IN SOME HOMES— THE OFRENDAS WILL BE SET UP IN MANY MEXICAN HOUSEHOLDS TO ENSURE THAT IT WILL BE READY BY NOVEMBER 1 AND 2. THE TRADITIONAL OFRENDAS USUALLY CONSISTS OF A TABLE ADORNED BY A CLOTH AND DECORATED WITH FRUITS,-flowers, vegetables and many other objects. THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF THE OFRENDAS ARE: A STRING OF COLORFUL PAPEL PICADO, PAPER CUT-Outs, A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE DECEASED, PAN DE MUERTO, CANDLES, INCENSE OR COPAL, A GLASS OF WATER AND CEMPASUCHIL FLOWERS. FREDENTLY, THE OFRENDAS CAN INCLUDE PERSONAL OBJECTS SUCH AS CLOTHING AND TOOLS THAT BELONGED TO THE DECEASED. THESE ITEMS FUNCTION AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL WORLD.

4 ELEMENTS ARE INCLUDED IN AN ALTAR— EARTH, AIR, FIRE, WATER. CEMPASUCHIL FLOWER— FLOWERS SIMILAR TO THE YELLOW MARIGOLD HAVE BEEN OFFERED TO THE DEAD FOR CENTURIES. THE CEMPASUCHIL LIGHTS THE PATH FOR THE SOULS OF THE DECEASED AS THEY REJOIN THEIR FAMILIES ON NOV 1 AND 2. THESE FLOWERS ARE ROUND AND YELLOW LIKE THE SUN—AN IMPORTANT DEITY IN ANCIENT MEXICO. AS THE SUN PROVIDES LIGHT DURING THE DAY, THE CEMPASUCHIL ILLUMINATES THE NIGHT. THESE FLOWERS ARE OFFERED IN MANY WAYS: THEY ARE PLACED BESIDE GRAVES, IN HOME ALTARS, OR THEIR PETALS ARE SCATTERED ON THE GROUND OUTSIDE THE HOMES, SIMULATING A PATH TO GUIDE THE SOUL OF THE DECEASED. PAPEL PICADO— THE INHABITANTS OF ANCIENT MEXICO USED CUT-Out BARK PAPER OR PAPEL AMATE AS AN OFFERING TO THEIR GODS AND FOR DECORATING SACRED FIGURES WITHIN TEMPLES DURING SPECIAL HOLIDAYS. PAPER WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE THE ATTRIBUTES OF CERTAIN GODS, MEN, AND COMMON PEOPLE. THEY WOULD USE THE DARK-COLORED PAPER TO MAKE CUT-OutS TO WARD OFF EVIL SPIRITS AND WHITE PAPER TO WELCOME BENEFICIAL SPIRITS. SOME OF THESE PAPER CUT-OutS WERE USED BY SHAMANS AND FOLK HEALERS DURING RELIGIOUS RITUALS. FOR THE DAY OF THE DEAD, THESE PAPER CUT-OutS ARE FREQUENTLY USED AS A CIELO (SKY) AND ARE SUSPENDED ABOVE THE ALTAR OR SIMPLY HUNG IN HOMES OR PLAZAS.
LET'S BUILD A DAY OF THE DEAD ALTAR!

WHAT WILL WE NEED?

• A table on which to build your altar, along with boxes, books, or items that will help us create various levels on our altar, think of how cakes have levels.

• One or two tablecloths, or textiles that can give your altar that unique look.

• Papel Picado

• Photo of the person to whom the altar is dedicated to

• A glass of water

• Flowers, preferably marigolds

• Fruit, bread, also known as "Pan de Muerto," and other foods the person being celebrated enjoyed during his time on earth.

• Candles and incense

• Lastly, try to incorporate other elements the person you're honoring enjoyed in life, books, music, a favorite sports team, cooking utensils, anything that will give your altar that unique and personal look.
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STEPS

THE BASE AND LEVELS:

PLACE A TABLE NEAR A WALL THAT CAN BE USED FOR VARIOUS DAYS TO DISPLAY YOUR ALTAR. WITH THE USE OF THE TABLE AND BOXES, WE WILL CREATE A TIER SYSTEM TO ACCOMMODATE FOR THE ELEMENTS TO BE PLACED AND DISPLAYED. THESE TIERS WILL ALSO HELP US PLACE VARIOUS ITEMS, AS WELL AS CREATE THE VARIOUS LEVELS (CAKE-LIKE EFFECT) GOING TOWARDS THE TOP OF OUR ALTAR. ONCE YOU HAVE CREATED THE VARIOUS LEVELS, WE WILL ADD OUR TABLE CLOTH, AND OTHER TEXTILES DESIRED.
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PHOTO OR PHOTOS:

PLACE THE PHOTO OF THE PEOPLE YOU ARE REMEMBERING AND CELEBRATING ON YOUR ALTAR. REMEMBER THAT AN ALTAR CAN CELEBRATE MULTIPLE PEOPLE. WE WILL ADD THE PHOTO TO THE TOP TIER OF THE ALTAR, AND THIS PHOTO WILL BE CENTERED. IF YOU ARE PLACING MORE THAN ONE PERSON ON THE ALTAR, YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO PLACE THESE PHOTOS IN THE BEST VISUAL MANNER OF YOUR CHOOSING.

PAPEL PICADO:

WIND IS REPRESENTED BY A MOVING OBJECT — PAPEL PICADO IS MADE FROM TISSUE PAPER, AND IT IS PLACED ABOVE, BEHIND, OR ON THE ALTAR TO REPRESENT WIND.
To make your own Papel Picado, cut a sheet of colorful tissue paper that is approximately the size of this sheet of paper.

1. Fold the top of the paper about one inch down

2. Fold the paper in half, make sure to keep the top fold visible

3. Fold the paper in half again

4. Fold the bottom edge upwards so that it comes up to the string fold

5. Cut out your unique design!

To hang sheets of papel picado, thread a long string or yarn in the string fold and glue it down with a glue stick.
LET’S BUILD A DAY OF THE DEAD ALTAR!

WATER:

PLACE A GLASS OF WATER ON THE ALTAR. WATER IS A SOURCE OF LIFE AND REPRESENTS PURITY. IT QUENCHES THE THIRST OF THE SPIRITS AS THEY HAVE TRAVELED FROM FAR AWAY TO VISIT THEIR FAMILY DURING DAY OF THE DEAD.

CANDLES:

CANDLES ARE PLACED ON THE ALTAR AS THE FLAME GUIDES THE SPIRITS ON THEIR JOURNEY. CANDLES REPRESENT, LIGHT, HOPE, AND FAITH. YOU CAN ALSO PLACE MORE THAN ONE CANDLE AND FORM A CROSS TO REPRESENT THE CARDINAL DIRECTIONS SO THE SPIRITS CAN FIND THEIR WAY.
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FLOWERS:

FRESH FLOWERS ARE ANOTHER IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN OUR ALTAR. WE CAN PLACE FLOWERS IN VASES, AND ALSO PULL THE PETALS OFF AND SCATTER THEM ALL OVER THE SURFACE OF THE ALTAR. FRESH FLOWERS ARE YET ANOTHER REMINDER OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFE. USING CEMPASÚCHITL (MARIGOLDS), IS ANOTHER FORM OF GUIDING THE SPIRITS BACK HOME, PULLING THE PEDALS OFF THIS FLOWER WILL ALSO GIVE A STRONGER SCENT AND THE BRIGHT COLORS ARE A VERY SYNONYMOUS WITH DAY OF THE DEAD.

PAPER FLOWERS:

PAPER FLOWERS CAN ALSO BE MADE AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR REAL MARIGOLD FLOWERS IF YOU CANNOT OBTAIN THEM.
Let’s Build a Day of the Dead Altar!

Make Your Own Flower

For this activity, cut at least five squares of yellow or orange tissue paper into 6 inch squares. You will also need pipe cleaners.

1. Stack five square sheets of yellow or orange tissue paper

2. Accordion-fold the stack of papers

3. Using a pipe cleaner, fasten the folded papers

4. Cut out edges of the paper

5. Top View:

6. Pull up each sheet, individually towards the center (pipe cleaner) to shape your flower

Fan out the folds of your papers
Let’s build a Day of the Dead altar!

**Fruit, bread, and food:**

Pan de muerto, along with fruit are placed on the altar, usually one places the food the person being celebrated on the altar enjoyed during his time on earth. The food is placed in the altar so the spirits can feast upon their return.

**Incense:**

It is tradition to burn incense especially copal to clear negative energy or bad spirits. The incense also helps spirits find their way.
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- Lastly, try to incorporate other elements the person you’re honoring enjoyed in life, books, music, a favorite sports team, cooking utensils, anything that will give your altar that unique and personal look.