



OCTOBER 13, 2023

# SUGAR SKULL!

A DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS MUSICAL ADVENTURE



## CURRICULUM GUIDE

GUIDE COMPILED BY DES MOINES PERFORMING ARTS

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## ABOUT THE STORY

Young Vita thinks her family has gone loco planning a celebration for deceased loved ones. Why throw a party for the dead? But when a candy skeleton on her Abuelita's cemetery ofrenda suddenly springs to life, Vita meets Sugar Skull, the charismatic candy skeleton who dreams of riding the exclusive train to Who-Knows-Where. But can this clever girl help him get on the train before it's too late? Join Vita as she finds herself on a magical, musical journey to unravel the true meaning of Día de Los Muertos.



## LEARNING CULTURE

*Sugar Skull!* is a joyful adventure that delves into the rich traditions of Día de Los Muertos to deepen students' understanding of Mexican and Latin American culture. Featuring regional dances of Mexico, colorful costumes and traditional music *Sugar Skull!* teaches about Mexican culture beyond the expected!

## SUGAR SKULL! PREVIEW

Watch the [trailer](#) below for *Sugar Skull!* to get a preview of what you'll see on stage.

## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

"Equal parts artistic and educational, Mexico Beyond Mariachi re-defines the interactive entertainment experience, engaging and captivating audiences of all ages. Each member brings a unique and personal aspect to the stage, creating cohesive, well-balanced, and engaging performances. A pure delight to watch!"

Director of Public Education  
New York Botanical Garden



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## ABOUT THE COMPANY

Mexico Beyond Mariachi (MBM) was created 18 years ago in New York City by a group of people who saw that there was a need in the community to know more about traditional Mexican performance culture that was extended past the stereotype of just Mariachi music.



Even though Mexican influence is all around us, what do people really know about the traditions of Mexico's music and dance culture? Or the origins of the stories, legends, and myths that are interwoven together? And how do we share that knowledge with young audiences?



## THEIR MISSION

Responding to the need to diversify representations of Mexican performance and art, MBM created *Sugar Skull!*. They have reached over 100,000 students in over 250 schools and communities. MBM began traveling around the United States to tell the story to young audiences and families around the United States. They believe it is an important time to reach new audiences with the message of equity, tolerance, and unity.

Click on the video to the right from Mexico Beyond Mariachi and what the group means to them.



## WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Mexico Beyond Mariachi is based in **NEW YORK CITY** but focuses on the traditions and heritage of **MEXICAN** and **MEXICAN AMERICAN** culture.

# THEATER ARTS

## SEEING A SHOW

Seeing a performance is different than seeing something on TV or watching a movie. What are some things that are different and what are the things that are the same? Use the printable chart on [page i](#) to list the similarities and differences.

In this performance you will see people singing, dancing and acting on stage. **The actor uses their body, facial expressions, and voice as tools to tell the story. The actor's most important job is to communicate to the audience how their character feels about what's happening to them in the story.**

## THINGS TO WATCH FOR

Use the glossary below to select one or two terms that you will watch for in the actors' performances, the story, or the way the stage is set up. After the show, report your observations to the class. Add observations to a class list or create a digital record using [www.padlet.com](http://www.padlet.com).

## GLOSSARY

**BELIEVABILITY:** theatrical choices thought to be true based upon an understanding of any given fictional moment, interpretation of text, and/or human interaction

**CHARACTER TRAITS:** observable embodied actions that illustrate a character's personality, values, beliefs, and history

**CONFLICT:** the problem, confrontation, or struggle in a scene or play; conflict may include a character against him or herself, a character in opposition to another character, a character against nature, a character against society, or a character against the supernatural

**DIALOGUE:** a conversation between characters

**FOCUS:** a commitment by a participant (an actor, technician, director) to remain in the scope of the project or to stay within the world of the play

**GENRE:** relating to a specific kind or type of drama and theater such as a tragedy, drama, melodrama, comedy, or farce

**GESTURE:** an expressive and planned movement of the body or limbs

**GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES:** the underlying actions and events that have happened before the play, story, or devised piece begins

