

Día de los Muertos

National Hispanic Cultural Center

Lesson Title: *Día de los Muertos* Sugar Skulls

Age Level: Upper Elementary to High School

Estimated Time: 2 1-hr sessions

NOTE: You can save time by preparing the Royal icing the day before.



SUGAR SKULLS

STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS:

National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Arts Content Standards 1-6

MATERIALS

Note: Don't make skulls on a rainy day or high humidity; they will not dry. Speed up the drying process by placing sugar skulls in the oven on its lowest temperature (175° F) on a parchment lined cookie sheet. Let them bake for 1.5 hrs and remain in the oven until dry. Sugar melts at higher temperatures.

- Sugar skull molds
- Granulated sugar
- Powdered sugar
- Egg whites or meringue powder
- Cream of tartar
- Food coloring paste or gels
- Colored tin foils, sequins, etc.
- Cardboard squares, or baking sheets and parchment paper
- Large mixing bowl
- Measuring spoons

- 1 cup liquid measuring cup
- 1/4 c. dry measuring cup
- Plastic spray bottle for water
- Electric/stand mixer
- 16 oz. plastic cups
- Butter knives or tongue depressors for mixing color into icing
- Pastry bags or small freezer bags
- Paper towels

Ingredients:

- 6-8 cups granulated sugar (I prefer superfine)
- 4 egg whites (or 4 teaspoons meringue powder and 4 teaspoons water)
- 1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar
- 1 teaspoon clear vanilla
- Skull molds

GOAL

Students will understand that sugar skulls are one of the key elements for decorating *altares* for *Día de los Muertos*. Sweets made out of sugar and egg whites are known as *alfeñique*. *Calaveras de azúcar* or sugar skulls are common *ofrendas* for Day of the Dead celebrations.

STUDENT LEARNING

Students will understand how sugar skulls represent the departed for *Día de los Muertos* celebrations. They will follow exact instructions to complete sugar skulls and creatively decorate them.

VOCABULARY

- Día de los muertos*
- Alfeñique*
- Azúcar*
- Sugar skulls
- Calaveras de azúcar*
- Copál*
- Ofrenda*

PROCEDURE

1. In a large bowl, using an electric mixer, blend together the egg whites and cream of tartar until eggs start to form peaks. Slowly add sugar until it has the consistency of moist sand for making sandcastles. If using meringue powder and water, mix dry ingredients first and then sprinkle the water over the dry ingredients while blending. Mix well until all sugar is evenly moistened. Squeeze the sugar in your hand, if your fingerprints remain, it is ready. If it doesn't hold the mixture it's too dry and needs more water. Water naturally sinks to the bottom of the bowl, so remember to stir the sugar mixture frequently as you make your sugar skulls.

Note: We prefer the simplest (but less traditional) recipe. Mix 5 lbs. sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup meringue powder. Add 10 teaspoons of water and mix till starts to stick.

Our favorite online resource for tips and more is mexicansugarskull.com.

2. To Mold: Pack sugar mixture firmly into mold. Use a ruler or straight edge to scrape the back of the mold flat. Pack down more sugar mixture until perfectly tight. Place a stiff cardboard square over mold and invert immediately. Lift mold off carefully. Throw any "mistakes" back into the bowl, stir up and try again. If mix is too dry, spray with a water bottle. If all the sugar mixture does not separate from mold easily, it is too wet. Re-mix with a bit more sugar. Rinse and dry your mold after every 5 skulls to avoid sticking.
3. To Dry: Sugar skulls should air-dry 8 hours or more before decorating. The length of time is determined by the size of the mold.
4. Royallcing: Using an electric/stand mixer, bring four egg whites, 1 tablespoon water, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cream of tartar (or $\frac{2}{3}$ cup water, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup meringue powder) to moderately stiff peaks. Slowly add 2 pounds powdered sugar until icing stiffens and shows no lumps (about 10 minutes). Do not try to mix more than two pounds of sugar or you will have a complete mess. Divide icing into equal amounts and place in paper cups. Add paste food coloring to the icing and stir vigorously to achieve the desired hues. Do NOT use liquid food coloring from the grocery store! Snip the tiniest corner from a freezer bag and fill to no more than $\frac{1}{4}$ full with the colored icing, or if you are a pro you can use a pastry bag and tips. Squeeze the bag firmly and evenly to extrude the icing onto the surface of the sugar skull. Using the royal icing one can cement circles of color foil or sequins for eyes, or strips to form crosses on the skulls. Icing can last for several days in an airtight container at room temperature. Do not refrigerate or it will harden.

SUGGESTED FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

Have students write a reflective piece on who their sugar skull was made for and why they chose that person.

EXTENSION

Students can pair their writings and skulls artistically on an *ofrenda* for *Día de los Muertos*.

Information and recipe from Christopher Gibson, gchristopher36@qwest.net, for the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM.