

Tapetes & Alebrijes

Mexican Folk Arts Traditions

At Hamilton International Middle School, students in Spanish and ESL classes will collaborate on creating a group *tapete*, or sand painting, to celebrate El Día de los Muertos. Woodshop students will make the wooden trays for the separate panels of the *tapete*, and will also make *alebrijes*, or fantastic, colorful wooden “monsters” to decorate the edge of the *tapete*. *Alebrijes* as a folk art tradition were, quite literally, dreamed up by Pedro Linares, who, as a young man, sick in bed, envisioned an imaginary world where all the animals had turned into “monsters,” with odd body parts. All were shouting the word, “*Alebrijes!*” When Pedro awoke, he began to model some of these fantastic creatures from papier mâché and paint them in vivid colors—a tradition that his family carries on, and has now been adopted all over Mexico.

Sand paintings are a tradition particularly appropriate to observances of El Día de los Muertos. Fulgencio Lazo says, “Sand paintings, by nature, are temporal. They are designed to last hours or days, at most. Like life itself, they are not ever-lasting.” In this respect, they are similar to other art works and adornments that typically appear during the celebration of Días de los Muertos. For example, flimsy but intricate *papeles picados* are left to fly until the weather claims them. Wax candles are readily burned, sugar skulls eagerly eaten. All are ephemeral, or short-lived.

One commentator, Mary Jane Gagnier Mendoza, explains the significance of ephemera (short-lived creations) this way: “Most of the elaborate Day of the Dead altars found in Oaxacan homes are adorned with authentic works of art meant to last no longer than the *fiesta* itself. To Western culture oriented to preserving everything as long as possible, it may seem strange to expend so much labor on objects having no other purpose than to be consumed and destroyed. Mexicans, especially indigenous Oaxacans, see themselves as ephemeral beings in an ephemeral world. To enjoy materials objects, yet be willing to relinquish them, is totally natural to them.” [“Dia de Muertos: The Dead Come to Life in Mexican Folk Art,” on the Web through www.mexconnect.com]