**IMAGINARY ELSEWHERE:** an imagined location which can be historical, fictional, or realistic

**IMPROVISE:** the spontaneous, intuitive, and immediate response of movement and speech

**INNER THOUGHTS:** the underlying and implied meaning or intentions in the character's dialogue or actions (also known as subtext)

**MOTIVATION:** reasons why a character behaves or reacts in a particular way in a scene or play

**NON-REPRESENTATIONAL MATERIALS:** objects which can be transformed into specific props through the imagination

**OBJECTIVE:** a goal or particular need or want that a character has within a scene or play

**PLOT:** a narrative as revealed through the action and/or dialogue; traditionally, a plot has the elements of exposition, inciting incident, conflict, rising action, climax, and resolution or falling action

**PRODUCTION ELEMENTS:** technical elements selected for use in a specific production, including sets, sound, costumes, lights, music, props, and make-up, as well as elements specific to the production such as puppets, masks, special effects, or other storytelling devices/concepts

**SCRIPT:** a piece of writing for the theater that includes a description of the setting, a list of the characters, the dialogue, and the action of the characters

**STAGING:** patterns of movement in a scene or play

**STORY ELEMENTS:** characters, setting, dialogue, and plot that create a story

**TECHNICAL ELEMENTS:** the elements such as sets, sound, costume, lights, music, props, and makeup used to create a unified and meaningful design for a theatrical production

**THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS:** practices and/or devices that the audience and actors accept in the world of the play even when it is not realistic, such as a narrator, flashback, or an aside

**THEME:** the aspect of the human condition under investigation in the drama; it can be drawn from unifying topics or questions across content areas

# INQUIRY 1

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## **Dia de Los Muertos is like Halloween. Why or why not?**

### **GOALS:**

Activating Prior Knowledge

Addressing a Common Misconception

### **DISCUSSION STRATEGY:**

Students can use sticky notes to write their opinion and post to a whiteboard chart or talk to a shoulder partner about their idea. Students may also find that they either do not know anything about Dia de Los Muertos or that they see that there may be some similarities and some differences.

### **GRAPHIC ORGANIZER:**

Use the chart on [page ii](#) as an individual printable or to project and complete together.

**Categories:** what do you THINK, what did you LEARN *through consulting a source*, what do you still WONDER about?

**Note:** The source in the LEARN column does not have to be an informational article or traditional book. A student, a student's family or a member of the community are also valuable sources for rich learning!

Depending on the prior knowledge of the class, teachers and students may begin to fill in the THINK portion of the chart. If teachers find that most students do not know about Dia De Los Muertos skip to Inquiry 2 and return to this question after some initial research.

Remind students that the THINK column is a place for revision. Having initial thoughts crossed out and revised or adding additional information to an entry shows a willingness to grow your thoughts!

### **ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS:**

Other cultural/geographic regions have rich and meaningful traditional practices. These practices are meaningful to those persons in a similar way that my cultural/familial/religious practices are meaningful to me and my culture/family/religion.

# INQUIRY 2

## What IS the celebration of Día de Los Muertos?

### GOALS:

Conducting Research  
Organizing Information

### RESEARCH STRATEGY:

Students may read the primary texts on Dia de Los Muertos as a whole class or in small groups and keep notes to add to the LEARN and WONDER category. Remind students at the conclusion of their reading to consider what questions remain unanswered or what they still want to know more about.

Use the graphic organizer from Inquiry 1 on [page ii](#) as an individual printable or to project and complete together.

### TEXTS TO EXPLORE:

(click on the images to link to the articles)

Arts & Culture

## Skeleton images go up on Mexican holiday, the Day of the Dead



Newsela article on the Day of the Dead, candy and the importance of the skeleton imagery.

**Note:** Create a free Newsela account to search for articles. Teachers can adjust the reading level of this article on the Newsela site.

