REDEFINING LA OFRENDA:

EVOLVING CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

by

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This thesis is dedicated to the celebration of life, death and life again. The commemoration of *La Ofrenda* has been a part of my life for many years and one thing I have learned from creating this work is that it is ongoing and that there will always be more to learn about *La Ofrenda*. Several people and institutions helped provide the information for this thesis and I am very thankful for their assistance.

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"Obedezco, Pero No Cuplo" - Don Antonio de Mendoza

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION *LA OFRENDA* 1

1. A HISTORY OF *LA OFRENDA* 10

Ancient Mesoamerican Elements 11
Spanish Religious Beliefs Reflected in *La Ofrenda* 17
The Creation of Colonial Mexico's *La Ofrenda* 21

2. SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF *LA OFRENDA* 34

3. TRADITIONAL VERSUS CONTEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS 56

Sandra Cisneros – *A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother*, 2015 57
Johanna Hahn – *La Ofrenda Exhibit* #1, 2014 59
Oakland Museum of California 62
Carmen Lomas Garza - *Ofrenda Para Antonio Lomas,* 1995 63
Joseph Mariscal – *Altar Para Daddy*, 1985 66
Amelia Mesa-Bains - *An Ofrenda for Dolores de Rio*, 1984 67

4. PRIVATE SACRED VERSUS PUBLIC SECULAR REPRESENTATION OF *LA OFRENDA* 76

Tonantzin Historical Society - O*frenda Hernandez Familia,* 2014 77
Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador – *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler,* 2015 80
Alana Rodriguez – Los Valientes, 2013 83
Maria Elena Rodriguez – *Unknown Border Crossings*, 2013 86

5. REDEFINING *LA OFRENDA* 93

Ramifications of Permanency and Future Artistic Directions……..... 93
Mizael Sanchez – *On Going House Ofrenda,* 2002 94
Latino Virtual Museum – *Virtual Ofrenda,* 2009 96
Eliana Cetto – *Gathering the Embers,* 2014 98
River Oaks Chamber Orchestra – *Musical and Literary Ofrenda,* 2016 100

6. CONCLUSION 107

REFERENCES CITED 110

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Kitty Williams, Title Unknown, 2010 8

2. Ofelia Esparza, Title Unknown, 2016..... 9

3. Joanna Hahn, *Ofrenda Exhibit*, Indiana State University, 2013 27

4. Folio 56 Borgia Codex – Mictlantecuhtli and Quetzalcoatl, ca1400-1500..... 28

5. Folio 5 Codex Telleriano-Remensis - Aztec god Huitzilipochtli sixteenth-century..... 29

6. Folio 28 Codex Borbonicus - Miccaihuitontli "Little Festival of the Dead " sixteenth-century 30

7. Tom Robinson Photography, Title Unknown, 2005 31

8. Rockwell Museum, Title Unknown, House *Ofrenda*, 2014 32

9. The Pajaro Valley Gallery, *Altar Mao Mao Chong de Jia,* 2016 33

10. Fran Meneley Photography, Title Unknown, 2007 45

11. Fran Meneley Photography, Title Unknown, 2008 46

12 Folio 58 Codex Tudela – *Burial Image with Petate,* sixteenth-century..... 47

13. Reydocbici.com – *Ofrenda* with *Platos de Mole*, 2010..... 48

14. Mislav Popovic Photography, Title Unknown, 2009..... 49

15. Stevie Mack and Kitty Williams, *Nelson Perez Family Ofrenda*, 2015 50

16. Laura Zuckerman, *Ofrenda to My Mother Blanche Zuckerman*, 2007..... 51

17. Tristan Savatier Photography, Untitled, San Francisco, 2014 52

LIST OF FIGURES CONTINUED

Figure Page

18. Judith Haden Photography, Untitled, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2007 53

19. Eneas de Troya, Altar Tradicional de Dia de Muertos en Milpa Alta, 2009 54

20. Festivalvidamuerte.com, Untitled, 2014 55

21. Sandra Cisneros, *A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother*, 2015 71

22. Joanna Hahn, *La Ofrenda Exhibit*, 2014 72

23. Carmen Lomas Garza, *Ofrenda Para Antonio Lomas*, 1995 73

24. Joseph Mariscal, *Altar Para Daddy*, 1985 74

25. Amelia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984 75

26. Tonantzin Historical Society, *Ofrenda de La Familia Hernandez*, 2014 89

27. Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador, *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler,* 2015 90

28. Alana Rodriguez, *Los Valientes*, 2013 91

29. Maria Elena Rodriguez, *Unknown People Lost in Border Crossing*, 2013 92

30. Mizael Sanchez and David Carrasco, *On Going Ofrenda Exhibit*, Peabody Museum, Harvard, 1990 103

31. Latino Virtual Museum, Smithsonian Latino Center, 2009 104

32. Eliana Cetto, *Gathering the Embers*, 2014 105

33. River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, Musical and Literary *Ofrenda*, 2016 106

ABSTRACT

La Ofrenda, or the offering, is deeply embedded in Latino-American culture and is closely associated with *Dias de Muertos*, the Days of the Dead, a joyous celebration to commemorate the deceased. This thesis explores the history of *La Ofrenda* from its roots in ancient Mesoamerica to its subsequent merging with Spanish religious beliefs during the colonial Mexican period. Symbolic and ritualistic elements of *La Ofrenda* are examined to reflect the syncretic nature of the altar showing how it incorporates elements of both cultures. The thesis then analyzes the placement of *La Ofrenda* in the context of public institutions across the United States of America to discern if authentic characteristics remain when the altar is featured public venues. Each chapter addresses a different set of contrasting elements with the first chapter examining traditional aspects and materials vs. contemporary installations. Second, will consider the distinction between private and sacred displays and those featured in a public secular venue. Next, an effect on *La Ofrenda* by the very institutions that are trying to preserve the practice is examined with a look at contemporary artists who create highly conceptual *Ofrendas* reflecting the ever-changing aspects of Modern art, using a wide variety of non-traditional techniques such as computer technology, video and performance. These new methods of artistic representation are challenging and changing not only *La Ofrenda,* but what can be perceived as an *Ofrenda*. The question of the future of the display of *La Ofrenda* in a public setting is examined through these nontraditional altar representations and addresses the ramifications they present to the authenticity of *La Ofrenda* in conceptual installations.

