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Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning

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Abstract. This article analyzes the origin and meaning of artistic representations of death—principally skulls and skeletons—in Mexico's Day of the Dead. It challenges stereotypes of the death-obsessed Mexican by tracing mortuary imagery in the Day of the Dead to two separate artistic developments, the first deriving from religious and demographic imperatives of colonial times, the second from nineteenth-century politics and journalism. Now generally perceived as belonging to a single, undifferentiated iconographic tradition, cranial and skeletal images of death have become virtually synonymous with Mexico itself.

Artistic Representations of Death in the Day of the Dead

In Hayden Herrera's biography of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1983), there appears a photograph of the artist lying on her sickbed, looking straight into the camera and holding in both hands a colorfully decorated sugar skull with her name scrolled on the forehead. Although the photograph bears no date, we may assume that it was taken on or around 1 and 2 November, when Mexican shops and street stalls are filled, as one traveler put it (quoted in Haberstein and Lamers 1963: 587), with "gleaming gay skulls, sugary-white and with splendid gold trimmings." It is common at this time of year for sugar skulls with people's names written on them to be sold in stores and on street corners. A similar product is made out of chocolate as well. People present these candy skulls to friends or relatives just as short, satiric literary verses known also as *calaveras* (skulls) are given to colleagues, compadres, and family members.

Representations of skeletons are also common at this time of year. Perhaps the most prevalent skeletal form is the soft, spongy, shapeless kind

fashioned out of bread dough and known as *pan de muerto*, or, humorously in American English, as “dead bread.” In Tlaxcala, for example, there is a wide range of such breads, many of which “are representations of human males and females” (Nutini 1988: 170–71). But there is also throughout the republic an enormous variety of skeleton toys of all sizes and plastic materials, with the skeleton displayed as naked or clothed, holding a recognizable object like a pipe or musical instrument, and usually giving some indication of age, gender, occupation, and the like. During the end of October and beginning of November, too, the newspapers are filled with images of political or other well-known personalities, anatomically drawn as skeletons but draped with the recognizable trappings of their office. The skeleton figures might also be grouped into little scenes taken from everyday life and installed in tiny painted boxes like dioramas; or they might assume the form of a party of funeralgoers, bus riders, or mariachi musicians (Figure 1).

Other than skulls and skeletons, the most common death-related toys are small caskets, usually made out of chocolate or sugar, and decorated with multicolored icing. Like the skulls, these caskets might or might not contain an individual’s name inscribed in sugar icing. A popular type of casket has a little plastic window at the top through which you can view a little sugar cadaver, set prone at the base. When a string is pulled, the cadaver sits up, as if resuscitating.

Probably more than any other single element, it is the prevalence of skulls and skeletons and caskets of all types that has made the Mexican Day of the Dead famous throughout the Western world. The ornamentation on these figurines and funerary objects is almost always colorful; it is occasionally detailed and aesthetically pleasing as well. Far from evoking morbid feelings, the Day of the Dead toys and candies are filled with charm and humor. Like other Mexican artisan crafts—for that is what in essence they are—Day of the Dead figurines have awakened tourists’ interest in the holiday. Among foreigners, they invariably appeal to the collectors’ instinct. They are transported back to the United States as evidence that Mexicans really are different from mainstream Americans. These toys and candies have been taken to reflect a peculiarly Mexican view of death—an “acceptance of death,” as Patricia Fernández Kelly (1974: 535) puts it. Fernández Kelly sums up the meaning of Day of the Dead folk crafts: “These complex and diversified folkloric traditions—the poetry and songs, the masks and sculpture—inevitably suggest the enormous tenacity and wisdom of a people and a culture whose oppressed situation has not been an obstacle for the expression of a unique and creative philosophy of life and death.”

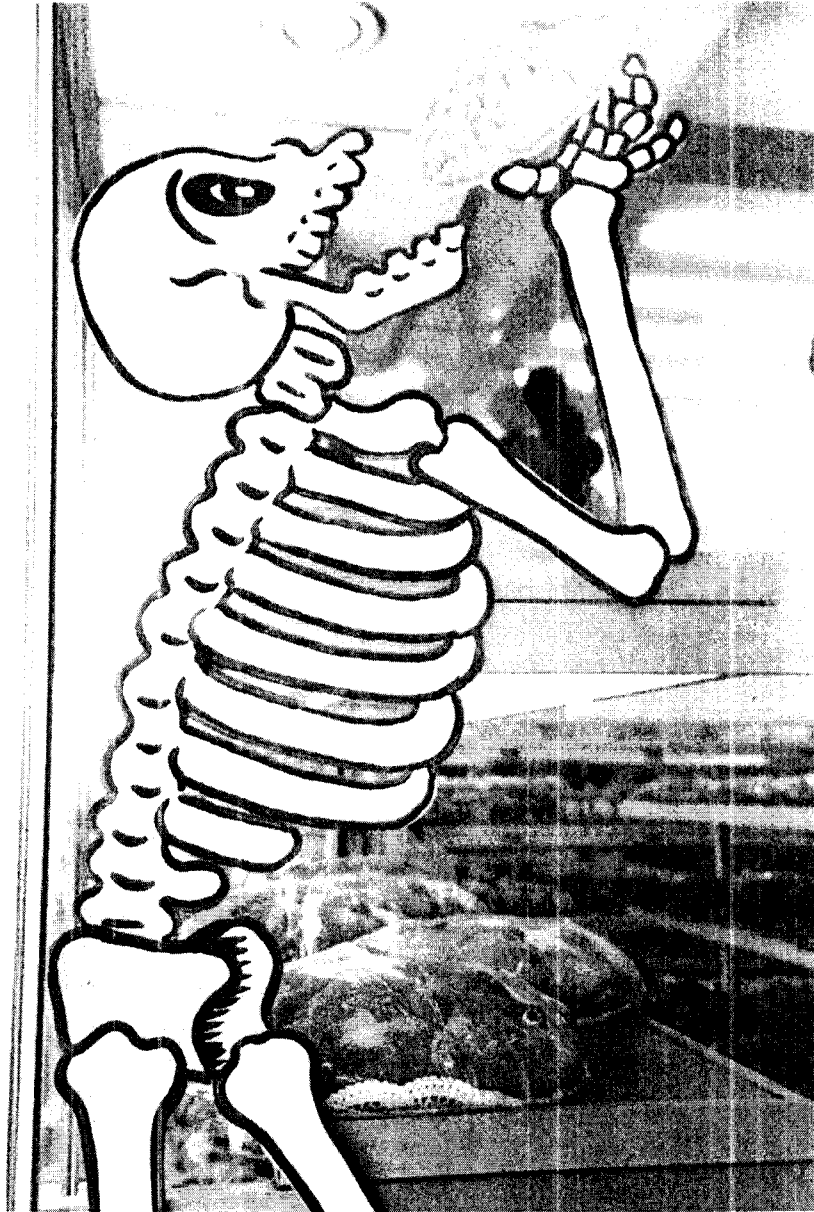


Figure 1. Bakery shop window with *pan de muerto* for sale displayed behind the glass. Cuernavaca, October 1995. Photograph by Stanley Brandes.

For Paul Westheim (1983: 9), too, the ubiquitous presence of skulls, skeletons, and the like is a supreme manifestation of the enormous difference between Mexican and Western attitudes toward death. Describing the reaction in Paris during the early 1950s to an exhibit of Mexican art, he says:

The skull as an artistic motif, a popular fantasy that for millennia has found pleasure in the representation of death. . . . this was a tremendous surprise and almost traumatic for visitors to the Exposition of Mexican Art in Paris. They stopped in front of the statue of Coatlicue, goddess of the earth and of death, who wears the mask of death; they contemplated the skull of rock crystal—one of the hardest minerals—carved by an Aztec artist, during innumerable hours of work, with an impressive mastery over his craft; they looked at the engravings of the popular artists, Manilla and Posada, who resorted to skeletons in order to comment on the social and political events of their times. They found out that in Mexico there are parents who on the second of November give their children presents of sugar and chocolate skulls on which are written the children's names in sugar letters, and that these children eat the macabre sweet, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They were fascinated by a popular art, made of very simple materials like cloth, wood, clay, and even chicle, dolls in the form of skeletons . . . common toys loved by the people.

Mexicans, in their popular arts, display an undeniable fascination with skulls, skeletons, and other representations of death, items that elsewhere cause a sensation of unpleasantness or even dread.

This article explores the nature and origin of death imagery related to the Day of the Dead. In my reading of the Day of the Dead literature, I find that much of the meaning of these objects to Mexicans and foreigners alike lies precisely in their presumed uniqueness, a uniqueness that Fernández Kelly and others take to signify a kind of folk wisdom and collective recognition of humanity's inevitable fate. I wish first to ask just how singular these toys and candies really are, then to explore their similarities and differences with related phenomena in ancient Mesoamerica and early modern Europe, and finally to speculate why they have assumed such prominence in the Mexican Day of the Dead.

