



Lesson #26

Claycrete Calaveras

Dia de los Muertos

(Day of the Dead)

By Gail Emerich

When the Spanish landed in what is now Mexico 500 years ago, they found indigenous people practicing a 3000 year old ritual that seemed to mock death. They tried, unsuccessfully, to eradicate the ritual and today it lives on as the Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead. The holiday has merged with Catholic theology but still maintains the basic principles of Aztec ritual, such as the use of skulls. The ritual coincides with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (November 1 and 2) and is celebrated in Mexico and much of the rest of Central America, as well as in parts of the United States.

Day of the Dead is a happy celebration of much feasting, dancing, and partying. It is meant to celebrate and welcome the spirits of dear departed loved ones. Mexicans view the afterlife as a place where you keep your identity since, to return to this world for the Day of the Dead, you must remain who you were. This explains the artistic tradition of making skulls, or calaveras, of all types and sizes doing ordinary day-to-day things. If uncle Jose was a barber, he continues as a barber after death. Most homes have a fancy Day of the Dead altar that serves as a sort of landing pad, with the objects on them serving as signals to guide the spirits of loved ones home. Placing a skeleton figure of a barber on your altar reaffirms to uncle Jose that he has not been forgotten on his spiritual return.

The word "calavera" has evolved to designate the animated puppet-like skeletons associated with Dia de los Muertos. These and other handmade decorations have a long tradition in Day of the Dead celebrations. In addition, paper and papier maché are commonly used in many Mexican arts and crafts.

Lesson Goals and Objectives:

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of the tradition and importance of Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexican culture, as well as the use of handmade skeletons to represent the spirits of friends or relatives who have died.
2. Students will recognize and use armatures as bases for sculptures.
3. Students will create a well-crafted skeleton form using craft stick armatures and AMACO® Claycrete®.
4. Students will creatively paint, clothe, and decorate individual skeletons representing imaginary (or possibly real) people who have passed away.

National Visual Arts Standards Addressed:

1. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture.
2. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.
3. Using knowledge of structures and functions.
4. Choosing a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics of artwork.
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.



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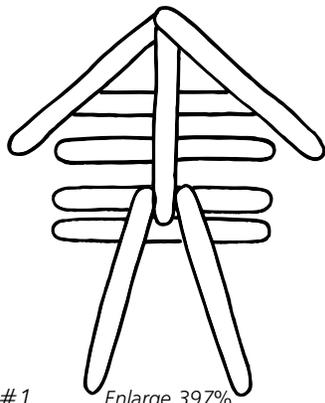


Photo #1

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Supplies:

- Simple paper patterns for flat skulls
- Simple paper patterns for craft stick skeletons
- Claycrete® (instant papier maché from AMACO®)
 - 1 lb. bag (41010B) – 6-7 students
 - 5 lb. bag (41811R) – 30-35 students
- White glue
- Water
- Craft sticks
- Wax paper
- Paint and markers
- Colorful materials for clothing and embellishing skeletons.
 - (Tissue paper, cloth, beads, paints, markers, yarn, glitter, etc.)
- Scissors
- Needle tools, compasses
- Large sewing needles
- String or yarn for hanging skeletons

Background Preparation:

1. This lesson plan is for 3rd through 7th grade students. The depth of research and sophistication of execution will vary with each grade level.
2. Discuss the history, tradition, and importance of Day of the Dead or Dia de los Muertos celebrations in Mexican culture. Discuss the importance of animated skeletons, or calaveras, to represent departed loved ones. Refer to the introduction at the beginning of this Lesson Plan as well as gather information from books and the internet.



Photo #2

Instructions:

1. Design and copy paper patterns for simple flat skull shapes (heads), as well as simple flat craft stick skeletons (bodies). See examples.
2. Mix Claycrete® using water and the instructions on the package together with white glue. The consistency of the mixed Claycrete® and glue should be such that it easily forms a mass without crumbling.



Photo #3

3. Discuss the project, showing finished examples, as well as the necessary use and strength of armatures in sculpture.

4. Give each student a pattern for the craft stick body or armature (see photo #1), craft sticks, and white glue. Students can line up craft sticks directly on the pattern and glue them together (see photo #2). It does not matter if the sticks adhere to the pattern paper as it can be gently torn off when the glue dries. Another option is to place a piece of transparent wax paper between the pattern paper and the sticks (see photo #3). Younger children may need to have the body skeleton constructed by the teacher.

5. While the craft sticks are drying, or during the next class, students will begin construction of the skull or head. Place wax paper over the skull pattern, then place an appropriate dab of the Claycrete® mixture on top of the pattern.



Photo #4

Gently spread and press the Claycrete® until it matches the pattern. Smooth the edges of the form.

6. Place dried craft stick skeletons (bodies) on top of another piece of wax paper. Gently but firmly form Claycrete® into small cylinders about the diameter of a pencil. Press onto the "bones" of the skeleton until the entire piece is neatly covered (see photos #4 and #5). Take care to keep the bones defined.

7. Allow both Claycrete® calaveras forms at least 24 hours of drying time, or more if needed. They need to be fully dried and firm before proceeding.

8. Carefully peel the dried skulls (heads) from the wax paper. You may need to remove them in a semi-dry state in order for them to fully dry. Also remove dried skeletons (bodies) from the wax paper.



Photo #5

9. To join each head to its body a hole must be carefully poked into the chin area, about half an inch from the edge. A needle tool or compass tip works well for this. Thread string onto a large sturdy needle, pull the string through the hole, and tie it securely around the upper part of the spine under the arms (see photo #6). To hang each calavera, poke two more holes near the top of the head, then use a large needle to pull a piece of string through the holes. Teacher assistance may be needed with the holes and the stringing, especially with younger children.



Photo #6

10. Before finishing each calavera, students will want to consider the individual they are representing. Professions, interests, and unique characteristics should be considered. Remember that they are meant to represent someone in a very positive way. This is an opportunity for students to be really creative (examples: the great aunt who always wore lots of jewelry and carried a big handbag, the grandfather who never went anywhere without his dog, the eccentric cousin with a mohawk hairdo, etc.).

11. When fully constructed, the “naked” calaveras are very sturdy and will accommodate an array of applied media. Tempera, acrylic paint, and markers work well for facial detail or shoes, while tissue paper or fabric works well for clothing or accessories (see photo #7). Pipe cleaners (craft stems), as well as glue, work well for firmly attaching clothing. Other possible additions include ribbon, pom poms, googly eyes, found objects, or even accessories crafted from left over mixed Claycrete®. Yarn for hair and beads, buttons, sequins, or glitter for embellishment completes each character.

12. Display the completed calaveras on a bulletin board. What a great bunch of spirits have returned for Day of the Dead!

Note: It is possible to cover both sides of the craft stick armature with Claycrete®, resulting in a two-sided figure. This may be desirable if the calaveras are to be displayed, twirling, from a ceiling. However, two sided figures tend to be a bit chunkier than a true skeleton. Care should be taken to apply the bare minimum of Claycrete® to each side.



Photo #7

This lesson plan was written by Gail Emerich, art teacher for grades 4-8 at Orchard School, Indianapolis, Indiana. The calaveras shown in this lesson plan were made by her students.

This is one lesson in a series of art plans for elementary and secondary programs using American Art Clay Co., Inc. products. Successful lessons will be considered for future publication. Send your ideas and high resolution (5" x 7" at 300 dpi) digital images on CD to American Art Clay Co., Inc., 6060 Guion Road, Indianapolis, Indiana 46254.