# INQUIRY 2, cont.

## TEXTS TO EXPLORE



Dance group Los Tecuanes perform the "La Danza de los Tecuanes" at a festival celebrating Día de los Muertos at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian Latino Center)

Smithsonian Article "5 Facts About Dia de los Muertos"



National Geographic Kids Article on the traditions in Dia de Los Muertos



A short video from National Geographic Kids featuring rich images appropriate for all ages.



This video for older students complicates the relationships that both cultures and individuals have with the celebration from Eddie G.

### NOTE-TAKING SIDE-BAR:

Many teachers assume students know how to take notes. But often, students are never explicitly taught how to take thorough notes in an efficient way. Consider discussing the following tips with students ready to take notes and model for younger learners.

1. Underline new vocabulary.
2. Skip lines between new ideas.
3. Draw lines between ideas or facts that connect to each other.
4. Take notes using symbols and drawings, not just words.
5. Don't worry about spelling as you take notes. You can check for proper spelling later.
6. Use bullet points to list sub-points.
7. Place a star by main ideas.
8. Place a question mark by anything you do not understand.
9. Abbreviate.

(adapted Facing History Teaching Resource Library)

# INQUIRY 3

**What traditions do others have to connect to or remember their loved ones?**

## GOALS:

Connecting to Global Perspective  
Presenting Information

## RESEARCH STRATEGY:

Students can learn more about the way other cultures and regions around the world celebrate and mourn the cycle of life and check out some interesting traditions by reading the two texts below or by embarking on their own research. It might be useful to jigsaw the text so that students are only responsible for reading a smaller segment of the larger work and presenting what they discovered to the class.

**Note:** The resource from the Smithsonian (see below) would be great for small group exploration and is divided into 6 slides!

## TEXTS TO EXPLORE:

(click on the images to link to the articles)

### Festivals of the Dead Around the World

In the United States, Halloween is mostly about candy, but elsewhere in the world celebrations honoring the departed have a spiritual meaning



This article from Fodors Travel has beautiful photography from many cultural celebrations.

## PRESENTING NEW LEARNING:

Students can create a slide or two in a shared google slide show or can create a poster sharing their main understandings about their assigned portion of the article featuring (at minimum):

1. The name of the festival
2. The country or countries in which it is celebrated
3. What time of year or date is it celebrated
4. Who participates (all the people, only men, only people of a certain religion?)
5. (At least) three interesting facts about the festival that someone visiting might like to know

## TECHNOLOGY EXTENSION:

For older students or for those looking to incorporate more technology into their presentation students can use Animoto <https://animoto.com> and create a short movie from still images and even add a voice recording. Note: Have students join a class account or have them create individual accounts in order to save and access past work.



# INQUIRY 4

**My traditions (as a family/culture/religion/community) connect me to others. Why or why not? Is this meaningful to you?**

## GOALS:

Drawing on Funds of Knowledge  
Connecting to Self and Others

## STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT:

Define “tradition” by asking for student input.  
“What does tradition mean?”



*A kid-friendly definition from Merriam-Webster:*

*Tradition 1: the handing down of information, beliefs, or customs from one generation to another.  
2: a belief or custom handed down from one generation to another. tradition. Noun.*

Have students first complete a 5-minute quick write to the prompt:

**In my (family/culture/religion/community) we have the tradition:**

Invite students to consider anything that their family does to celebrate birthdays or holidays in their home, something special that happens at their church each year, or an event in their neighborhood or community. Teachers may need to model examples, especially for younger students.

After completing the quick-write students should be prepared to discuss whether they feel more connected to others through this tradition (or not) and why that tradition is meaningful to them with a partner or small group.

## BIG QUESTIONS:

If not to connect people, why might traditions exist?

Why do people across all kinds of religious, cultural and geographic communities create traditions to mark important occasions and gather together?

Have students complete a page ([printable on page iii](#)) to be made into a class book (digital or paper) or ask students to create a thinglink ([www.thinglink.com](http://www.thinglink.com)) using an image that represents their tradition and create at least three short connections: one that defines/explains the tradition, another that explains the image chosen and a third that explains how it connects them to others. Students may present their thinglink and explain their connections in a Living Museum gallery desk walk.