The Cultural Continuity Model in Day of the Dead Art

In Mexico the literature on death, and the Day of the Dead in particular, invariably incorporates a cultural continuity model to explain religious beliefs, practices, and iconography. Consider, for example, Patricia Fer-

nández Kelly's article "Death in Mexican Folk Culture" (1974), which is structured almost paradigmatically. Fernández Kelly begins by talking about the centrality of death to humanity in general and to Mexicans in particular. She proceeds to a lengthy examination of death-related artifacts in pre-Columbian Mexico and what they express about the meaning and importance of death to those people. The author's stated purpose here is to point out "the permanence of some traits and in general the sense of continuity of the idea of death within contemporary Mexican folk culture" (*ibid.*: 526). There follows a brief section on the European conquest, which the author summarizes thus: "The polytheistic religions were replaced by Christianity and the voice of the indigenous Mexican was dimmed forever. Its former power was lost, but a murmur was to remain." Fernández Kelly fails to identify explicitly the precise nature of that murmur, although it is possibly revealed in her psychological association concerning the origin of sugar skulls: "When looking at them in the showcases of the sweet shops," she says (*ibid.*: 527), "one cannot help recalling the ancient Aztec *tzompantlis*, special stone structures where the skulls of the men who had died in sacrifice were exhibited." Whatever else that prequest murmur may consist of, it presumably accounts for those aspects of contemporary Mexican funerals and Day of the Dead ceremonies that seem unfamiliar to Westerners. The murmur represents the exotic.

Fernández Kelly concludes her article with a description of funerals and the Day of the Dead. Like the vast majority of scholars who have written on this issue, she rightly believes that the attitude toward death in present-day Mexican folk culture is the product of a combination of pre-Hispanic with Spanish beliefs and practices: "Without doubt, the Christian tradition has left Mexico a priceless collection of artistic and literary testimonies which document its own interpretation of death. But the fusion of the European cultural patterns with the pre-existing beliefs offers a third and perfectly individualized complex of practices and ideas" (Fernández Kelly 1974: 526).

As an overall formulation of Mexican culture today, it would be hard to dispute this fusion model. It is important to note, however, that embedded within the model is a reification of culture. Culture has an existence of its own. It is passed down from generation to generation and blends with alternative, coexistent traditions to create a new cultural product. The role of historical events and socioeconomic circumstances in producing particular beliefs and customs is vague at best. Above all, those who express and carry on these traditions—that is, the people themselves—are missing from this type of narrative. The story is essentially Kroeberian; culture is implicitly portrayed as superorganic. The actual mechanisms of continuity and change are missing from the account.

A similar point of view comes from *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, a scholarly and beautifully illustrated exhibition catalog written and compiled by Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer (1991). The book starts with a detailed description of Day of the Dead activities, especially (befitting a museum catalog) as they incorporate the visual arts. There are reproductions of sugar skulls, papier-mâché skeletons, decorated tombs and home altars, storefronts painted with animate skeletons, and the like. The following chapter, "The Pre-Hispanic Background," is illustrated with diverse pre-Columbian stone sculptures of deities and humans with skull-like faces; with pages from various codices (Borgia, Laud, Borbonicus) showing skull-like and skeletal-like drawings of supernatural beings; and with the *tzompantli*, or skull rack, at the Mayan site of Chichén Itzá, among other death-related representations from pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. The accompanying text focuses on the cosmology, deities of death, beliefs in the afterlife, artistic imagery related to death, and death-related rituals of the ancient Aztecs and related peoples. Carmichael and Sayer make no explicit connection between these phenomena and the Day of the Dead. Rather, they summarize with a noncommittal statement: "To what extent these pre-Hispanic festivals and their associated rituals were transmuted into the Christian festivals remains a matter of keen debate" (1991: 33). Carmichael and Sayer formulate their neutrality with utmost caution. However, the sheer length and detailed elaboration of their textual and artistic presentation related to pre-Hispanic customs, art, and beliefs lead readers to assume that these phenomena are in fact precursors of Day of the Dead arts and crafts.

The next chapter in Carmichael and Sayer 1991, "The Spanish Conquest," tells the story of the imposition of Catholicism on Mesoamerica and briefly describes the Day of the Dead in colonial Mexico. The chapter is illustrated mainly with Mexican death images: an eighteenth-century painting of a deceased nun, contemporary masked death and devil dancers, an ancient decorated skull, a toy Day of the Dead altar, and the nineteenth-century artist José Guadalupe Posada's image "The Grand Banquet of Skeletons," among other pictures. There are no European images save a reproduction from a 1972 Mexican printing of Fray Joaquín Bolaños's book, *La portentosa vida de la muerte* (The portentous life of death). As in the chapter on pre-Hispanic background, this exposition avoids explicit analysis of European origins, with one exception (Carmichael and Sayer 1991: 42–43): the citation from Foster 1960 of the Castilian custom, transferred to Mexico, whereby a large funeral bier covered with a black cloth is erected in churches during All Saints' and All Souls' Days.

The authors also include in the chapter a general statement about the syncretism that occurred between the religion of the Aztecs and Catholi-

cism during the first century after the conquest (ibid.: 40–41). Their example is the classic one—nowadays seriously challenged (Taylor 1987: 198)—of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as representing the pre-Columbian goddess Tonantzin and functioning in colonial times as a saint to whom Indians had particular devotion. Although there is no explicit statement of syncretism in the Day of the Dead, the authors do state that “where there was some possibility of combining an Aztec fiesta with a feast day in the Catholic calendar, this was done” (ibid.: 40). The organization of chapters in *The Skeleton at the Feast* clearly implies a syncretic process without openly stating which elements of the festival were ancient Mesoamerican and which European. However, insofar as European origins go, Carmichael and Sayer are willing to say of the Day of the Dead: “*Nominally* this is the Christian feast of the All Saints’ and All Souls’, but it is celebrated in Mexico as nowhere else in the Catholic world” (ibid.: 14; italics added).

Scholars find it difficult indeed to minimize the role of the Aztecs in the Day of the Dead or, conversely, to emphasize European origins. Much of the justification for pre-Columbian antecedents comes from the iconography of ancient Mesoamerica, with its undeniable plethora of skulls and skeletons, as well as from the equally prevalent presence of skulls and skeletons during the contemporary Day of the Dead. What is missing from most accounts is an analysis of the context in which skulls and skeletons appear. Hence, the first step in assessing origins is to examine the essence of Day of the Dead skulls and skeletons, that is, their intrinsic characteristics and how these skulls compare with skulls and skeletons incorporated in related religious traditions.

Day of the Dead Art: Some Basic Characteristics

In order to trace the possible origins of Day of the Dead art, we must first identify some of its essential features. As George Kubler (1969) pointed out, artistic form and function, content and meaning, must be differentiated. For our purposes, this means that the mere repetition of skulls and skeletons as a motif does not necessarily indicate cultural continuity. The function and meaning might well vary enormously from one historical epoch or ethnographic context to another.

Mexican representations of skulls and skeletons during the Day of the Dead display at least nine intrinsic characteristics:

1. They are *ephemeral* art. Pan de muerto (dead bread), sugar skulls and coffins, drawings of skulls and skeletons on storefront windows, death images made of straw and cut into colored paper: all

of these items are made for momentary consumption. They tend to be constructed from flimsy, nondurable material. For the most part, at the popular level in Mexico, they are not saved for display or enjoyment. They exist to celebrate the moment.

2. They are *seasonal* art. Artistic images are specifically connected to the celebration of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. Representations of death that appear at this time of year are decidedly not incorporated into funerals or the permanent decoration of family tombs. When these images are sold at other times of the year, they tend to occur in a touristic context and, in any event, refer to the specific holiday known as the Day of the Dead.

3. They are *humorous* in content. For the most part, the skulls, skeletons, caskets, and other death-related images that appear during the Day of the Dead evoke laughter rather than sadness, enjoyment rather than pain.

4. They are *secular*. The iconography of death holds virtually no sacred meaning either for its producers or its consumers. True, the sugar caskets with little cadavers inserted inside are sometimes decorated with a simple, colored sugar cross. But aside from that one symbol, it would be difficult to discover religious imagery in the Day of the Dead iconography. Skulls and skeletons, be they made of bread or sugar, are generally eaten. Paper, straw, or clay toys are played with and quickly fall apart unless handled with the utmost delicacy. Little or no sacred significance attaches to the objects themselves, although they are incorporated into the celebration of a sacred holiday.