INTRODUCTION: *LA OFRENDA*

Latino-Americans have a rich social history blending European and indigenous Native American cultural heritages. Due to this heritage, Latino-Americans often celebrate cross-cultural traditions which incorporate pre-Columbian beliefs with Western European ideologies, creating a syncretic culture, one that is an amalgamation or fusion of different religions, cultures, and ways of thinking. This syncretic blend of cultures is evident in most aspects of Latino-American identity, from social mores to political philosophies, from spiritual and religious practices to artistic expression. A vivid example of this fusion is evident in the creation of *La Ofrenda* (figure 1). From its inception, *La Ofrenda* or "the offering" was an altar constructed for prayer and spiritual guidance as well as a ritual space organized with items of food, drink, honorific gifts, and a multitude of mementos, which serve to pay homage to the deceased. *La Ofrenda* is primarily tied to the religious and spiritual festival *Dias de Muertos* or Days of the Dead.[1] Often known as simply *Dia de los Muertos*, referring to just one day of celebration, in actuality *Dias de Muertos* more properly reflects this event consisting of several days, based on a syncretic commemoration with the origins of the ceremony established by a ritual called *La Ofrenda*. This centuries old creation of *La Ofrenda* is a fundamental component of the relatively more modern *Dias de Muertos* celebration, and it is quite probable that without *La Ofrenda*, the festival of *Dias de Muertos* and its recent popularity would not exist. *La Ofrenda* is the historical root of the whole celebration.

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[1] Kristin G. Congdon. "Teaching about the "*Ofrenda*" and Experiences on the Border." *Studies in Art Educatio*n. 40, 10 (1999), 314.

Further, the material objects used to represent *La Ofrenda* are conduits, representing the important iconographic elements and traditional adherences of the religious and spiritual history of the celebration. *La Ofrenda* allows the material and spiritual components of the festival to be displayed on a tangible stage that presents a visual reference to the ideas behind the social and ethnographical meaning of the altar. Ritualistically, *La Ofrenda* was erected using various physical items presented as offerings, which were used as a temporary invitation for the souls of the dead to return and be honored once again in life. The altar was traditionally erected for a period of one to three days to help a family or community celebrate a private spiritual communion with the incorporeal world. On the night of the commemoration families and communities would ceremoniously walk to the local graveyard carrying bundles filled with symbolic and ritualistic items needed to construct their honorary *Ofrenda*. At each gravesite, family members and friends would place the necessary objects needed in the *Ofrendas* creation. The commemorative altar was fully constructed over the evening by family and friends who would then spend the rest of the evening reminiscing joyfully about their deceased loved ones until the next morning when the commemoration was considered complete. The final part to the commemoration was deconstructing the altar and making the gravesite presentable. *Ofrendas* were originally considered ephemeral creations and not meant to be permanent fixtures.[2] Regardless of how an *Ofrenda* is displayed or who is involved in the altar's creation, most *Ofrendas* share a number of traditional characteristics. *Ofrendas* are

[2] Stanley Brandes. "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning." *Ethnohistory*, 45, 2 (1998), 188.

generally constructed using simple materials and consumable substances that are readily available. The traditional materials are typically obtained locally, and the ritual practices associated with each object placed on *La Ofrenda* are customarily passed down from one generation to the next. Consequently, traditional *Ofrendas* carry strong ancestral ties and are considered sacred altars which often represent local craftsmanship and regional distinctiveness. Only a few treasured items would be preserved for sentimental value or used again the next year. The altars were then dismantled, with personal objects such as rosaries, special mementos, photos or *retablo*s saved, food items consumed or ceremonially buried, and often the last remains of the altar disposed of or burned during a private commemorative ceremony.[3] *Ofrendas* are meant to be traditional, sacred and temporary.

However in the twenty-first century, *La Ofrenda* and the *Dias de Muertos* celebration has evolved from its original intent as a ritualistic, spiritual practice meant to be privately viewed and experienced. Currently it is becoming a highly publicized event for museums, cultural centers, and other organizations via media exposure and tourism and viewed by people of all backgrounds and in worldwide locations. Over the past seven centuries the *Dias de Muertos* festival has increased in popularity and is now acknowledged as one of Mexico's largest and most recognized celebrations.[4] At the same time, the symbolic meaning of the modern *Dias de Muertos* celebration finds its

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[3] Hugo Gino Nutini. Todos *Santos in Rural Tlaxcala: A Syncretic, Expressive, and Symbolic Analysis of the Day of the Dead*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2015), 161-63.
[4] Stanley Brandes. "Sugar, Colonialism, and Death: On the Origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead." *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 39, 2 (Apr., 1997), 270.

origin in the physical creation of *La Ofrenda*. It is the physical creation, use of symbols, and artistic construction of *La Ofrenda* that directs the festival's intended purpose to celebrate and honor the deceased. Understanding the symbolic meaning of the objects used in the creation of *La Ofrenda* is crucial, for within the objects are the ties to *La Ofrenda's* syncretic development from elements found in both indigenous Mesoamerican and Spanish European ritual festivals. These syncretic elements of *La Ofrenda* continued to blend Latino-American traditions extending from the Colonial Mexico period and to the present twenty-first century.

In the United States over the last thirty years, museums and cultural centers have started to identify and feature various iconographic components used in the *Dias de Muertos* festivals including the creation of an *Ofrenda*. Several locations nationwide have an honorary exhibit during the festival that include mission statements aimed at educating the public as to Mesoamerican and Spanish European syncretic components and ritualistic qualities of *La Ofrenda*. The idea of shared symbolic and ritualistic qualities helps bridge the two cultures through practiced rituals and is a significant social factor for the importance of maintaining and promoting *La Ofrenda* and the *Dias de Muertos* celebration.[5] Whereas many museums and cultural centers have constructed their own temporary *Ofrenda* as part of the *Dias de Muertos* holiday, a few museums even retain permanent in-house *Ofrenda* altars. This permanence creates another way to view *La Ofrenda,* making the creation of *La Ofrenda* and all the material characteristics

[5] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual Second Edition.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-6.

associated with it a form of contemporary art made to "express, preserve, and transmit cultural and religious ideals and political differences."[6] This increase in the popularity of publicly displaying an *Ofrenda* at cultural centers and museums within the United States of America has had an impact on the spiritual, temporal, and material presentation typologies linked to L*a Ofrenda*. The traditional *Ofrenda* is evolving (figure 2).