**Extention:** Check out this [Día de Muertos guide](#) created by the Museum of Latin American Art for directions on making a student tradition zine.

# REFLECTING WITH THE ARTS

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## ARTFORM 1: VISUAL ARTS

### REFLECTION STRATEGY:

Students will “read” the art and video below by answering guided questions.

### USING VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES:

VTS directions adapted from *Facing History and Ourselves*

Display the image ([page iiiii](#)) or pass out copies to students. Then pose the following three questions in order. Pause after each question to give students time to reflect.

1. What do you **SEE**? What details stand out? (At this stage, elicit observations, not interpretations.)
2. What do you **THINK** is going on? What makes you say that?
3. What does this make you **WONDER**? What broader questions does this image raise for you?

Follow the same three steps for the [video link](#). Play through multiple times if needed. Expand the first question to include: What did you **HEAR**?

Watching and listening to the webcam video creates a feeling of being immersed in the scene. It might provide an opportunity for a creative writing response, such as an imagined story in the setting of the video or a poem which evokes the 5 senses:

I see/I hear/I touch/I taste/ I smell



Webcam Mexico video of Día de Los Muertos (audio with no narration)

# REFLECTING WITH THE ARTS

## ARTFORM 2: THEATER

### WRITING A SHORT SCRIPT:

One way to revisit the experience of attending a performance or to reinforce literature experienced in the classroom is to create a script and dramatize a favorite scene, the main plot points or even to use the existing story as a catalyst for something new.

Teachers may need to model the formatting of the scene.

**SPEAKER 1:** I'd love to create an ofrenda with you.

**SPEAKER 2:** Great, let's get the materials we need.

After students read or revisit a remembered scene to create a short script they can select parts in small groups to present to the class. Readers focus on fluency and expression.

Feel free to expand into adding props and focus on gestures and facial expressions that convey how the character is feeling in the scene if students have mastered the basics!

Students may work in small groups or as a whole class to recall the dialogue and action from a scene in *Sugar Skull* or in the books below:

*Rosita y Conchita*, Eric Gonzalez and Erich Haeger

[Click here to see a video of the book read aloud in English and Spanish](#)

*The Day of the Dead/El Día de Los Muertos*, Bob Barner

[Click here to see a video of the book read aloud](#)

*Clatter Bash! A Day of the Dead Celebration*, Richard Keep

*I Remember Abuelito: A Day of the Dead Story*, Janice Levy

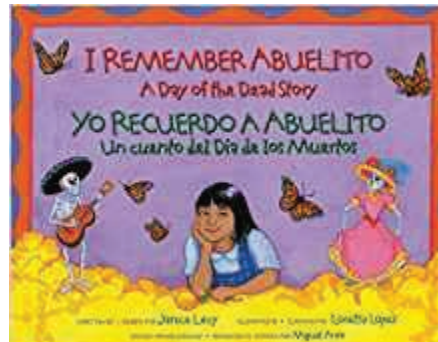
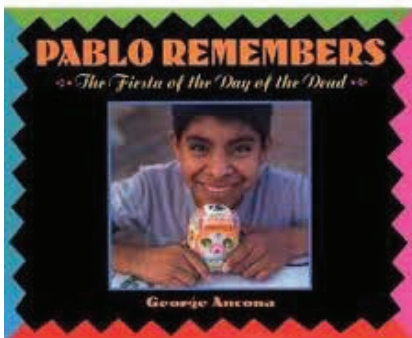
*The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story*, Janice Levy

*Pablo Remembers*, George Ancona

*The Dead Family Díaz*, P.J. Bracegirdle

*The Day of the Dead*, Tony Johnston

[Click here to see a video of the book read aloud](#)



**The teacher can discuss with students:**

“After you leave the performance in some ways your experience of it has just begun! We want you to continue thinking about the people you saw and heard on stage and the ideas you had about what it all meant? Take some time to consider one (or more!) of the questions below:

1. What part was most memorable or stuck out in your mind?
2. What idea did the performance make you consider? Did you have any connections?
3. What part was most interesting to see or to listen to? What was your favorite?”

