

The Day of the Dead In the Lake Pátzcuaro Region



Reprinted courtesy of Alfredo Zalce

Alfredo Zalce, *Day of the Dead*, 104 x 122.5 cm, 1988 (oil on canvas).

Michoacán, where cultures merge, is one of the places with the greatest religious syncretism in Mexico, and therefore, with an immense wealth of ritual. Vasco de

Quiroga, sent to Michoacán after the conquistador Nuño de Guzmán was accused of gross cruelty to the Purépechas, was responsible for making it one of the places where the Christian gospel was most effec-

tively spread, and where it was also most completely combined with the rites and beliefs of the pre-Hispanic culture.

The ceremonies associated with the Day of the Dead in Michoacán, therefore,

although markedly Christian, also conserve much of the magical thinking of the pre-Hispanic world that says that the souls of the dead return on the nights of November 1 and 2 to receive offerings from the living. At this time of year, splendid offerings are placed on tombs, graced with the light from tapers and the intense orange-yellow of the *compasúchil* flower, a species of marigold. Voices raised in song and the peal of the decorated church bells can be heard when the darkness of night covers the souls of both living and dead. On the island of Janitzio, in addition, the lovers Mintzita and Taré, the Purépecha prince and princess who died before they could marry, are also remembered. Legend has it that they became the guardians of a treasure hidden in the depths of Lake Pátzcuaro surrounding the island.

November 1 is a day of celebration, mixed with a profound mysticism: a central part is the *teruscán*, organized pillaging in which boys run through town stealing ears of corn, squash, flowers and other products from fences and roofs. All this is later cooked by the adults in a kettle in the church atrium and distributed among the participants in the ritual. That night, a wake is held for the "little angels": as in the rest of Mexico, this consists of making an altar for *los muertos chiquitos*, children who have died. In Janitzio, their tombstones are adorned with flowers, toys and sweets in the hope that they will come back and consume the treats they liked the best.

In the community of Huecorio, this ceremony is carried out in people's homes beginning October 31, and the offerings to the children include toys from differ-

ent parts of the state, as well as the gifts they never received in life.

On November 2, the offering of the crops (*campen*) is made: a procession through the town collects donations, which are then taken to the church where the priest intones prayers for the dead.

In Pátzcuaro, the Day of the Dead has a more Christian than pagan connotation and most of the ceremonies take place in the churches: mass is celebrated and offerings are made and concerts given in the atria.

In Tzintzuntzan, the ancient capital of the Purépecha kingdom, the townspeople pass the night next to imposing pre-Hispanic and colonial buildings, common in



Sugar skulls are given as gifts on the Day of the Dead.

this region. In addition to floral arrangements and food, local crafts are included in the altar offerings, such as black *vidriado* dishes, white dishes, straw angels, fruit and carved wood. (This practice is also common in Ihuatzio, known for its straw

weaving.) Here, the women take charge, dressed in mourning, wrapped in their wide shawls, they keep order and arrange the offerings, singing through the night to Cutzi (the moon), praying for happiness for the living.

The ceremony in Janitzio, the most famous of the islands in Lake Pátzcuaro, is marked by the all-night singing in Purépecha; the candles are lit one by one, illuminating the embroidered tablecloths under the offerings, the nocturnal colors of the flowers and the tranquil figures of the living. The island of Jarácuaro, in contrast, is festive and noisy; dances to flute music under the great arches set inside the church symbolizing each of the town's neighborhoods dominate the evening. Here, the whole town is decorated, but at dawn the offerings are removed from the tombs and taken into the church where praises are sung.

In Tzurumutaro, a town near Pátzcuaro, a unique ceremony is carried out: in the Agrarianism Museum, regional flowers and vegetables adorn an offering to General Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico's president from 1934 to 1940, generally credited with the agrarian reform.

Participating in these ceremonies is a sacred duty to the dead. The ritual atmosphere and the profound respect for a ceremony to pray for peace for the souls of the departed and happiness for those still inhabiting this world are traditions that have not been lost in Michoacán and that demonstrate the immutability of magical-ritual thinking in this corner of our country. ■■■

Taken from: *Noche de muertos* (Morelia, Michoacán: Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Michoacán, n. d.).