This thesis intends to examine how several museums and cultural centers across the United States have affected the customary ritualistic traits of *La Ofrenda*. The very act of placing *La Ofrenda* in a museum or exhibition setting alters the conventional contexts for *La Ofrenda.* It is these new and often opposing conventions blended with the authentic components that will be discussed by exploring the fusion of innovative sometimes unusual contexts evident in contemporary *Ofrenda* displays. The chapters are organized into thematic categories with the first chapter consisting of a historical overview of *La Ofrenda.* Chapter Two presents a symbolic analysis of *La Ofrenda*. Chapter Three explores the adaptation of the traditional *Ofrenda* and its development in contemporary installations. Chapter Four will examine *La Ofrenda's* private sacred versus public secular representation in a transformation from traditional altar to conceptual art installation. Chapter Five will discuss the ramifications to the traditional context of an *Ofrenda* when it is incorporated into a permanent exhibit, followed by examples modern interpretations of *La Ofrenda*. Data and research will be based on 1) an attempt to represent museums and cultural centers which exhibit and promote *La Ofrenda*

[6]Laura Perez. *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 91.

throughout different regions across the United States of America 2) the possibility of personal contact with curators to pose questions regarding the museum or cultural center's response to *La Ofrenda* and that of the public 3) their accessibility via the internet that provides historical background and featured commentary on *Ofrenda* exhibits and the *Dias de Muertos* festival in general. Some of the questions to be explored are as follows: are museums and cultural centers representing the original traditional, spiritual, and temporal ritualistic values of *La Ofrenda* or are they exhibiting a broader more modern aesthetic? How do these museums and cultural centers feature and interpret *La Ofrenda* as a reflection of their local community? How do these museums or cultural centers educate the public about and foster an appreciation of the spiritual, religious, and ethnographic origins of *La Ofrenda*? Following a fundamental history and necessary explanation of the symbolism of *La Ofrenda*, specific displays from museums and cultural centers around United States will reveal and highlight the differences between traditional *Ofrendas* and many of those being currently created for the public which are expanding the meaning and experience of *La Ofrenda*. Across the nation, while many curators are attempting to present *La Ofrenda* and the festival in an updated yet historically rooted method, some displays attempt to redefine and at times even ignore characteristics that are important to the traditional representation of *La Ofrenda*. If these characteristics are no longer included in the creation of *La Ofrenda,* the entire historical and cultural significance may be lost and the work becomes something other than an *Ofrenda*. In some public institutions *Ofrendas* are being changed in ways that call into

question the validity of the alterations being forced upon the work and whether they truly represent this well-established spiritual and cultural event.

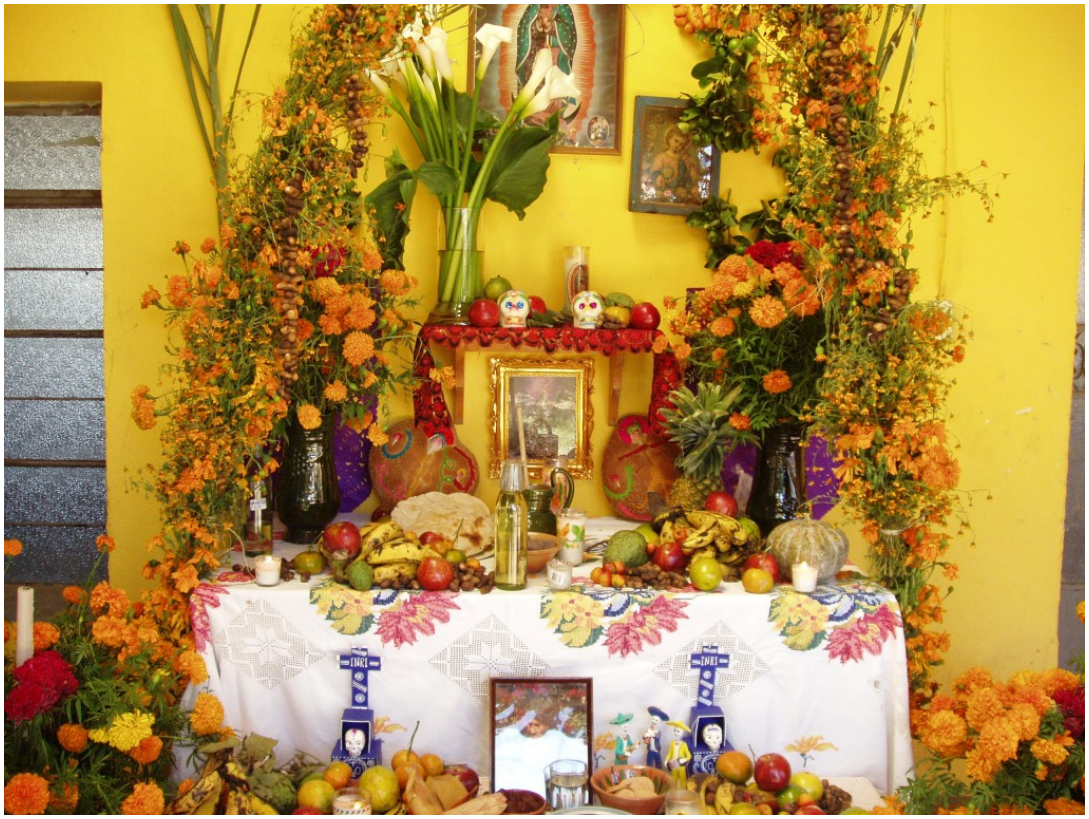


Figure 1:

Kitty Williams, Title Unknown, April 2010, mixed media.
Photo courtesy of Crizma.com



Figure 2:

Ofelia Esparza, Title Unknown, 2016, mixed media.
Photo courtesy of MOLAA

CHAPTER ONE: A HISTORY OF *LA OFRENDA*

It is crucial to understand the transformation of *La Ofrenda* from a private, ritualistic and religious ceremony into a publicly constructed festival and artistic demonstration at museums and cultural centers. To truly understand and appreciate this evolution, a detailed history of *La Ofrenda*, and more broadly the origin of the *Dias de Muertos*, needs to be explored, including an examination of the syncretic physical and spiritual elements comprising the cultures of Mesoamerica and Europe. The creation of the offering (*Dias de Muertos Ofrenda*) is fundamental to the spiritual and religious component of the historic *Dias de Muertos* celebration and traditionally one cannot exist without the other. *La Ofrenda* focuses spiritual commemoration of deceased loved ones, and through the construction and offered mementos placed on and around the altar, ritualistic components are established leading to the celebratory festival of *Dias de Muertos*. Although practiced once a year in the latter part of autumn, dates for its celebration can change based on different venues. Most *Dias de Muertos* festivals and *La Ofrenda* observances presently occur around the last week of October to the first week of November, depending on local regional preferences. *La Ofrenda* is a funerary and sacrificial commemoration that not only honors death, but promotes the circle of life. It is a festival of communion. It celebrates the creation of life, the reality of death, and the cyclical renewal of life. The purpose of the festival, and the construction of the altar, reminds celebrants that death should not be feared, but rather acknowledged and celebrated as part of the cycle of life. In the beginning of her work, *The Days of the*

Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed, Rosalind Rosoff Beimler addresses the concept of death:

> In all cultures, there is a struggle between life and death. Life is noisy and bright; death is silent and dark. To the light we attribute goodness; to the dark, fear and evil. Spring brings fertility and thoughts of love; fall brings barrenness and intimations of death. Funeral rites reflect both the denial and the acceptance of opposites….Every culture must learn to deal with the loss of life in order to survive. Feelings of abandonment, anger, guilt and fear must be resolved before the priority of life can be reasserted.[7]

Beimler sets the stage for understanding the mixed origins of *Dias de Muertos* and its syncretic creation. For many, the festival and altar's creation becomes a day of reflection about life and death and helps people who might have feelings of fear and abandonment to instead find comfort in honoring deceased loved ones. The living invite the souls of the dead back to a temporary existence at *La Ofrenda* and are thereby heartened and experience a sense of wellbeing. The living also help the dead to experience the joys of the corporeal world again, offering the dead materialistic gifts they once associated with the pleasure of their life (figure 3). The departed are invited by the living to sit by the home hearth, warming their souls while reminiscing with friends and family before returning to the land of the dead.