5. This iconography is *commercial*. It is made by skilled artisans to be purchased and can be found for sale around the time of the Day of the Dead at virtually all marketplaces throughout Mexico. Urban shopkeepers use drawings of skulls and skeletons to decorate their stores and attract customers.

6. Day of the Dead art is *designed for living people*, not for the deceased. It is true that this art occasionally decorates tombs and home altars, but it is employed in this fashion solely during the Day of the Dead. Never does it accompany funerals, nor are the recently deceased buried alongside any artistic objects related to the Day of the Dead. The objects and artistic representations associated with the Day of the Dead tend mostly to be purchased by and exchanged among the living as a way of reinforcing social relationships. They are also used for purposes of commercial advertisements as well as political and social satire.

7. Day of the Dead art is *ludic*. The toys and candies are often

designed for play. They have moving parts. The skeleton marionettes and puppets are fixed with flexible joints that make them come alive when manipulated. The coffins, crafted with plastic windows allowing a view of little cadavers inside, come laced with strings that allow the cadavers to resuscitate. Much of this art, then, is meant to be handled and manipulated.

8. Day of the Dead art is *small, light, and transportable*. You can hold this art in your hand; you can lift it and move it around. Even the altars are assemblages of numerous small pieces that can be mounted and unmounted easily by a single person.

9. Much of Day of the Dead art is *urban and shared among Mexico's cultural elite*. It is manufactured and created in the city for consumption by city people, although there is a rural artistic tradition associated with this holiday as well.

In examining the origins of Day of the Dead art, all these characteristics should be taken into account. Day of the Dead art is integrated into social and cultural life in particular ways. Any discussion of how and why this art exists, and the reasons for its preeminence in contemporary Mexican life, must recognize that function is as important as form. Two images that look alike might differ greatly in the ways they are employed and interpreted, thereby casting doubt on common origins. It is important to bear this point in mind when comparing Day of the Dead art to similar representations in ancient Mesoamerica and Europe.

Pre-Columbian Skull and Skeleton Representations

In assessing the possible contribution of ancient Mesoamerica to the iconography of the Day of the Dead today, we must bear in mind the essential fact that the ancient world was diverse, complex, and long-lived. We cannot speak of the pre-Columbian world as if it were, artistically and symbolically, a single undifferentiated entity. Even where symbols appear, they might have well operated socially according to different principles. Scholars are fond of pointing out that "the image of death is everywhere in the arts of pre-Hispanic central Mexico" (Childs and Altman 1982: 6). Along with Gombrich (1972: 20-21), what we want to ask about, however, is "the institutional function of images" as well as "to which genre a given work is to be assigned." As for the ancient Maya, who flourished in southeastern Mesoamerica, it has been said that although they seemed less obsessed with death than the Aztecs, "this is compensated for by a greater presence of death in abstract form, especially in symbols, which appear with high frequency" (Coe 1975: 92).

Let us first consider these Mayan symbols of death. Among them are the ubiquitous human skulls and bones, often crossed. At Toniná, for example, located near Palenque in eastern Chiapas, there survives a spectacular stone panel carved with skull bas-reliefs. In fact, practically all ancient art in the Mayan area and in Veracruz shows crossbones and fleshless mandibles (Winning 1987: 55). Human skulls and bones are, of course, nearly universal iconographic representations of death. However, the ancient Maya also employed a unique iconography of decomposing corpses, symbolized by black spots or blotches on the cheeks of the victims or by a sort of division sign—a horizontally oriented squiggle with a dot above and below—also situated on the cheek of the deceased (*ibid.*: 92–93). At Palenque there is a vase in which death is represented not only by the skeletal state of the victim but also by long, black hanks of hair in the shape of a bow tie, as well as by disembodied eyes affixed to the skulls (Robicsek and Hales 1988: 267). Throughout the Mayan region, too, death was represented by the closed eyes and open mouth of the victims (*ibid.*). Except for the human skulls and bones, none of these Mayan death symbols can be found in present-day popular Mexican art, including that associated with the Day of the Dead.

Turning now to central Mexico, the iconographic representation of death varies markedly from one culture to another. At Teotihuacán, which flourished during the first seven centuries of the present era, skulls and skeletons as a design motif are relatively insignificant (see, e.g., Berrin 1988). Although Winning (1987: 58) briefly describes two monuments at Teotihuacán that display skulls, he states that overall skull representations at this site are “rare” (*ibid.*: 61). Instead, Teotihuacán artists represented death by a simple iconographic sign: “They added a pair of perforated disks, or rings, above the eyes on the forehead” (*ibid.*: 60). Cultures that flourished about the same time as Teotihuacán, in the present states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit, show similarly rare skeletal representations (Fuente 1974), although the first Mesoamerican skull rack, containing sixty-one human heads, was erected prior to the Christian era in southern Mexico, at Coyotera, in connection with Zapotec expansionist warfare (Hassig 1992: 42).

At the Toltec capital of Tula, however, there exist the first indications in central Mexico of a real fascination with skulls and skeletons. Tula flourished from the ninth until the thirteenth century A.D. The site includes the decimated remains of a *tzompantli*, or skull rack, which once displayed multiple rows of stone-carved skulls adorning the sides of a broad platform upon which the actual skulls of sacrificial victims were publicly exhibited (Hassig 1988: 206, 1992: 112). The *tzompantli* appeared during the final

phases of civilization at Tula, which was destroyed around 1200 (Davies 1977). Chichén Itzá, almost contemporaneous with the Toltecs and located far to the southeast in the heart of Yucatan, contains a better-preserved tzompantli. Says Diehl (1983: 149) of this structure: "The platform sides are covered with grisly carved stone panels showing human skulls strung up on upright posts like beads on a necklace. These probably symbolize the real skulls which once covered the platform summit." In the Mayan area, too, Uxmal displays a tzompantli, with skulls and crossed long bones.

In addition to the tzompantli, there is a freestanding wall at Tula known as the *coatepantli*, or Serpent Wall, which formerly enclosed the north side of the pyramid, on which stand tall, rigid warrior figures, the famous *atlantes*. This wall, probably associated with the cult of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (the supreme god Quetzalcóatl in the form of Venus the morning star), is decorated with a series of carved stone panels that show feathered serpents devouring human skeletons (ibid.: 64). The most remarkable feature of these skeletons is their lanky limbs and prominent joints, which allow for corporal flexibility; they are surprisingly like large, lithic versions of the wooden and clay toy skeletons found in markets all over Mexico around the time of the Day of the Dead. Like small toys today, these stone skeletons appear animate, with their awkwardly crossed legs and outstretched arms. However, their artistic design and execution were considerably removed in time from the Spanish conquest at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It thus appears unlikely that these lifelike skeletons, today an isolated archaeological find, would have themselves survived into the colonial and postcolonial eras in Mexico in the form of figurines associated with All Saints' and All Souls' Days.

Since the Aztecs were the leading power holders at the time of the Spanish conquest, it is reasonable to suppose that their iconography—rather than that of their predecessors—was what carried over into the art of colonial Mexico and exerted a long-term influence over folk art associated with the Day of the Dead. There are at least three elements of Aztec art that scholars point to repeatedly as demonstrating the indigenous focus on death. First is the well-preserved tzompantli, found at the site of the Great Temple at the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. On each side of this structure there are five horizontal rows of sixteen stone skulls, which form a tightly knit design that completely covers the base of the platform. Second are the numerous prominent stone sculptures of deities who are represented with skull-like features. Among the most famous is the image of Coatlicue, also known as Ilamatecuhtli, goddess of the earth, life, and death, whose face usually appears as a skull. The fleshless face is sometimes itself decorated above the brow and below the neck with a row of smaller skulls (see,

e.g., Anonymous 1963–64: 209–10; Spranz 1973: 83–85). Similarly, stone sculptures representing Mictecacihuatl, goddess of the underworld and of the dead, also show the face in the form of a skull (Matos Moctezuma 1992). One of the most famous artifacts from the Aztec Great Temple is an enormous circular monolith, 3.25 meters in diameter, showing Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, decapitated, with limbs spread across the entire stone slab; she bears a skull-shaped back ornament typical of earth deities. Finally, the Aztecs left skull offerings that were found at the Great Temple (Carrasco 1992: 116–17). These are actual human skulls, decorated with shell and pyrite eyes and sacrificial flint knives, which were inserted into the skulls to represent tongues and noses.

