

Clay Culture in

Clay

Caroline Nay

Within the first two weeks of school, my students begin making ceramic skulls inspired by the Mexican holiday, the Days of the Dead (Los Días de los Muertos). During the Days of the Dead, family and friends

gather together to remember close loved ones who have died. Even though this celebration is recognized as a national holiday in Mexico, many

American communities also participate and hold their own wonderful festivals every year on November 1 and 2. This is also a great beginning project for ceramics because it introduces a simple pinch pot hand-building method.

Motivation

Explain the history and traditions of the Days of the Dead and show examples of traditional art made for this festival. These pieces are often entered into contests at a local Days of the Dead festival. I conduct three critiques on most projects. The first is on the rough drafts, then mid-critiques to check on the progress of the project, and lastly a critique on the final piece prior to its first firing. These critiques help students by giving them a chance to explain their ideas and ask questions.

Creating Skulls

As a warm-up assignment, demonstrate how to create a small pinch pot. Students may carve designs into these practice pots by scratching or drawing on them with a needle tool. Make two more pinch pots and demonstrate joining

and shaping them to make a clay skull.

Have students sketch and color three different rough drafts for their skulls. When you approve one of the three draw-

ings, give the student a piece of clay about the size of a fist. Instruct each student to round the clay into a ball, slice it in half, and make a pinch pot from each piece.

Next, have students join the two pinch pots using scoring and slip techniques and then shape the clay to form a skull. At this point, students can smooth the form and add incised designs or additional sculpted pieces of clay. When the piece is dry, have

each student sand it smooth with a sander screen. Fire the work, glaze it, and then fire it again.

Building an Ofrenda

Traditionally in Mexico, *ofrendas* are offerings for past loved ones, usually arranged on a brightly decorated table. At Days of the Dead festivals or in art galleries, you may see contemporary *ofrendas* that focus on a celebrity who has died or social/political issues. Students may build *ofrendas* for display at school or at a local festival.

Students created their *ofrenda* for our National Art Society festival. It was the first built for the festival. In building it, students learned a great deal about the Days of the Dead, as well as how to create a cohesive, large-scale piece. Students were also

on hand at the festival to explain the meaning of the *ofrenda*.

A special thank you to the Winchester Cultural Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, for displaying our artwork and *ofrendas*.

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes in the humanities or sciences.

WEB LINKS

www.azcentral.com

www.daysofthedeadfestival.com

Objectives

Students will:

- recognize and understand the traditions of the Days of the Dead.
- create Days of the Dead themed skulls using the pinch method of clay construction.

Materials

- earthenware clay
- assorted colors of glaze
- ceramic tools such as needle tools, wooden tools, and sanders
- small Styrofoam skulls for students to use as reference in sculpting their clay skulls (optional)