Ancient Mesoamerican Elements

La Ofrenda and the modern day *Dias de Muertos* festival celebrated around the world are commonly held on November first and second, and in some cases becomes a

[7]Rosalind Rosoff Beimler. *The Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed.* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Publishing Ltd. 1991), 14.

weeklong observance with traditions dating back to the sixteenth century during the period of the Spanish Conquest of the Americas.[8] The exact date for this celebration is still debated with many scholars asserting earlier links to both pre-Columbian ritualistic festivals and commemorative Roman Catholic observances. According to Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, authors of *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*, the origins of *La Ofrenda* and the festival of *Dias de Muertos* can be traced back to both ancient Mesoamerican sacrificial ceremonies which developed from both early Mayan and Aztec cultures as well as early religious beliefs practiced by devout Spanish Roman Catholics of the medieval period.[9] Carmichael and Sayer support their findings for the early Mayan and Aztec basis by comparing elements of the Nahuatl or Aztec creation myth to the characteristics associated with *La Ofrenda* and the *Dias de Muertos* Festival.[10] The Nahuatl creation myth tells the tale of the Mayan plumed serpent god, Quetzalcoatl, who journeys to the deepest level of the underworld to meet with the goddess of death, Mictlantecuhtli (figure 4). The Serpent God, feeling lonely, asks to be able to return the immortal bones of Nahuatl ancestors back to earth after they were destroyed in a catastrophic event on the mainland. Quetzalcoatl is given the bones and on his travels back to the mainland, he drops the bones on the ground, damaging them, and in doing so dooms humanity to mortal existence. Not wanting to remain alone in the

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[8] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer. *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 33-34.
[9] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 24-25.
[10] The term Nahuatl refers to a shared language spoken by the Nahua people who later referred to themselves by the name 'Aztecs' after the mythical ancestral home Aztlan. There are various forms of the Nahuatl language spoken but the key linguistic elements to the language are indigenous to Mesoamerica and have existed since the seventh century A.D.

world, the serpent god looks for another solution and gathers the bones up once again and brings them to Tamoachan, the paradise of the Aztecs. Here he gives the bones to the Aztec earth goddess, Cihuacoatl, who accepts the sacrifice and grinds up the bones, scattering them over the crops using Quetzacoatl's blood as fertilizer. From this joining of Mayan and Aztec sacrificial rituals developed the Aztec harvest ritual.[11] The ceremony was also organized to satisfy the demands of another ferocious feathered god recognized as the Aztec god Huitzilipochtli, who demanded homage from the people through the most precious thing they could offer, blood and their source of life (figure 5).[12] In exchange for this death tribute, the sun god would bless the crops annually and the dead would be mourned properly by their loved ones and would be allowed into various afterlife locations depending on how they died.

For Carmichael and Sayer, these tales relating the Aztec sacrificial festivals support a recurrent theme for many Mesoamerican cultures of the relationship between human life, religiosity, and the gods, and supports the concept of a cycle of life, death and the cyclical life renewed.[13] Further, Carmichael and Sayer include primary documentation and recorded ethnographic accounts by fifteenth and sixteenth century anthropologists Fray Bernardino de Sahagun and Miguel Leon Portilla to support their ideas.[14] Beimler further supports a belief in a pre-Colonial existence of the *Dias de*

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[11] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 25-27.
[12] Rosalind Rosoff Beimler, 18.
[13] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 25.
[14] Bokovoy, Matthew F. review editor. "Bernardino de Sahagun: First Anthropologist." *The Journal of San Diego History,* 49, 2 (2003) Catholic missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagun was a pioneering ethnographer in the sixteenth century who spent over fifty years working towards recovering written information on the history of the Aztec people after the Spanish Conquest had

Muertos festival and the creation of *La Ofrenda* by providing information, which places the occurrence of the ritual and festival activities, early in the fall around August and September.[15] Additionally authors Joseph Kroger and Patrizia Granziera provide a description of the different monthly Aztec agricultural celebrations in accordance with the eighteen agricultural ritual ceremonies (Veintena Ceremonie) comprising the solar Aztec calendar.[16] Kroger and Granziera discuss the ritual called Tlaxochimaco, performed in the ninth month of the Aztec Veintena Ceremonies. This ritual festival was known as the 'Birth of the Flowers' ceremony to honor the dead and becomes significant to linking the ceremony to its sixteenth century origins as the concept of incorporating flowers into the *Dias de Muertos* festival and *La Ofrenda* is an important symbolic part to the ritual. [17] Pointing directly to the existence of the Aztec festival of the dead, Ferdinand

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systematically destroyed their primary records. It is through his labor that a written history of the Aztecs remains. His most famous work, the Florentine Codex, is comprised of 2,400 pages bound into twelve books and includes 2,500 illustrations by indigenous artists portraying the history of the Aztec peoples and their ideologies. Anthropologist Miguel Leon-Portilla continues the work of Sahagun through a biography detailing the life of Sahagun. For more information on both Miguel Leon-Portilla and Fray Bernardino de Sahagun please see: Leon-Portilla, Miguel. Bernardino de Sahagun: First Anthropologist. Translated by Mauricio J. Mixco. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 324.

[15] Rosalind Rosoff Beimler, 18-19.

[16] Joseph Kroger and Patrizia Granziera. *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonna: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 31, 62. Kroger and Granziera explain that the Veintenas Celebrations were Aztec ritualistic agricultural ceremonies based on a solar calendar and divided into eighteen months with twenty days in each month. Kroger and Granziera do emphasis that this solar calendar configuration was very fluid and that exact dates are hard to pinpoint because the calendar changed between the years 625 AD and 1521 AD. 31, 62.

[17] Joseph Kroger and Patrizia Granziera, 31, 62. Kroger and Granziera do note that the names, order, and activities of the ceremonies change at times depending on different regions throughout Mexico. They continue to state that much of the information for the Veintenas Celebrations comes from the works of Fray Bernardino de Sahagun author of the Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain and Dominican friar Diego Duran (1537?-1588) and their personal first hand accounts with the Nahuatl and Aztec people. 31, 62.