If we examine the art associated specifically with pre-Hispanic burials in central Mexico, we discover almost no representation of skulls and skeletons anywhere. At Teotihuacán, for example, “a large variety of pottery vessels were made for everyday use and for burial with the dead, but none bear elaborate imagery” (Pasztory 1988: 54). The multitudinous clay funerary offerings found in western Mexico, dating from 100 to 300, contain no skeletal or skull-like representations whatsoever. They instead include lively sculptures of musicians, warriors, water carriers, people sitting, and people drinking (Fuente 1974). At Tula, burial sites occasionally contain a few undecorated pots, but nothing else (Diehl 1983: 90). Tenochtitlán shows offerings of skulls and skeletons, although not necessarily funerary offerings. Contreras (1990: 407) describes an offering found at the Great Temple that contained three skulls with some perforations above the forehead and with incrustations of shell and of a material similar to red clay placed within the eye sockets. A ceramic funerary urn from Offering 14 at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán shows a nonskeletal representation of the deity Tezcatlipoca but no skulls.

As far as ancient Mayan burials are concerned, there, too, we find principally nonfigurative art. Death themes do appear among the polychrome vessels associated with elite burials, but most mortuary art reflects various human activities in the context of life, not death. Consider two contrasting Late Classic (c. 600–900) burials at the Altar de Sacrificios, Palenque. Burial 128, belonging to a nobleman, shows that the priests placed the deceased in a large clay urn, together with offerings of mantles, mats, gold, silver, food, and charcoal. At Burial 7, that of a poor commoner, “the only offerings were two plain, inverted bowls, one placed over the head and the other near the pelvis” (Coe 1988: 223). In no case do we have skulls or skeletons—except those of the actual deceased—associated with Mayan burials. To the contrary, iconic representations tend to symbolize affirmations of life. To Eduardo Matos, the great tomb at Palenque

represents an "allegory of life in the vicinity of death" (quoted in Museo universitario 1974-75: 15). In the case of another funerary artifact, the famous polychrome vase at the Altar de Sacrificios, Palenque, iconographic representations include animals, dancers, canoes, flowers, and serpents, with no skulls or skeletons at all (Schele 1988).

What general points might be derived from this brief survey of skull and skeletal art in ancient Mesoamerica? First, however extensive this art might have been, it was unevenly distributed through time and space. Teotihuacán and western Mexico seem to have incorporated this kind of iconography sparingly, if at all, whereas the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec civilizations made important use of it. The Aztecs show representations of skulls but no full-length skeletons. Their predecessors, the Toltecs, used both. As a rule, skull and skeletal iconography in Mesoamerica is not associated with mortuary ritual as such. It is also stiff and stylized. There are two notable exceptions: the skeleton tablets at Tula, described above, and a ceramic codex fragment from Palenque, known as the Sacrifice of Xbalanque (Robicsek and Hales 1988), in which there appear death figures represented in animated skeletal state.

The archaeological remains that seem closest in feeling and spirit to contemporary Day of the Dead skulls and skeletons are the stone bas-reliefs at Tula and the representations of death on the ceramic codex from the Palenque Sacrifice of Xbalanque. And yet these two artifacts are far removed in space, time, and function both from one another and from the Spanish colonial regime. These remains are also very different stylistically from one another. It would be difficult to make a case for continuity of iconographic representation dating from these pieces to the present. At Tenochtitlán, on the other hand, we have an abundance of skulls and skeletons, both real and representational, that might very well have exerted a direct influence on church and folk art in colonial and postcolonial Mexico. However, skull iconography at Tenochtitlán displays stylized rigidity and seriousness that diverge enormously from art associated with the Day of the Dead. These archaeological remains display nothing of the playfulness and humor so essential to contemporary Mexican skull and skeletal representations.

And how could they? Consider Hassig's (1988: 121) graphic description of Aztec *tzompantli*:

Captors did not kill their captives but brought them as offerings to the priests, who carried out the sacrifices, dragging them to the sacrificial stone if they faltered, and sacrificing them to Huitzilopochtli. After they were killed, the bodies were laid by the skull rack, and each warrior identified the one that he had captured. Then the body was taken

to the captor's home, where it was eaten; the bones were hung in the house as a sign of prestige. The heads of those who were sacrificed were skinned, the flesh was dried, and the skulls were placed on the skull rack, the *tzompantli*.

Contextually, the use of skulls among the Aztecs could not be further removed from that among Mexicans in today's Day of the Dead celebration.

Given the diversity and complexity of skull and skeletal representations in ancient Mesoamerica, it is impossible to discount their cumulative impact on colonial and postcolonial art. Nor can we state that any one culture or civilization contributed to contemporary skull and skeleton representations more than any other. At the same time, it is impossible to draw clearly defined lines of stylistic and thematic influence from ancient times to the present day. Mesoamerican cultures were varied, and each in its own way showed a concern with death. But that was true, too, of Europe at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Christian Representations of Death in Europe and New Spain

As noted, skulls and skeletons were only a few of the means by which the peoples of ancient Mesoamerica represented death. The archaeological record in this part of the world, as everywhere, is discontinuous and incomplete. Hence it is impossible to say whether skulls and skeletons were the most common symbols of death or, if not the most abundant, whether they were the most powerful and salient. It is all too easy to read back into the historical record that which seems to display the most evident continuity.

Similar doubts arise when we turn our attention to Europe at the time of the Spanish conquest and after. José Moreno Villa's essay "The Death Theme in Spanish and Mexican Arts" (1986: 113-37) offers a survey of the topic from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries, with an emphasis on Spain. There is nothing either in the text or in the numerous artistic reproductions that bears the least resemblance to a skull or skeleton. We are presented with stone sarcophagi of well-dressed nobles and clerics; paintings of delicate toga-clad damsels collapsing in the arms of muscular protectors; and, of course, sculpted and painted figures of the deceased Christ hanging on the cross, cradled in the arms of his mother, lying prone in his casket, and the like. From Moreno Villa's vision of Spanish and Mexican representations of death, it would seem that the skull and skeleton are negligible images at best. In the words of another

author (Bialostocki 1987: 15), it was “the cruel death on the cruciform gallows” that dominated Christian thought and artistic imagination: “From the Early Medieval times down to the Late Baroque sculpture and to the naturalistic painting of XIXth century the image of the dying God in the shape of a suffering man constitutes the main subject of Christian art.”

This does not mean that the artists of early modern Europe confined themselves to the motif of the dying Christ. Skulls and skeletons were, in fact, important features of European iconography during colonial times and after. Bialostocki (*ibid.*: 28) points out that “the great period of the skull and skeleton ornamentation is the period of the Baroque”—that is, a period coinciding with much of the Spanish colonial era—“which introduces an inflation of these elements.” Consider, for example, the no-longer-extant tomb of the Good King René of Anjou, which shows the deceased monarch as “a wobbly skeleton, sitting on his throne, his crowned head powerlessly inclined and his scepter and royal globe having slipped from his hand to the ground” (*ibid.*: 28). This description is reminiscent of the holy image of San Pascual, King, a saint venerated throughout Latin America, especially Guatemala (Luján Muñoz 1987). The cult of San Pascual emerged during the middle of the seventeenth century. He almost always wears a crown on his fleshless skull. Sometimes he is represented as a full skeleton, holding a scythe, with scepter and other accoutrements of his office lying at his feet; sometimes he is clothed in cape and gown. In folk art, he is a full-bodied skeleton wearing no clothing and carrying no identifying objects but a crown. Although San Pascual is principally a Guatemalan image, portraits of him can be found for sale outside churches all over Mexico as well. San Pascual and the Good King René of Anjou are not isolated cases. Death heads, sometimes combined with the hourglass, sometimes with bat wings, became a popular design motif. Gian Lorenzo Bernini carved skeletons on two of his most well-known papal tombs. That of Pope Urban VIII shows a skeleton emerging from beneath the sarcophagus; the skeleton is portrayed as inscribing on the tablet the name of the deceased.

In eighteenth-century New Spain, as throughout Europe, allegorical portrayals of the ages of man often included a skeleton as the image of death. Life was represented typically as a two-sided staircase, ascending on the left side and descending on the right. Upon each stair was drawn a person representative of a particular age, starting at the lower left-hand side with a picture of a baby representing infancy and ending, at the lower right-hand side, with a skeletal figure symbolizing death (e.g., Museo Nacional de Arte 1994: 254–55). Another common eighteenth-century motif was the *arbol vano* (tree of vanity) or *arbol del pecador* (sinner's tree), generally

portraying a young man, the sinner, reclining or seated at the base of a tree, completely spent from sensual excesses (*ibid.*: 256–63). Invariably, there are otherworldly figures surrounding the sinner, often a devil, occasionally an angel, but always a menacing skeleton, wielding an ax or a scythe. Apparently, the tree of vanity in New Spain derives from the engravings of the sixteenth-century Flemish artist Hieronymus Wierix, who directly influenced artists working in the New World during the baroque era (*ibid.*: 256).