Use the prompt below to share with your class, with families or with us at Des Moines Performing Arts, about your experience.



After attending the performance, discuss the experience with your students. Ask them questions about what parts of the show they found to be most exciting or surprising. Next invite students to write letters to the performers or to the Center for Performing Arts’ education team about the experience. Use the template on the right, if helpful.

**Once completed,  
mail the letters to:**

Center for Performing Arts  
at Governors State University  
1 University Parkway  
University Park, IL 60484

If you’d prefer to email us a batch of letters, that’d be great too! Our email address is:  
wminarik@govst.edu

We’ll do our best to send your class a reply!

Follow our template below to get started.

**Dear** **DATE**

**Write a sentence or two about you – your name, age or grade to introduce yourself!**

**(If you get stuck, here are some sentence starters to get you thinking: )**

**My favorite part of the show was...**

**While watching the show I felt... because ...**

**I have drawn a picture of the scene when...**

**This experience was special because ...**

**Sincerely,**  
**(your name)**

Students might choose to draw a favorite part or create a collage. They might choose to write a letter or a short story that is connected to the performance; they might even make a video where they share a review and post to the class webpage!

However students choose to respond, we’d love to hear from you! Upload your responses to [this form](https://forms.gle/EG1HomHQasE1SXHS7):  
<https://forms.gle/EG1HomHQasE1SXHS7>

# RESOURCES AND SOURCES

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## ***Newsela***

<https://newsela.com/read/day-of-dead/id/23693/>

## ***National Geographic Kids***

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/celebrations/day-of-the-dead/>

## ***Smithsonian***

<https://insider.si.edu/2016/10/5-facts-dia-de-los-muertos-day-dead/>

## ***Video from National Geographic Kids***

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sSawpU81cl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sSawpU81cl)

## ***Video from Eddie G. (older students)***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVltJThmgRQ>

## ***Smithsonian Magazine article***

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/festivals-dead-around-world-180953160/?page=1>

## ***Infographic***

<https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/colours-in-cultures/>

## ***Fodors Travel***

<https://www.fodors.com/news/photos/14-death-festivals-around-the-world>

## ***Guide for Additional Resources and Crafts: Museum of Latin American Art***

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59b9c2b7d2b8570174037c16/5baee13553450afc1658e89d/1538187579945/2018+MOLAA+Dia+de+Los+Muertos+Packet.pdf>

## ***Diego Rivera Painting***

WikiArt

## ***Diego Biography Video***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47aaDNjIDuc>

## ***Anatomy of a Day of the Dead altar***

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-day-of-the-deadaltar-diagram-spanish-english-20151029-ht>

## ***Mexico Webcam***

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icBXIBu\\_oik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icBXIBu_oik)

## ***Rosita y Conchita book***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhrz0ykXPCI>

## ***The Day of the Dead/El Día de Los Muertos, Barner***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5otGdjv8RuE>

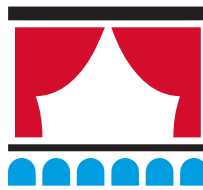
## ***The Day of the Dead book, Johnston***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LY5oySIHDU>

# COMPARE AND CONTRAST

ABOUT THE ART (PAGE 3)

Use this printable chart to list the similarities and differences between going to the theater and watching tv or seeing a movie. How are they the same? How are they different?



SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES

# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

INQUIRY 1 AND 2 (PAGE 4 AND 5)

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what do you THINK	what did you LEARN	what do you still WONDER

# TRADITION PRINTABLE

INQUIRY (PAGE 8)

