



Day of the Dead – Sugar Skulls

Subjects Social Studies, Holidays, Halloween, Art

Grades 6-8

Brief Description

Students use common kitchen tools and foods to make sugar skulls, a traditional Mexican decoration for the Day of the Dead. You may wish to have students measure and mix the ingredients on day 1 and form and carve the skulls on day 2 and decorate them on day 3, or prepare the paste and roll it into balls yourself and do the lesson in two days rather than 3.

Background information

Sugar skulls are a big part of the celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Southern Mexico. Decorated sugar skulls are sold in village markets and stores in the latter part of October each year. Sugar skulls, bright yellow flowers like marigolds, candles, incense and the foods beloved by the deceased family members are put on home altars to celebrate the Day of the Dead. On November 2 these decorations are taken to the cemetery where they decorate the tombs. Sugar skulls are easy to make and can last a year if they are kept dry.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about a ritual tradition in Mexico
- Practice three-dimensional modeling of a sculptural form
- Practice fine hand/eye co-ordination

Keywords

Halloween, Day of the Dead, Dia de los Muertos, culture, Mexico, ritual, death, rite of passage

Materials Needed

- powdered (icing) sugar
- granulated sugar
- powdered sugar
- egg whites
- cream of tartar
- salt
- cornstarch
- plastic decorations, coloured tin foil, paper flowers, sequins, etc.
- corrugated cardboard squares for the base (one for each sugar skull - size is not critical, but should be less than 10 x 10 cm)
- large metal bowl
- measuring spoons
- liquid and dry measuring cups
- plastic spray bottle
- electric mixer
- 16 oz. plastic cups

- wooden tongue depressors for mixing color
- wooden spatulas and other blunt carving tools
- pastry bags or small 'ziplock' plastic bags
- drawing of a skull for reference when forming the skull
- paper towels
- wash up facilities

Lesson

CAUTION: Do not make sugar skulls on a rainy or high humidity day.

This recipe makes four small sugar skulls, multiply as needed. These skulls will be white. If you plan to make non-white skulls, you may add food colouring. However, do ensure the children know that everyone's bones are the same colour - only skin colour changes.

Day 1 - Make the paste and roll it into balls

In a metal bowl, beat the egg whites, slowly adding the cream of tartar and salt until peaks form. It works best if you use old egg whites and warm them to room temperature before you beat them

Add powdered sugar and knead until you have a firm paste. If it is too dry, add a few drops of water. If it is too moist, add more powdered sugar. If you leave fingerprints in the mixture, it is just right. The ratio will change slightly as the humidity in the air and weather changes.

Roll the paste into balls and dust them with cornstarch.

Wrap in plastic and refrigerate overnight.

Day 2 - Carve the balls into skull shapes

Place the balls on the cardboard bases and form skulls and facial features by hand using wooden spatulas and other blunt carving tools. Spritz them lightly with water to improve sculptability.

Day 3 - Make the 'Royal' Icing and decorate the skulls

Using an electric mixer, beat 3 egg whites and ½ teaspoon cream of tartar.

Fold in 1 pound powdered sugar

Keep in a tightly covered container until used.

Use this icing to decorate the skulls. You may add food colouring to the icing, and use it as a glue to attach beads, flowers and other decorations. If you do not have a pastry icing bag, snip a small piece of the corner from a 'ziplock' plastic bag and squeeze the icing out.

You can also use canned icing, shredded coconut for hair, eyebrows and beards. You can also just use white glue, feathers, sequins, foil, beads, glitter and other "found" objects to decorate your skull.

There, you are done. Use the sugar skulls as part of your Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) exhibit.

Can you eat the Sugar Skulls? We don't advise it. The decorations are not edible (tin foil, tissue, etc.) and while there is nothing that will make you sick they have been handled a great deal and are not very clean.

Tip : Make a batch of Sugar Skulls at home before trying it in the classroom

Tip : Be prepared for a lot of mess. This activity may be done outside. Have a sink and plenty of washing water handy.

Tip : Play some Mexican music while your class is making the skulls.:

Evaluation

Observe how students work together and stay on task.

Students are graded on the neatness and aesthetics of their skull.

You may want to have the class vote on the 'best' skull in a series of categories, for example, 'most creative', 'most colourful', most striking resemblance to the deceased person.