In eighteenth-century New Spain, too, elaborately decorated funeral catafalques portrayed animated skeletal figures (*ibid.*: 271–88). Two of the most elaborate can be observed today in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Toluca and the Museo de Arte Virreinal in Taxco. The catafalque of El Carmen, displayed in the museum at Toluca, shows multiple scenes of the skeletal death figure. In one panel the skeleton fires a cannon at a fortress; in another the figure helps a nun card wool; in a third it rides a fancy carriage. Other panels portray the skeleton walking hunched over with a cane, writing while seated at a small table, and of course wielding a scythe. Several of these panels show the skeleton wearing some article of clothing; most of them, too, portray the skeleton talking, an act symbolized through white banners, strung with Latin words, streaming from its mouth (*ibid.*: 272–76). The catafalque of Santa Prisca, housed in the museum at Taxco, displays equally animated skeletons. One is seated on a tree stump in contemplative mode, legs crossed and head resting on one hand. A scythe and bow and arrow are at the skeleton's feet. Another panel shows the skeleton actually shooting the bow and arrow; in another it is walking by a lakeside, holding an hourglass; in another, toppling a castle; and so forth (*ibid.*: 277–80). Death is as alive in these figures as it is in Day of the Dead iconography today (Figure 2).

It is clear that even in the pre-baroque era skulls and skeletons were characteristic features of European art. The cloister at the Augustinian monastery in Malinalco, dating from 1540, contains an alcove dominated by a painted fresco of a friar and a skeleton with scythe standing next to one another (Peterson 1993). Consider, too, the open-air chapel at Tlalmanalco, on the road to Amecameca, east of Mexico City, constructed by Franciscans in 1550–60. The chapel portrays dozens of skulls lining the upper reach of its graceful arches, all of them alternating with diverse plants. On each of the central columns there are representations of human figures, dressed in Renaissance garb and holding hands. According to Curiel Méndez (1987: 156), the entire ornamentation at Tlalmanalco is designed to demonstrate “the Triumph of Death over humanity.” The figures on the open-air chapel suggest different states of decomposition; in the



Figure 2. Panel from an eighteenth-century catafalque, housed in Toluca. The angel declares, "Death runs with time" (i.e., death is inevitable). Photograph by Stanley Brandes.

words of Curiel (*ibid.*: 156–57), "There are skeletons, skulls with remains of flesh and intact heads, all with distinct expressions of horror before the inevitable triumph of death." Curiel interprets the figures on the open-air chapel at Tlalmanalco as a version of the Dance of Death. His main evidence (*ibid.*: 156) is that some of the carvings represent people holding hands, as is the case with the Dance of Death. This feature, together with the alternation of skulls with plants, makes the entire sculptural ensemble reminiscent, if not an exact replica, of the Dance of Death.

The Dance of Death was popular in Europe for several centuries from the second quarter of the fifteenth century onward. It even had important reverberations in the nineteenth century (Goodwin 1988), and possibly up to the present time in the form of Day of the Dead iconography. Most frequently, the Dance of Death appeared as both literature and drawing. In searching for origins, art historian James Clark (1950: 90) maintains that "whether our starting point is in England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Italy or Spain, we find all the signposts pointing in the same direction," that is, to the Cemetery of the Innocents, located in Paris and dated 1424. For others, the Dance of Death motif is much older, in that it

is a textual and artistic elaboration of old Germanic mythology (American Art Association 1922: prefatory note).

There exist innumerable versions of the Dance of Death; collector Susan Minns amassed over seven hundred separate items, dating from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, all of them European (American Art Association 1922). The first known printed edition was published by Guy (or Guyot) Marchant in Paris in 1485 (Chaney 1945: 6). Oddly, the Spanish versions, from the early fifteenth century onward, contain text alone, with no pictorial art (Clark 1950: 41-50; Whyte 1931). Probably the forty-one woodcuts published in Lyons in 1538 by Hans Holbein the Younger (1971) constitute the most famous rendition of the textual and pictorial Dance of Death. Literary and artistic versions of the Dance of Death vary enormously. However, it is possible to describe a prototypical dance. Robert Wark (1966: 8-9) offers an excellent, succinct description:

Normally the pictorial side of the work consists of a series of human figures each accompanied by a skeleton or cadaver that came to symbolize Death. The figure of Death is frequently represented as if in a grotesque dance to which he is leading his human companion. The human figures are drawn from the various strata of society in more or less descending order: Pope, Emperor, Cardinal, King, Bishop, Duke, and so on, down to the Parish Priest and the Laborer. The order and number of figures vary a great deal from one rendition to another, but the general theme of Death leading away members of the various ranks of society remains the same. The pictures usually are accompanied by a text which takes the form of a series of brief conversations between the human figures and Death. The meaning behind the presentation is clear enough: Death visits all ranks and conditions of men; he is the great leveler before whom all worldly distinctions crumble.

As in the funeral catafalques of eighteenth-century New Spain, Dance of Death pictography during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance portrays highly animated skeletal figures. The most artistically meritorious versions of the Dance invest the skeletal figure with a wide range of human emotions: hostility, glee, insolence, furtiveness, haste, and the like. These skeletons symbolize the deceased and yet interact with the living and occupy their world.

Art historians agree that the Dance of Death was above all didactic. As James Clark (1950: 105) puts it, "The equality of all in death is the theme, with the further conclusion that man must repent before it is too late." Death was, of course, a daily presence for Europeans in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Black Death was within living memory, and people lived in daily contact with death. "The mortality rate

was high," Werner Gundersheimer (1971: xiii) reminds us, "and the infant mortality rate was such that a family might well confer the same Christian name on several successive children. Funerals were frequent and public, and . . . executions were performed in public places." The Dance of Death, in addition to portraying the inevitable and demonstrating death as a great leveler, was a manner of "realizing graphically, and thereby perhaps of somewhat domesticating, the dreadful fatality that hovered over even the most sheltered lives" (*ibid.*).

Christian art at the time of the Conquest was replete with skeletal representations of death in the abstract. In Europe and in New Spain, drawings of both the tree of vanity and the allegories of the stages of life regularly incorporated skeletal figures as representations of death. Clark (1950: 108-11) concludes that the Dance of Death was not designed to portray individual deceased people in skeletal form. Rather, he says (*ibid.*: 111), "The dance is a symbol of death, nothing more. Poet and artist alike intended to portray in allegorical form the inevitability of death, and the equality of all men in death. . . . The motive was at first didactic. John Lydgate put it in a nutshell: 'To shew this world is but a pilgrimage.'"

The Dance of Death is the one prominent antecedent of Day of the Dead art that contains an element of humor, although it is hardly the whimsical, spontaneously generated humor of the sugar skulls and toy skeletons sold in Mexican markets during October and the first days of November. In Holbein's woodcuts, the most widely disseminated versions of the Dance of Death, the skeleton usually mocks "the living person while summoning him to die" (Gundersheimer 1971: xii). Since Holbein's woodcuts were published during the first generation after the Conquest, they might easily have influenced popular art in early colonial New Spain.

And yet much argues against any sort of direct influence, at least in the first two centuries following the Conquest. For one thing, the earliest example of what is possibly the Dance of Death in New Spain is the sculptural ensemble at the open-air chapel of Tlalmanalco. Certainly there is nothing humorous in this ensemble, nor, as sculpture, is it executed in the medium through which the European Dance of Death appeared. Second, it is by no means definite that the chapel at Tlalmanalco represents the Dance of Death at all. In fact, much argues against it: the portrayal of skulls at Tlalmanalco in lieu of the usual skeletons; the stone in lieu of paint or print; and plants, rather than humans, in sequential alternation with the death figures. Added to this evidence is the complete absence of graphic versions of the Day of the Dead from Spain, the country that provided the most immediate influence on Mesoamerica for generations after the Conquest (Figure 3).

Further, Day of the Dead skeletons vary noticeably from Dance of



Figure 3. Detail from the open-air chapel at Tlalmanalco. Photograph by Stanley Brandes.

Death skeletons in one critical way: In the case of the Day of the Dead representation, skeletons do not interact with live humans. In toys and quotidian scenes, all the Day of the Dead figurines are skeletons—dressed as humans but entirely fleshless nonetheless. In the Dance of Death, the skeletons almost invariably interact with portrayals of live humans. They interrupt their daily activities to carry them off; they tug at the humans, poke them to get their attention, pull them away to their inevitable demise. Death figures in the Dance of Death do assume a mocking expression, but they clearly ridicule the living victims about to die, who frequently belong to the social elite, for example, the clergy and nobility.