Anders cites depictions recorded in the Codex Borbonicus, created during the early sixteenth century. Halfway through the codex an illustration clearly portrays the harvest festival being performed during the same calendar month of the Tlaxochimaco ritual, designated in this manuscript as Miccaihuitontli or "Little Festival of the Dead" substantiating the occurrence of a harvest fall festival celebrating and welcoming back the deceased through homage, sacrifice, and festivities (figure 6).[18] Author and historian Michel Graulich also explores various accounts of the Aztec festivals of the dead through the works of early sixteenth century chroniclers Sahagun, and Duran, as well as looking into sixteenth century codices, Codex Borbonicus and Codex Telleriano-Remensis. Graulich explains how different harvest celebrations are recorded while pointing out the similar documented elements which portray a ritualistic festival focused on honoring the dead by inviting them back from the incorporeal plane to the earthly realm again:[19]

> One of the commentators of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (pl. 4 p. 159) explains that during three days, there was fasting in honor of the dead. The very day of the feast, the Indian climbed on the roofs of their houses and, turned to the North, they beseeched their deceased parents by saying: "Come quickly, for we are waiting for you."[20]

Graulich's information helps support an ancient Aztec and Nahuatl custom of inviting deceased ancestors back to the earthly realm to celebrate with the living, which in turn

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[18] Ferdinand Anders. *Códice Borbónico, 1st ed., Códices Mexicanos 3 (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario;* Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt; Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991). See commentary volume, 205–7.

[19] Michel Graulich. "Tlaxochimaco or Micchailhuitontli (February 17-March 8 in 682; July 23-August 13 in 1519)" *NVMEN International Review For The History of Religions.* (M. Heerma Van Voss, H.G. Kippenberg and R.J.Z. Werblowsky International Association For The History of Religions V. XXXVI. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 57.

[20] Michel Graulich, 57.

becomes incorporated into the ritualistic construction of the *Ofrenda* and celebration of the D*ias de Muertos* festival.

Alan R. Sandstrom presents a contemporary perspective linking the harvest festival for the deceased back to a pre-Hispanic period by his exploration into the Nahua religion still practiced today by Aztec and Nahua communities. Sandstrom's first-hand anthropological account explores the ancestral religious beliefs of the Nahua with a section focusing on the continued practice of traditional calendrical rituals, beginning with the ritual to celebrate the 'Death of the Earth.' Sandstrom explains that for the Nahua, this is a time to honor '*yolotl* souls' or the heart-souls of the dead that roam the Earth during the later part of October to the first week of November. Traditional Nahua ritual encourages the construction of a special home altar on October thirtieth, used to receive the dead and invite them back to enjoy some earthly pleasures. Many of the mementos placed on the altar are items that the deceased especially enjoyed in life, however Sandstrom points out another linking symbolic element to the altar's construction in the use of vibrant orange and gold marigold flower blossoms (*cempoalxochitl*) in Nahuatl. The marigold flower (*cempoalxochitl*), translated as twenty flower, was completely unknown to Europe prior to the pre-Columbian era. These symbolic flowers of the dead bring to mind the Veintena Ceremonies, 'Birth of the Flowers festival' described by fifteenth century chronicler, Fray Benardino de Sahagun, showing the continuation of symbolic elements used originally in pre-Hispanic Aztec harvest rituals. The marigold flowers were woven into a pinwheel-like garland and placed all around the altars construction and the petals were scattered on the ground and served

as a trail leading to the altar. These marigold flower trails, called *xochiojtli*, are to be used by the heart soul or (*yolotl*) to find their way back to loved ones.[21]

Despite the variations of names and dates associated with the harvest festival practiced in various regions, scholars acknowledge rituals conducted by the Nahua and Aztecs focused on honoring the dead and celebrated annually sometime between the months of August and September. These ceremonies remained until the influence of conquering Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century who began to introduce their own religious and ritualistic beliefs and subsequently changed the dates observed to ritualistically honor the dead in Mesoamerica to the first week in November. These dates coincide with two similar European Roman Catholic religious festivals that similarly honored the dead: All Saints Day, November first and All Souls Day November second.

Spanish Religious Beliefs Reflected in *La Ofrenda*

Many scholars see the creation of *La Ofrenda* and celebration of *Dias de Muertos* as being influenced by sixteenth-century European missionaries and Spanish conquistadors who came to the vast territory. A driving purpose of the Spanish Crown in tandem with the Roman Catholic Church, beyond initial land acquisition and financial exploitation, was the intent to impose their religious and social values on the native populations and make them conform to European ideologies. One method was to acknowledge the importance of certain rituals and religious traditions practiced by the

[21] Alan R. Sandstrom. *Corn is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Aztec Indian Village*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 279-282.

native people and use it to European's advantage. The missionaries and Spanish administration would devise ways to supplement and incorporate Catholic religious belief and ideology and native customs and rituals, intermixing the values of both cultures to produce what is now referred to as Mestizo culture, a mixture of indigenous Native American and European ancestry.[22] Early sixteenth-century friars Pedro de Gante, Alonso Molina, Diego Duran, and Bernardino de Sahagun realized that both cultures shared some ritualistic ceremonial practices such as celebrations in honor of gods and worship of these gods through festival activities and prayer at an altar. Instead of trying to destroy the festivals and idols of the Aztec and Nahua, many colonial friars explored methods of conversion through a fusion of rituals practiced by both cultures. In *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, Pardo draws attention to collective thought by early sixteenth-century friars who were surprised at times with some of the similarities between traditional Nahua rituals and Catholic sacraments. In their chronicles, several friars noted the similarity in observing and practicing adulation of a certain deity or religious entity, to accepting the extramundane power of certain objects or icons, to bestowing offerings and paying obeisance to a religious symbol or god.[23] Pardo continues by describing various methods of conversion utilized by different friars. He provides as example Friar Alonso Molina's attempt to use the Roman Catholic sacraments of Baptism expressing the

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[22] Laura E. Perez, 8.
[23] Osvaldo F. Pardo. *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacrament in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 8-12

quality of devotion (the Nahua and Aztec already were familiar with showing devotion to other gods) and the sacrament of Confirmation which reinforced devotion through continued rituals and instruction (for the Nahua and Aztec rituals constant practice of the rituals was part of their daily lives) as one method to assimilate the indigenous Nahua and Aztec peoples. Molina realized the power of the ritual function of the sacraments, noting how to the Nahua it was similar to their ceremonies or *ritos*.[24] Molina was also the first friar to translate and to print the Roman Catholic Catechism into Nahuatl in Mexico City in 1546. Kroger and Granziera assert this was an attempt at a ""spiritual osmosis" developed between Indians and friars: the Indians 'christianized' themselves while the friars ' indianized' themselves by learning the vernacular languages and studying the native culture."[25] Further, Friar Pedro de Gante worked to subsume the Nahua and Aztec's religious beliefs by combining Aztec gods and their celebration days with honoring Catholic saints and their associated holidays, thus helping to create a syncretic belief system embraced by many of the native and later Mestizo populations. *Dias de Muertos* and the early sacrificial *La Ofrenda* altar were the products of these syncretic celebrations reflecting both cultures desire to honor the dead. Carmichael and Sayer support the syncretic origins of *Dias de Muertos* and *La Ofrenda* tracing the sacrificial Aztec harvest ritual celebrated in the fall, to the first two days of November which are the

[24] Osvaldo F. Pardo, 10-11.
[25] Joseph Kroger and Patrizia Granziera, 137-139.

