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Día de los Muertos 'is like Memorial Day with a priest'



BOISE ARTIST ANA MARIA SCHACHTELL WORKS ON HER ALTAR TO MEXICAN PIONEER JESUS URQUIDES, WHICH WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT THE IDAHO HISTORICAL MUSEUM FOR DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS STARTING ON TUESDAY.

DANCING WITH THE DEAD

BY BETHANN STEWART

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When the soul of Idaho's legendary mule packer Jesus Urquides comes back to Boise for a visit this year, he'll find a warm welcome at the Idaho Historical Museum.

The museum and the Mexican Consulate have teamed up for Day of the Dead festivities, which showcase altars by about a dozen Idaho artists throughout the museum. One will be devoted to Urquides.

Part of the consulate's mission is to foster cultural exchanges between Mexico and the United States, said spokesman Sebastian Galvan Duque.

A blend of pre-Columbian and Catholic beliefs, Day of the Dead celebrates the return of souls to the Earth for a day to be with their families.

"It's so different from the American Halloween," said Kurt Zwolfer, education specialist at the Idaho Historical Museum. "It's about family memory, and that's what this building is about."

Urquides' altar will be at his saddle

DAY OF THE DEAD VOCAB

► **Calavera:** means skull in Spanish but also refers to poems written for the Day of the Dead that satirize a person's life.

► **La (Calavera) Catrina:** the "elegant skull" was an etching of a well-dressed skeleton by Mexican artist Jose Posada, which has come to symbolize the Day of the Dead. The etching was a satire of wealthy women and conveyed the idea that not even the rich can escape death.

► **Pan de muerto:** bread of the dead, a sweet yeast bread traditionally eaten on the Day of the Dead.

► **Compasuchil (sem-pah-soo-cheel):** marigolds, which feature prominently on altars and graves during Day of the Dead festivities.

in the middle of the Idaho history exhibit, where he belongs, said Ana Maria Schachtell, who is preparing it. "For the Latinos in Idaho, he's our

Papa," she said, referring to the inscription 'Papa' on his gravestone in Pioneer Cemetery on Warm Springs Avenue. "We Latinos are not newcomers. It's very important for our children to know that."

Schachtell said the holiday "is like Memorial Day with a priest."

Traditionally, the living family members prepare altars for their dead relatives that include their favorite foods and drink, so when the soul returns he or she can enjoy what was enjoyed in life, Galvan Duque said.

Everything on the altar — marigolds, incense, candles — has the sole purpose of guiding the spirit home, said artist Alma Rosa Gomez,

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MUERTOS

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winner of the 2010 Governor's Award for excellence in the arts.

Gomez is making an altar for Mexican artist Frida Kahlo on the bar on the museum's second floor. "She was a very colorful artist and one of my favorites," Gomez said. "The bar is an appropriate place for her."

Gomez also makes altars at home for family and friends who have passed away, but they are more intimate than the ones that will be viewed by the public, she said.

This year, the event is being celebrated more broadly. Artist Star Moxley has put together an exhibit of Day of the Dead altars made by 17 Idaho artists at Alexa Rose Gallery in Downtown Boise.

Her own altar honors the memory of her companion of 14 years, Comet, whom she raised from a puppy.

"My interpretation was honoring something you lost," she said. "In a modern sense it could be environmental, political."

At the historical museum display, the traditional sugar skulls symbolic of the holiday will be replaced with small clay skulls made by students at Sage International School. A giant mosaic skull will be made from them on the museum floor.

The skulls and the skeletons associated with the holiday aren't meant to be scary, Schachtell said. "The symbolism of the skeleton comes to remind us of the inevitability of death, but also to enjoy life because we're not going to be here forever," she said. "The skeleton comes with a big smile to party with us."

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