In the case of Day of the Dead figures, death itself is mocked rather than any specific human victims. At the countless cemeteries where daytime or nighttime vigils are held in honor of relatives during the Day of the Dead, humorous iconography is scarce or absent. Mexicans do not mock the real death of their loved ones. And apart from Day of the Dead vigils, Mexican tombstones rarely display representations of skulls or skeletons. The humor about death is most prevalent in anonymous contexts, like stands and markets where death figures and colorful paper cutouts are sold (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986), as well as in newspapers, where the weaknesses of living public figures, portrayed in skeletal form, are exposed publicly. Artistic humor comes out, too, in the labeling of sugar skulls with the names of living persons, never with the names of the deceased. In Mexico the funerals of very young children—those classified as *angelitos* (little angels) because they are said to pass directly to heaven after death, without having to go through purgatory—are often lively affairs accompa-

nied by music. But there is no special humorous iconography associated with these funerals, as there is with the public celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Mexicans, like people virtually everywhere, take the death of friends and relatives seriously. Humorous iconography is a product of and is appropriate to a single celebratory moment, the Day of the Dead. For this reason, most of this iconography can be classified as ephemeral art. It need not last beyond that one occasion.

Artistic Humor in the Day of the Dead

It is fair to say that no other predominantly Catholic country in the world celebrates All Saints' and All Souls' Days with the artistic exuberance and humor that Mexico does. In Spain, which brought this holiday to the Americas, the celebration is thoroughly somber. In New Spain, at some still indeterminate date, All Saints' and All Souls' Days began to assume a humorous cast. However, we can be pretty certain that it was sometime during the first two centuries after the Conquest. By the mid-eighteenth century, the holiday already had acquired its unique Mexican name, the Day of the Dead. By that time, too, humorous figurines had appeared. We may thus deduce that the Day of the Dead at this time took on its present-day flavor, at least in the Valley of Mexico.

Contrary to reports that sugar figurines are documented "only to the 1840s" (Green 1980: 71), there is excellent evidence that they appeared a full century earlier. In the 1740s Capuchin friar Francisco de Ajofrín (1958: 87) wrote:

Before the Day of the Dead they sell a thousand figures of little sheep, lambs, etc. of sugar paste [today called *alfeñique*], which they name ofrenda, and it is a gift which must be given obligatorily to boys and girls of the houses where one is known. They also sell coffins, tombs and a thousand figures of the dead, clerics, monks, nuns and all denominations, bishops, horsemen, for which there is a great market and a colorful fair in the portals of the merchants, where it is incredible [to see] the crowd of men and women from Mexico City on the evening before and on the day of All Saints.

Note that this passage, the earliest account of secular objects being sold during the Day of the Dead, makes no specific mention of skulls or skeletons. Significantly, however, it does report death imagery in the form of "coffins, tombs and a thousand figures of the dead." Moreover, it is implied that these and associated objects served as children's toys; hence,

they were probably humorous or at least whimsically conceived objects, not unlike those of today. The friar goes on to explain (ibid.) that sugar figurines and other “cute little things” [*monerías*] are made in rapid succession by “clever” artisans who sell them cheaply. However, he warns the consumer not to pay in advance, which would result, he says, in the receipt of second-rate, tardily delivered items.

The most explicit precursors of the humorous popular art found in today’s Day of the Dead comes from the last half of the nineteenth century. It was at this time that broadsides, known as *calaveras* (skulls), began appearing in significant numbers. Childs and Altman (1982: 54) view this development as a consequence of the freedom of the press that arrived with Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821. Technical advances in newspaper printing and the emergence of illustrated newspapers were also partly responsible. The first illustrated newspaper in Mexico was called *El Calavera*, which began publication in January 1847. Through drawings, verse, and essays, *El Calavera* specialized in satirizing political currents of the day and particularly in poking fun at the new nation’s leaders. After thirty-one issues, it was suppressed by the government and its leaders were imprisoned for trying to incite rebellion (ibid.). Yet the long-term impact of this newspaper was considerable.

Shortly thereafter, journalist Antonio Vanegas Arroyo hired illustrator José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) to illustrate his topical ballads, which he hawked around streets and fairs, pilgrimages, and public gatherings (Wollen 1989: 14). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Posada was creating powerful calavera images each year on the occasion of the Day of the Dead; these “vivid and lively skeletons and skulls with grinning teeth [were shown] dancing, cycling, playing the guitar, plying their trades, drinking, masquerading,” and doing dozens of other comical activities (ibid.: 14–15). Childs and Altman (1982: 56) correctly observe that “everyone and everything was a likely subject of his illustrations. There are calaveras of leaders of the 1910 revolution like Francisco Madero, who is depicted as a drunken peon, and another of Vanegas Arroyo, Posada’s publisher. There are grand ladies and gentlemen of the aristocracy and coquettish barmaids, all in skeletal form. There are also scenes drawn directly from *Días de los Muertos* celebrations, such as the one of a cemetery picnic and another of a seller of sugar skulls.” Probably the most famous of Posada’s images is that of the *catrina*, the female dandy, portrayed as a fleshless skull, topped with a fancy, wide-brimmed hat replete with large billowing feathers and other decorations (Figure 4).

Posada’s influence on Mexican art and culture is incalculable. Largely ignored by artists of his day, he was discovered and popularized through



Figure 4. Bakery window in Cuernavaca portraying Posada's *catrina*, who states, "Dona Blanca the baker has delicious *pan de muerto*. Go inside, passerby, and take away what you wish. R.I.P." Photograph by Stanley Brandes.

the zealous efforts of artists and writers, many of them non-Mexican. Peter Wollen (1989: 14) recounts the birth of Posada as a recognized genius:

The painter Dr Atl, the most persistent early pioneer of modernism in Mexico, and the young French immigrant, Jean Charlot, one of the group of muralists around Diego Rivera, were the first to notice

Posada's work in the new artistic context of the post-revolutionary years. Charlot, who first saw Posada prints in 1920, followed up his discovery, showed prints to other painters and wrote the first biographical and critical essays on Posada's work, in the early twenties. In time, other artists—including Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siquieros—took up Posada's cause, often in hyperbolic terms, and acknowledged their debt, direct or indirect, to the humble popular print-maker. The legend was born.

Folklorist Frances Toor and collaborators promoted Posada's reputation when in 1930 she published *Las obras de José Guadalupe Posada, grabador mexicano*. Diego Rivera, in an introduction to a book reproducing 406 of Posada's engravings, called him "an engraver of genius" and "the greatest artist" among those Mexicans who have produced popular art (quoted in Macazaga and Macazaga 1979: 21). In his famous mural *A Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, Rivera reproduced Posada's catrina, placing both this figure, a parody of full bourgeois costume, and a portrait of Posada in the center of the huge painting, where they flank Rivera himself.

Posada was not the first or only great satiric engraver of his day. In fact, Manuel Manilla, among others, preceded him. And these Mexicans were themselves part of an international artistic movement. As Wollen maintains (1989: 19), Posada is part of the more general phenomenon of broadside artist, part of "the whole repertoire of nineteenth century urban popular art—catchpenny prints, peep-shows, panoramas, Punch and Judy, melodrama and fairground attractions." Like the rest of this art, Posada's addressed particular historical circumstances in the national arena in which he found himself: a new country with an unstable political framework in which the normal democratic means of criticism were highly restricted. Posada needed to make a living; his art had to sell. He found his market among an enormous restless urban populace dissatisfied with their political leaders and needing an outlet in which to criticize them. Posada's art became just one of numerous forms of popular resistance (Beezley et al. 1994) expressed throughout Mexican history. As William Beezley (1987: 98) puts it, the rhymed, illustrated obituaries "offered the common people the opportunity, without fear of censure or reprisal, to express their dissatisfaction with political and social leaders and to define their grievances, real or imagined."

Posada became nationally and internationally famous through the promotional efforts of famous artists and writers within and outside Mexico. Hence for a second time Posada's art was popularized, this time not by struggling journalists but by the country's artistic elite, who read into

his imagery the meaning of Mexico itself. Wollen (1989: 16) summarizes Posada's legacy thus:

It is wrong to see Posada simply as an "influence." His name and legend were constitutive in the establishment of the Mexican renaissance; they symbolized both an alternative tradition and, crucially, a chain of succession. This particular role assigned to Posada was important both in relation to Mexicanism and in relation to Modernism. It gave credibility to claims to be part of an authentically Mexican artistic tradition, crossing both the class gap and the historic divide of the Revolution itself and, at the same time, guaranteed the modernity of the tradition by aligning it with the revival of popular imagery among the European avant-garde. It was a way of solving the classic dilemma of evolutionary nationalism—how to be popular, authentic, traditional *and* modernizing, all at the same time.

By the 1930s Posada and his calaveras had become symbolic of Mexico. The irreverence of the calaveras suited the revolutionary ideology of Mexico; yet the international art community had virtually declared these satiric skulls and skeletons a kind of high art. As analyzed by Liza Bakewell (1995: 31), Posada's work satisfied the needs of a "cultural nationalism" that started with the Mexican Revolution and persists to this day.