Spanish Catholic celebration of All Saints Day (*El Dia De Todos Santos*) on November first and All Souls Day (*El Dia De Animas*) on November second.[26]

Stanley Brandes reminds the reader that the two Catholic religious observances make up a sequence of days honoring the deceased and hence the term *Dias de Muertos* refers to the Days of the Dead, a series of festival days. He continues on urging the reader to realize while the Day of the Dead celebration becomes an elaborate Mexican festival, it was initially a pan-Roman Catholic holy commemoration.[27] For many its importance is the ritualistic honoring of saints and souls through by attending specially created masses by priests. Many of the devout will perform vigils by visiting the cemeteries of loved ones, depositing honorary remembrances on and around gravesites.

Historically, it was not until the end of the thirteenth century that All Souls Day was actually accepted by the entire Catholic Church and made a liturgical day. Carmichael and Sayer suggest the reason for the reluctance to make All Souls Day a liturgical day was derived from fear on the part of Catholic Church administrators that felt a day to honor and celebrate the dead would allow for the continued existence of pre-Christian pagan rites and festivals celebrating ancestor worship. Acknowledging All Souls Day meant giving people permission to indulge in the practices of feasting, paying homage to ancestors and loved ones at gravesites, and creating altars. For many clergy these elements were too similar to pagan rituals that celebrated the cult of the dead and allowed for superstition and false idol worship to exist rather than a sanctioned Catholic

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[26] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, p. 40-43.
[27] Stanley Brandes. "The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity." *The Journal of American Folklore*, 111, 442 (autumn, 1998), 360.

liturgy.[28] In the end, the Catholic Church tolerated the incorporation of some rituals to help people embrace Catholic religious beliefs. The church sanctioned the practice of feasting and depositing of offerings at constructed altars to honor the memory of martyrs or deceased family members, despite resemblance to Nahua and Aztec festival practices. This syncretism of rituals was approved because the ultimate agenda of the Catholic Church was to convert the populace to Christianity.[29] This amalgamation of Catholic rituals, evolved into the All Saints and All Souls Day Celebrations creating the multifaceted and complex Catholic event called *Dias Todos Santos*.

The Creation of Colonial Mexico's *La Ofrenda*

When Spanish missionaries arrived in the Americas in the sixteenth century, they came with the intent to convert the indigenous peoples to the Catholic religion while bringing along some ideologies of deep-seated folk ritualistic practices still being observed in Spain during the sixteenth century. Again, early missionaries realized that the *Dias Todos Santos* (All Saints and All Souls Day) celebrations shared similarities with

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[28] Hugo G. Nutini. Todos *Santos in Rural Tlaxcala: A Syncretic, Expressive, and Symbolic Analysis of the Cult of the Dead*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10-14.

[29] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 15. Carmichael and Sayer also include a very interesting defense of this desire by the church to blend the pagan ancestor worship rituals and Christian observances by including information by anthropologist Peter Brown. Peter Brown states: For one generation, a lively debate on 'superstition' within the Christian church flickered around the cemeteries of the Mediterranean. In 380 Ambrose at Milan and in the 390, Augustine at Hippo, attempted to restrict among their Christian congregations certain funerary customs, most notably the habit of feasting at the graves of the dead, either at the family tombs or in the memoriae of the martyrs. In Augustine's explicit opinion, these practices were a contaminating legacy of pagan beliefs: 'When peace came to the Church, a mass of pagans who wished to come to Christianity were held back because their feast days with their idols used to be spent in an abundance of eating and drinking." (Brown:1981) In Peter Brown. The Cult of The Saints. London, 1981.

the Aztec harvest festivals as they were also celebrations paying homage to the dead through rituals consisting of but not limited to: visiting the cemeteries of loved ones, constructing temporary altars, and leaving behind tangible offerings for the dead.[30] For Spanish Friars understanding and using the ritualistic similarities in their Catholic instruction was very important because the friars quickly realized that, like many European folk rituals that were never completely erased from the European folk mentality, the Aztec and Nahua held on to their ritualistic practices as well. In his work, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian sacraments in the Sixteenth Century*, Osvaldo supports this decision by Spanish colonial Friars who saw the need in combining religious similarities to achieve conversion of the indigenous peoples contending:

> Europeans accounted for these perceived similarities by asserting that Amerindian religions offered nothing but a distorted and sometimes inverted image of the Christian sacraments, a phenomenon attributed to the influence of the devil. This idea, popularized in Europe as part of the church's fight against popular practices and more aggressively, against witchcraft, did not always appeal to those missionaries in Mexico who developed a familiarity with Nahua culture as well as a strong commitment to understanding its working for teaching purposes.[31]

In colonial Mexico the festival of *Dias Todos Santos* (All Saints Day and All Souls day) was embraced with vigor by both the indigenous population and by Spanish settlers. Historical, for the Spanish, *Dias Todos Santos* is a series of days celebrating mourning.

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[30] Hugo G. Nutini. "Review by Hugo G. Nutini." *American Anthropologist, New Series*, 93, 3 (September 1991), 773.
[31] Osvaldo F. Pardo, 13.

It can begin on the evening of October thirty-first and continue to the evening of November second and this sequence of days can vary by each community honoring the festival. During the sixteenth century in many regions in Spain, especially pious mourners would make visits on All Souls Days to local cemeteries and place material items (*ofrendas*) the offerings, for the dead to partake in and be honored by the living and by God. These 'offerings' consisted many times of placing a blanket-like bouquet of flowers and small tokens that reflected the deceased, were set on and around the gravesites.[32] This organization of materials was called a Spanish death altar or a catafalque, and was meant to represent a cloth-covered bier (raised platform) used in funeral processions (figure 7).[33] Many times this catafalque was organized into different tiered levels with each level displaying a special offering to the deceased (figure 8). In some locations Spaniards would place candles around the graves and at times include a bleached human skull or small skeletal figure at the top of the structure.[34] This construction at the church or grave (*tumba*) would be removed later in the week after the

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[32] Mary J. Andrade. *Through the Eyes of the Soul, Day of the Dead in Mexico*. (San Jose: La Oferta Review Newspaper, Inc. 1996), 17.

[33] Stanley Brandes. *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: Celebrations of Death in Mexico and Beyond*. (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 28-29.