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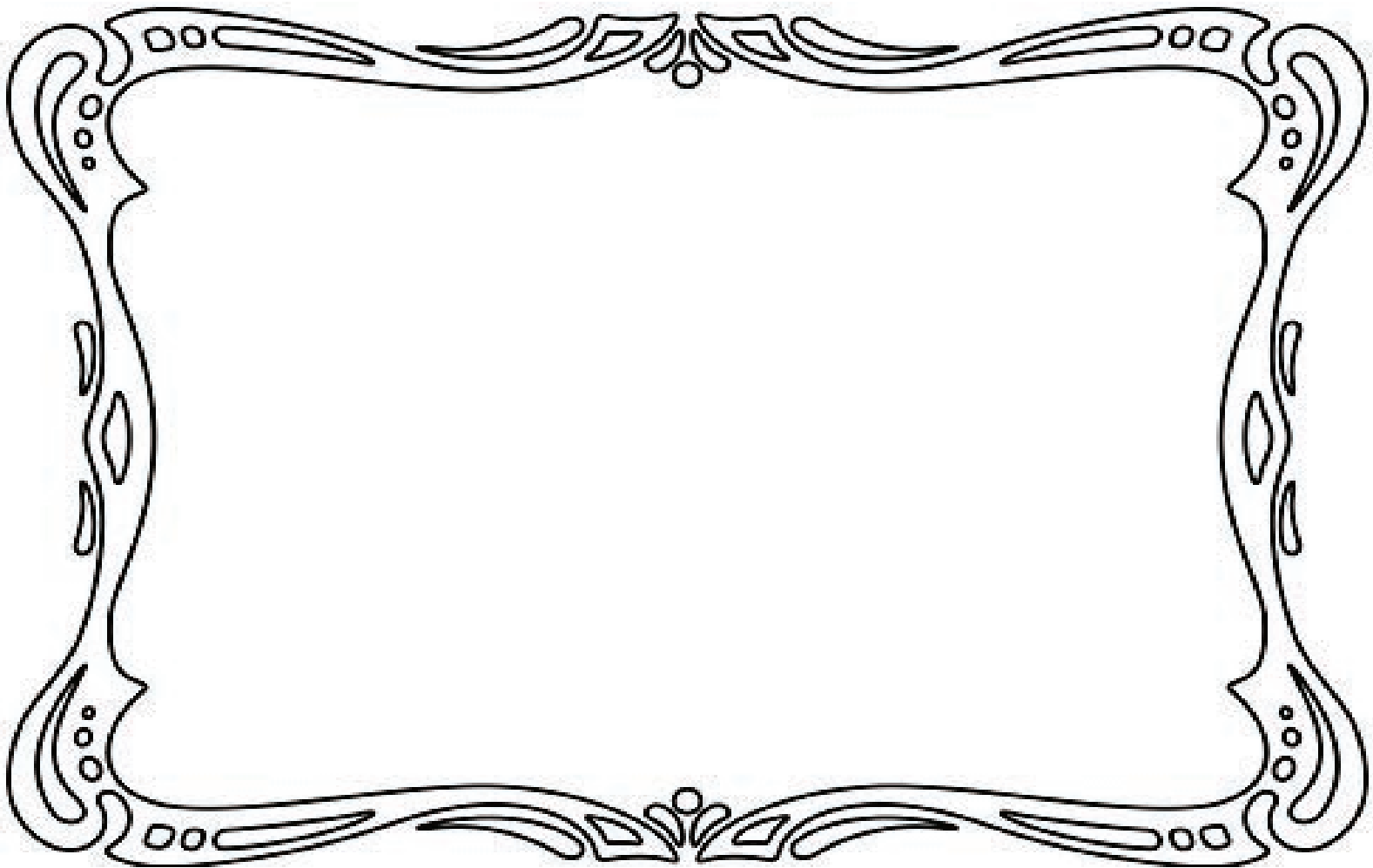
What is a holiday or tradition that you celebrate with your family and friends?

Why does your family choose to honor this tradition?

Do you make any special foods? If so, which ones?

Do you decorate your home and/or do you dress in a special way?

If so, draw it out! Draw a picture of you and your loved ones celebrating.



MOLAA EDUCATOR PACKET  
Día de los muertos | 2018

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MUSEUM OF LATIN AMERICAN ART



# DIEGO RIVERA'S PAINTING

REFLECTING WITH THE ARTS (PAGE 9)

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Day of the Dead, Diego Rivera, 1944