

Art & Museums



¡FANTASMAL! Many of Chicago's Dia de los Muertos celebrations happen in Pilsen.

Living art

Mexican folk tradition Dia de los Muertos celebrates life, loved ones and creativity.

By **Audrey Leon**

As parent-child discussions go, talking about death doesn't top anyone's list. But Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)—an annual Mexican holiday in early November—offers parents a refreshingly upbeat opportunity to start the conversation.

In late October, of course, many Americans' thoughts turn to trick-or-treating, ghosts and goblins. Because the holidays share proximity on the calendar, not to mention some similar pageantry, people occasionally conflate Dia de los Muertos with Halloween. But the traditions of November 1–2 have less to do with a good scare. Instead, they focus on honoring deceased loved ones by creating altars and presenting offerings (*ofrendas*) of favorite foods, drinks and gifts.

"You don't have to be Mexican to be able to appreciate the culture,"

says west suburban Hillside resident Yolanda Bindert, who travels into the city several times a year with her husband and nine-year-old son to visit the National Museum of Mexican Art—especially each autumn, to connect to the seasonal traditions hosted there. "My parents are Cuban and Colombian, and they have Day of the Dead, but it's done in a solemn, religious way. Mexicans do it in a very beautiful and celebratory way."

With an exhibit, "Dia de Muertos XXV," that runs into early December and also via kid-friendly activities, NMMA aims to entertain and educate families curious about the holiday. "You don't want to be heavy-handed talking about death with your kids," Dan Bindert says. "But this is an interesting way, through viewing art, to process what life is about—that there are generations of people who make their mark on the world, and they are not necessarily forgotten."

In addition to the annual exhibit (now in its 25th year), the Pilsen institution hosts many children's art classes, including **sugar-skull decorating** (October

9, \$2 per person) and mini altar making (October 16, \$2 per person). After participating, kids demonstrate a wider understanding of the holiday, says director of education Nancy Villafranca. "They have some notion of what the altars are about," she says. "They've seen some aspect in their lives, such as a shrine with teddy bears and flowers."

One reason the Binderts return every year to the museum's autumn events is because their boy's creativity shines. "Our son is not an artsy kid. He's obsessed with trains and rail lines," Yolanda says. "When he participates in Day of the Dead, we get to see him use a lot of colors and decorate a sugar skull in unique ways. It's his [chance for] artistic expression."

Compare Day of the Dead traditions across North America in "Dia de Muertos XXV." See Calendar.



¡Mas eventos for Day of the Dead!

Dia de Los Muertos Fair at St. Procopius School (1625 S Allport St, 312-421-5135, stprocopius.com/school).

October 27 at 8:30am. Free. Starting bright and early, the elementary school holds mass, followed by a 10am procession around the campus to its soccer field. The event includes student folk dances and traditional Mexican food. Head to the field for the best public viewing.

Dia de los Muertos concert at Harris Theater (205 E Randolph St, 312-236-3681, chicagosinfonietta.org).

November 1, 7:30pm. \$26–\$50. Listen as Chicago Sinfonietta guest conductor Hector Guzman conjures the spirits of loved ones past. The symphony concert aims to reflect the holiday with both joyful and sorrowful tones, via compositions by Carlos Chávez and Joaquín Rodrigo.



▲ Muertos de la Risa at Pros Arts Studio (1119 W Cullerton St, 312-226-7767, prosarts.org).

November 2, 4–7pm. Free. Another Pilsen mainstay, Pros Arts Studio holds the "longest-running" title, curating Day of the Dead processions for 32 years. Muertos de la Risa, held in Dvorak Park behind Pros Arts' offices, offers face painting, Calavera Circus performances and a chance to observe altar processions and community *ofrendas*. —AL