[34] Stanley Brandes, 28. Brandes includes in this evidence in Spain for the construction of a catafalque on All Souls Day. In his work he references Historian Lorenzo Pinar who researched the Castilla province of Zamora, which since the 1500's, erected on All Souls Day catafalques in all the town churches. Pinar continues on to describe the image of the catafalque, "surrounded by a variety of candles as well as twenty-five rolls of bread." Brandes then mentions two other locations in Spain following the same ritual practice of leaving mementos at gravesites and honorary church catafalques: the town of Madridanos being one and the Basque territories during the eighteenth century. For further reading see Stanley Brandes, Skulls to the living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond.

vigil was officially concluded.[35] Carmichael and Sayer see this Spanish catafalque as the precursor to the three-tiered *La Ofrenda* that would be constructed on November second by Mestizo families in Colonial Mexico. However, the festival of *Dia de los Muertos* and the construction of *La Ofrenda* differs from the religious holiday of *Dias Todos Santos* in that *Dia de los Muertos* is not to be approached as a day of remorse and sadness but rather to view death as a natural occurrence of life (i.e. a cycle of birth, death and rebirth.) Taking the fear out of the finality of death, the *Dia de los Muertos* festival mocks death and celebrates life by having a festival full of laughter, food, drink, dancing and the construction of *La Ofrenda* which consists of material offerings to the deceased so they can come back and also join in the celebrations.

For many Latino-Americans and other people celebrating *Dias de Muertos*, *La Ofrenda* is as important, if not the most important part, of the *Dias de Muertos* festival. The construction of *La Ofrenda* varies by location and by personal preference, but *La Ofrenda* has developed over time from being just a personal, spiritual, and ritualistic tradition in association with a commemorative celebration, to becoming a respected form of artistic expression and, in many cases, is considered an artwork having its own aesthetic values. Often viewers scrutinize the entirety of an *Ofrenda*, from the materials used to construct it, to its subject matter or meaning ascribed to the commemorative altar. The viewer then assigns an artistic judgment on the formation of *La Ofrenda* based on its construction and the significance of the objects included in its formation (figure 9).[36]

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[35] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 42-43.
[36] Kristin G. Congdon, 313-314.

Because viewers ascribe certain qualities to the object they think should be evident in a *La Ofrenda's* construction and presentation, they create a system of values by which *La Ofrenda* can be judged. In Thomas Reid's *Essays On The Intellectual Powers of the Human Mind: An Essay on Quantity VII Chapter 1: An Analysis of Taste*, Reid defends the concept of artistic judgment assigned to an object in his thoughts, "On Taste in General"

> Our judgment of beauty is not indeed a dry and unaffecting judgment, like that of a mathematical or metaphysical truth. By the constitution of our nature, it is accompanied with an agreeable feeling or emotion, for which we have no other name but the sense of beauty. This sense of beauty, like the perceptions of our other senses, implies not only a feeling, but an opinion of some quality in the object which occasions that feeling. In objects that please the taste, we always judge that there is some real excellence, some superiority to those that do not please. In some cases, that superior excellence is distinctly perceived, and can be pointed out: in other cases we have only a general notion of some excellence which we cannot describe….Beauty or deformity in an object, results from its nature or structure. To perceive the beauty, therefore, we must perceive the nature or structure from which it results. But it is impossible to perceive the beauty of an object without perceiving the object, or at least conceiving it.[37]

Reid's opinion is important, because many museums and cultural centers also see and ascribe these judgments of beauty to an *Ofrenda*, using them as instructional tools for the public. It becomes the basis for deciding which *Ofrenda* or *Ofrenda's* they choose to exhibit to public, versus setting up any general construction of an *Ofrenda*. How the *Ofrenda* is presented is crucial and there are elements that must exist for *La Ofrenda* to

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[37] Thomas Reid D. D. *Essays on the Intellectual Power of the Human Mind to Which are added and Essay on Quantity and An Analysis of Aristotle's Logic: Essay VIII Of Taste Chapter 1. Of Taste in General.* (London: Printed By Thomas Davis Whitefriars, 1827), 371.

be represented correctly. If these qualities are not visible, an artist statement is necessary to defend the representation of *La Ofrenda*.



Figure 3:

Joanna Hahn, *Ofrenda Exhibit #1*, 2013, mixed media.
Indiana State Museum Annual *Ofrenda* Altar Exhibit.
Photo courtesy of Indiana State University