It is important to recall at this point that even though Posada's art has long been widely disseminated, reproduced, transformed, and mimicked in nonritual contexts, he himself used the Day of the Dead as a creative stimulus and, one supposes, a commercial opportunity. By his time it was an entrenched tradition. Artistically, as well, the sugar candies in the form of dead people, caskets, and related mortuary imagery—all of it humorous—had been a part of the popular celebration of the Day of the Dead for generations. It is not surprising, then, that Posada's satiric imagery, itself the immediate product of crucial developments in Mexico's political history and in the evolution of printing, should have been enthusiastically received in its day. Both his thematic material and humorous tone coincided with already-established artistic patterns in the celebration of this holiday. The imagery also responded to the desires of Mexican artists, who were in "full revolt against a tradition of dependence on European, especially Spanish, academic art. They wanted to replace it with an art whose genealogy would go back before the Conquest, which would be original to Mexico, popular and authentic" (Wollen 1989: 15).

Mortality, Politics, and the Convergence of Iconographic Traditions

To this point, the analysis of mortuary iconography in the Day of the Dead has focused on three possible artistic precursors: the death imagery of at least some pre-Columbian art; the sugar candies that appeared during the colonial celebration of the Day of the Dead; and the satiric engravings of Posada and others that became part of the popular celebration of this holiday during the last half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. To conclude, I wish to discuss the relationship among these separate but related phenomena, as well as the implications of popular art for the formation of Mexican national identity. As indicated earlier, it is insufficient simply to postulate that Day of the Dead iconography is the product of an uninterrupted tradition of images of skulls and skeletons, stretching from the ancient past to the present. Artistic styles and motifs are not merely transmitted across generations. The people who inherit these traditions retain them, transform them, or discard them according to particular historical circumstances. What we need is some indication—even a speculative indication—of how and why artistic features persist or disappear. We lack any convincing account of the mechanisms by which Day of the Dead iconography has been shaped into a Mexican national symbol. A processual treatment of the artistic dimension of the Day of the Dead is what has been missing from the literature.

The little we know about Day of the Dead figurines in the colonial era comes from Ajofrín. The friar tells us that by the mid-eighteenth century people in the Valley of Mexico were buying whimsical figurines made of sugar paste for this occasion. We also know that some of these figurines incorporated mortuary symbolism. How is the existence of these sweets related to pre-Columbian patterns? To begin with, the only evidence of humorous sugar figurines during the colonial era comes from the Valley of Mexico; hence we would do well to focus on the Aztec, whose presence dominated the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Conquest. The artistic imagery of other ancient Mesoamerican peoples, like the Maya, Toltec, and Totonac, are of possible interest. But these peoples varied so much from one another both in iconography and in space and time that their influence on colonial patterns in New Spain was remote at best.

It is significant that the mortuary imagery of the colonial era during the Day of the Dead was not, as with the Aztec, made of permanent material like stone and bone. This imagery took the form of sugar candy. If we are trying to establish lines of continuity between the ancient Aztec and colonial culture in the Valley of Mexico, it would be more fruitful,

in my opinion, to examine ritual Aztec foods than sculpture. The great sixteenth-century chronicler Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who has rightly been called a "pioneer ethnographer" (Klor de Alva et al. 1988), provides the most telling evidence. According to Sahagún (1978 [1829]: book 3.5-6), the Aztecs made images out of wood, which they covered with *tzoalli*, or amaranth seed (*Amaranthus hypocondriacus*) dough, shaped in human form. Consider, for example, the account of what the Aztecs did with a *tzoalli* image of the great god Uitzilopochtli during Panquetzaliztli, the fifteenth month: "And when he died, they broke up his body, the amaranth seed dough. His heart was Moctezuma's portion. And the rest of his members, which were made like his bones, were disseminated among the people. . . . And when they divided among themselves his body of amaranth seed dough, it was only in very small [pieces] . . . the youths ate them. And of this which they ate it was said, 'The god is eaten.'" During Atemoztli, the sixteenth month, anthropomorphic amaranth seed images were made for a feast honoring the rain god, Tlaloc. Sahagún's account states (book 2.29) that "they made eyes and teeth on them and worshiped them with music." During Tepehuitl, the thirteenth month (ibid.: book 2.131-33), the Aztec amaranth dough figures took on a specific mortuary cast: "All the [wooden] serpent [representations] which were kept in people's houses and the small wind [figures] they covered with a dough of [ground] amaranth seeds. And their bones were likewise fashioned of amaranth seed dough. . . . And [for] whoever had died who had not been buried, they also at this time made representations of mountains. They made them all of amaranth seed dough. Thereupon they dismembered the amaranth seed dough [figures]. . . . little by little they went, taking some of it when they ate it." As indicated in this passage, these dough images commemorated only specific classes of deceased, namely, those who had drowned or who had died in such a way that they were buried rather than cremated. Food offerings were set out in honor of the images. Continues Sahagún (ibid.): "They . . . placed these images of the dead on . . . wreaths of grass, and then at dawn placed these images in their oratories, on beds of grass, rush, or reed; having placed them there they offered them food, tamales and mazamorra [a dessert made of maize gruel and fruit], or stew made of fowl or dog meat, and later burned incense to them in a pottery incense burner." It is tempting to interpret the anthropomorphic dough figurines as precursors of the molded sugar candy sold on the Day of the Dead in mid-eighteenth-century New Spain and up to the present day. It is likely, in fact, that the acceptance of anthropomorphic foods by residents of the Valley of Mexico in the colonial era can be traced to the prevalence of *tzoalli* images in Aztec ritual. After all, anthropomorphic foods are not

automatically acceptable to everyone; in some parts of the world—France, for example—they are rejected as cannibalistic.

To the Aztec custom of consuming anthropomorphic sweets we must add the Spanish ritual practice of offering food at cemeteries in honor of the dead. Consider the province of Zamora, in Old Castille. From the 1500s on, All Souls' Day celebrations required a catafalque, situated in the main chapel of any given church; the catafalque was encircled by candles and "twenty-five rolls of bread" (Lorenzo Pinar 1991: 95). From late medieval Majorca there are several testaments that conclusively document the custom of situating bread on tombs during All Souls' Day. In his will dated 13 December 1344, Jaime Corbera stated: "I wish and arrange . . . that my heirs should give each year, on the Day of the Deceased [i.e., All Souls' Day], on my sepulcher, five *sueldos* of bread, candles, and other obligatory objects, in such manner as on this day is custom to do" (quoted in Gabriel Llompart 1965: 96–97). A century later this Majorcan practice was still flourishing, as witnessed in another will: "My . . . brother Pedro Juan shall be obliged for life on the Day of the Deceased each year to carry to the sepulcher of the 'Betnassars' . . . a *cuévano* of bread worth 10 *sueldos*, as well as a tall candle to burn while the holy office is celebrated, as is customary" (ibid.: 96).

There is evidence that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sweets formed part of the All Saints' and All Souls' Days celebration in the Iberian Peninsula. A document from the Barcelona silversmiths' guild, dated 15 October 1671, stipulates that on All Souls' Day two *corteras* of *pa dels morts*—Catalan for "dead bread"—be offered to the deceased. What is astounding about this document, aside from references to dead bread, is the use of the term "Diada dels Morts," that is, Day of the Dead, to refer to All Souls' Day. This is the earliest such reference of which I am aware. Equally relevant is Joan Amades's (1956: 611) observation that in eighteenth-century Barcelona, during All Saints' Day, *panellets* and chestnuts "were combined and distributed in such a manner that they formed whimsical designs and figures." *Panellets* (little breads) are still the All Saints' Day sweet par excellence in Catalonia. For generations, they were made of marzipan—sweetened almond or walnut paste—and coated with pine nuts. Nowadays these ingredients are replaced by lemon, strawberry, pineapple, and the like, which, according to one Barcelona baker, are more in keeping with contemporary preferences for "light cuisine" than the rich nuts of times past.

These examples are a modest sample of the abundant evidence that in Spain, and indeed throughout southern Europe, bread and sweets formed an integral part of the celebration of All Souls' Day prior to and during

the colonial era in New Spain. (For a fuller account see Brandes 1997). Not only was bread carried to tombs and churches during All Souls' Day, but it was also distributed to the poor and handicapped (Llabrés Quintana 1925). We can safely assume that this tradition was carried to Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it must have been taught to the Indian converts. At the same time, Indians in the Valley of Mexico, at least, were accustomed to offerings of edible anthropomorphic figures, in the form of molded amaranth dough, during mortuary and other rituals. To reconstruct the precise sequence and combination of practices is risky. Nonetheless, we may postulate that when the Spaniards introduced All Saints' and All Souls' Days rites to the Indians, food offerings were an essential part of what they taught. The Indians, being accustomed to offerings of this nature, made such items an essential component of their gifts to ancestors and the saints.

What is unusual about the Mexican food offerings is that so many of them, from colonial times to the present, explicitly play on mortuary themes, including skulls, skeletons, and caskets. As far as we know, too, Mexico is the only country where sugar is the principal substance out of which Day of the Dead figurines are sculpted, rather than being combined with nuts and flour. The unique nature of sugar production and distribution in New Spain had a critical impact on ritual foods used during All Saints' and All Souls' Days (Brandes 1997). Because of the peculiar role of sugar in the economy of New Spain, Mexicans used sugar as Europeans used moldable, edible substances like bread and marzipan or as the ancient Mexicans used tzoalli.

In explaining the importance of skulls, skeletons, caskets, and the like, it is crucial to recall the prevalence of these images in the Valley of Mexico—the seat of pre-Columbian and Spanish power at the time of the Conquest and thereafter. We have seen that both the Aztecs and the Europeans were accustomed to these images as religious symbols, although the Aztec and European images lacked the humor that characterized and still characterizes these images in the Mexican context. Equally critical is the relation between the humorous Mexican images and the ubiquitous presence of death in early colonial Mexico. In the first century after European contact, numerous major and minor epidemics afflicted the indigenous peoples of the Valley of Mexico and their neighbors. The first major epidemic, a virulent attack of smallpox, came to Mexico from the island of Hispaniola and decimated Tenochtitlán; it is generally agreed that this decisive event favored the Spanish Conquest (McNeill 1976: 183–84). Severe and widespread disease recurred in the years 1545–48, 1576–81, and 1736–39, although, as Charles Gibson (1964: 136–37) points out, many lesser

epidemics caused destruction in limited areas. Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, large-scale depopulation occurred both during and between epidemics. Although it is uncertain which pathogens were responsible for the three major epidemics, the most likely candidates are those that caused smallpox, measles, typhus, and typhoid (*ibid.*). Spanish methods of treatment, based largely on bloodletting, exacerbated the effects of disease. In the plague of 1576, for example, the viceroy distributed medical instructions to all affected towns; the principal method was prompt bleeding. The same remedy was applied during an epidemic in 1595 (*ibid.*: 499).

Although estimates of the population decline are by no means definitive, Sherbourne Cook and Woodrow Borah's are widely accepted and cited. Based on exhaustive research into the source of royal revenues, they calculate that from 1519 to 1532 the population of central Mexico shrank from 25.2 million to 16.8 million (Cook and Borah 1979: 1). In 1548 the population stood at about 6.3 million and in 1605 at 1.075 million. By the 1620s only about 730,000 Indians were left (*ibid.*: 100). John Super (1988: 52) refers to this loss as "a demographic catastrophe perhaps unequalled in the history of the world." Spanish observers of the era were understandably concerned about the population loss. A summary of the literature indicates that "excessive labor requirements, excessive tributes, mistreatment, drunkenness, the Indians' 'flaca complexión' [weak constitution], starvation, flood, drought, disease, and divine providence were all mentioned . . . as causes" (Gibson 1964: 136).

From the vantage point of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century observer, however, the full extent and impact of this massive loss of life could not have been recognized. The one early chronicler who faced up to it was Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1992 [1552]: 58), who placed most of the blame on his countrymen: "The Spaniards have killed more Indians here in twelve years by the sword, by fire, and enslavement than anywhere else in the Indies. They have killed young and old, men, women, and children, some four million souls during what they call the Conquests. . . . And this does not take into account those Indians who have died from ill treatment, or were killed under tyrannical servitude." Whether through warfare, debilitation, or disease, the enormous destruction of life suffered by the Indians of sixteenth-century Mexico is nearly incomprehensible.

Under the circumstances, it seems reasonable to posit that the Day of the Dead became ritualistically elaborate in Mexico as a by-product of this loss of life. Not only did people die in staggering numbers, but they were also uprooted and resettled in unfamiliar territory. For purposes of taxation and civil obedience, they were herded into hundreds of new grid-

plan towns (Foster 1960: 34-49). The anguish that these changes must have wrought is incalculable.

During colonial times, sugar figurines with mortuary themes must have had a profound psychological impact. It is significant in this context that they are ephemeral. This quality is what enabled people simultaneously to confront and to deny the death that they celebrated ritually and that was a biological catastrophe of their times and those of their ancestors. The humor and whimsy of the figurines, too, must have assisted the inhabitants of New Spain in coping with dire demographic circumstances by mocking, and thereby implicitly denying, the tragic reality experienced by them and their forebears. In the colonial era, death figures, to be sure, were the combined iconographic offspring of Mesoamerican and European civilizations. However, the images no doubt took firm hold in New Spain because of the demographic collapse, the cruel, relentless, utterly public presence of death. The figurines were and always have been particularly available during, and appropriate to, the Day of the Dead, a community holiday in which the common fate of humanity is commemorated. They have never been associated with funerals, honoring the death of particular relatives. This distinction casts serious doubt on claims, summarized earlier in this article, that Mexicans display a unique relationship with death (Figure 5).

As Childs and Altman (1982: 58) have pointed out, the sugar skulls and skeleton toys that predominate in rural areas of Mexico during the Day of the Dead represent one artistic tradition. This article has demonstrated the origins of this tradition, which include the artistic and religious legacy of Aztecs and Spaniards at the time of the Conquest, as well as demographic circumstances during the colonial regime. There is a second artistic tradition related to the Day of the Dead that was initiated with the broadside illustrations by José Guadalupe Posada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This second tradition, as we have seen, had a more overtly political and social mission than the first. It consisted mainly of satiric artistic commentaries, which could flourish because of the humorous license provided by the Day of the Dead.

Posada's art and its offshoots provided what has elsewhere been called a type of "peaceful protest" (Brandes 1977). Members of all social strata came under Posada's mocking eye, but there was an especially biting quality to the humorous portrayal of political leaders and other public figures, who could not ordinarily be ridiculed in public. There is an enormous anthropological literature, skillfully synthesized and summarized by Mahadev Apte (1985), that demonstrates the opportunities provided by religious ritual for humorous commentary on otherwise forbidden themes, as well as for mockery of social and political elites. This is essentially the theoretical



Figure 5. Sugar skull (about six inches high). Mexico City, October 1995. Photograph by Stanley Brandes.

mode in which Posada's art, and the literary and artistic offshoots of his art, must be understood. Posada could employ calaveras—skulls, skeletons, and other mortuary imagery—in part because a well-established artistic tradition in Mexican popular art allowed him to do so. His calaveras, too, were appropriate to the occasion for which they were produced. The Day of the Dead in essence provided Posada with a uniquely propitious artistic opportunity. However, the purpose and impact of his art were different from those of the sugar candies that emerged during the colonial era.

Posada's calaveras, through their popularization by famous artists who took up his cause, have influenced Mexican street and gallery art profoundly. Childs and Altman (1982: 58–59) provide several apt examples:

The wire and plaster skeleton figures of the Mexico City artist, Saúl Moreno, are on the surface not very different from toys made in Oaxaca. But Moreno's work is not produced for friends and neighbors, but is made for and consumed by art collectors. A skeleton sculpture by Moreno is more likely to be found in a Berlin art collection than on a villager's altar in Tepoztlán. Another Mexico City artist, Pedro Linares, works in papier-mâché and has created *Días de los Muertos* objects which have no real counterpart in observances of the festival. He makes large skeleton figures which compare to the Judas figures commonly made for Holy Week. But whereas the Judas figures are made to be burned in a village fiesta, the Linares papier-mâché skeletons and skulls . . . have no such function and are intended for a national and in fact international art market.

The political and social commentaries that follow the Posada tradition continue to appear in newspapers throughout Mexico around the time of the Day of the Dead. But the art that his work spurned, through its validation by world-famous Mexican artists, now transcends Posada's immediate goals. It has become an important commercial enterprise and for this reason has acquired a life of its own. Mexican skulls and skeletons sell well to the international community of tourists and collectors. Judging from the Posada reproductions drawn annually on store windows and displayed in supermarkets, skulls and skeletons also stimulate business among Mexican consumers.

These two separate, albeit related, traditions of mortuary art—the first stemming from the religious and demographic imperatives of colonial times, the second from the political and journalistic developments of a new nation—are now generally perceived by Mexicans and outsiders as one undifferentiated phenomenon. They have virtually become emblematic of Mexico itself. As indicated earlier in this article, scholars interpret

the skulls and skeletons that appear during the Day of the Dead as evidence of a peculiarly Mexican view of death. On the contrary, no special Mexican view of death, no uniquely morbid Mexican national character, has yielded this mortuary art. Rather, specific demographic and political circumstances originally gave rise to it, and commercial interests have allowed it to flourish in the twentieth century. It is above all the enormous proliferation of Day of the Dead art that has produced the all-too-familiar stereotype of the death-obsessed Mexican.

Note

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