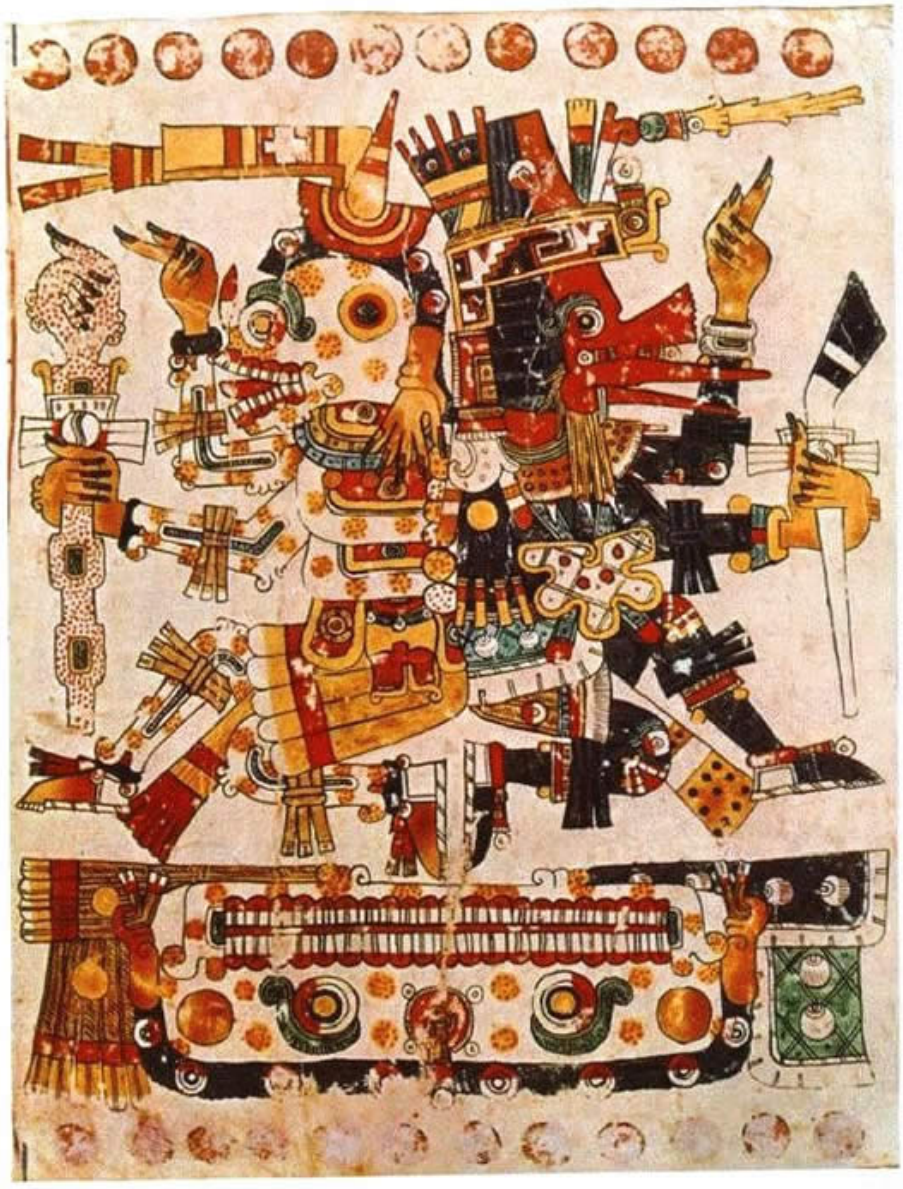


Figure 4:

Mictlanteccuhtli and Quetzalcoatl, Folio 56 of the Borgia Codex, from Puebla or Tlaxcala, Mexico, Mixteca-Puebla, ca. 1400-1500. Mineral and vegetable pigment on deerskin, 10 5/8” x 10 3/8”. Facsimile, Biblioteca Apostolica Vatican, Rome.



Figure 5:

Codex Telleriano-Remensis - Aztec god Huitzilopochtli sixteenth century.
Ink and paint on European paper, from the recto (front) of Folio 5
Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris).

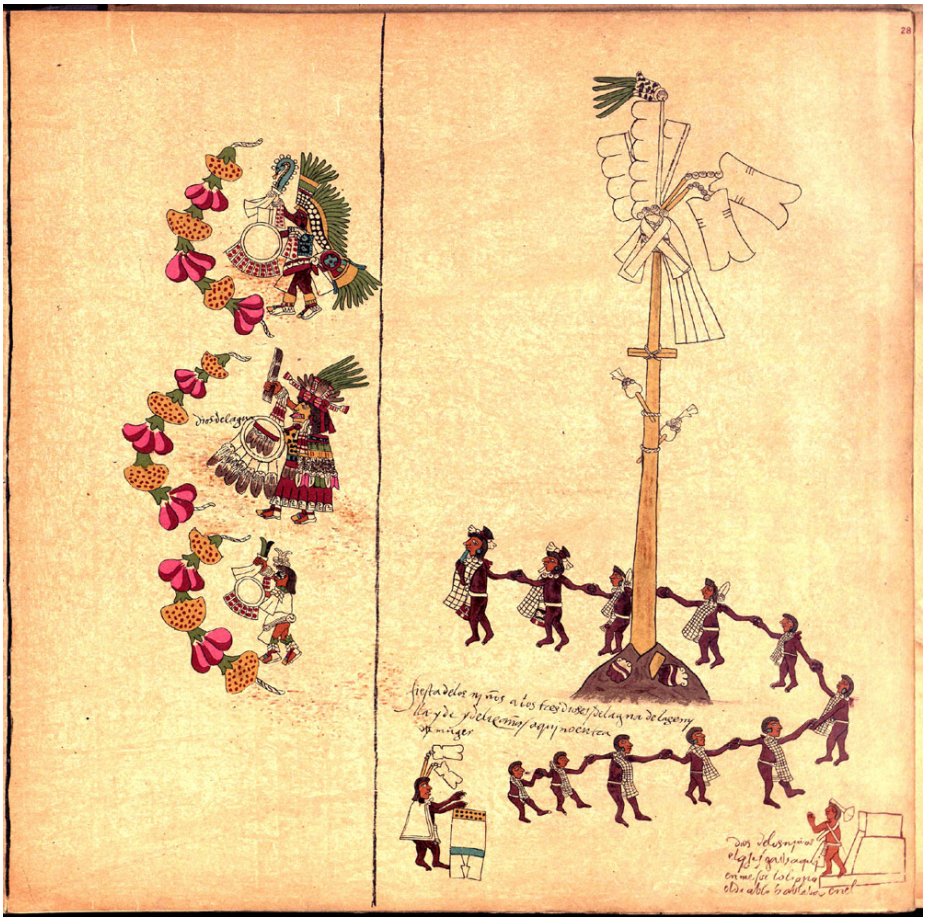


Figure 6:

Ferdinand Anders et al., eds., "Little Festival of the Dead," *Códice Borbónico*, 1st ed., Códices Mexicanos 3 (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario; Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt; Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991).
Large manuscript screen fold 46.5 ft long with squares measuring 38.5cm
Folio 28 ink on amalt parchment, sixteenth century.



Figure 7:

Courtesy Tom Robinson Photography.com, Title Unknown, 2005.
Molino, Mexico.
Example Raised Bier *Ofrenda.*



Figure 8:

Photo Courtesy Rockwell Museum, Title Unknown, 2014, mixed media.
Student Constructed House *Ofrenda*.
Example Tiered *Ofrenda*.



Figure 9:

Photo courtesy, The Pajaro Valley Gallery, *Altar Mao Mao Chong de Jia*, 2016, mixed media.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF *LA OFRENDA*

There are intrinsic characteristics of *La Ofrenda* and while people constructing an *Ofrenda* might choose to represent these characteristics differently, historical sources suggest certain symbolic meanings signify the objects making up *La Ofrenda.* These objects have ritual and spiritual meanings and are usually arranged in a distinctive order either on the ground in a rectangular pyramid formation reminiscent of a raised bier or catafalque used to support a coffin in Roman Catholic memorial services or displayed on a tiered platform similar to both ancient Mesoamerican stepped temples and early Christian altars that also were stepped and tabular in form, giving *La Ofrenda* its altar-like appearance.[38] These rectangular biers and raised tiers are symbolic representations of a ritualistic shrine where the top level referred to heaven, the middle level designated the earthly realm and the lower level symbolized the Aztec underworld; united the levels were believed to be an entryway for the souls of loved ones to enter into the earthly realm for a short period of time. Furthermore, the rectangular biers and tiered platforms are frame-like, providing directional focal points for the viewer and constraining attention within an established boundary with a focus of meditation. This organized viewing experience assigns significance to the elements placed within the assemblage, and reinforces *La Ofrenda's* symbolic importance.

La Ofrenda traditionally contained handcrafted goods which were either obtained regionally or were personally created. These items included various types of flowers

[38] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 43.

such as marigold flowers (*cempausuchitl*) mats (*petates*), food and drink offerings as well as mementos of the dead, and miniaturized skeletons and skull art figurines, (*calacas* and *calveras*). Also included are small images of Catholic saints (*retablos*), as well as images or likenesses of the deceased, miracle charms (*milagros*), candles *(ceras*), paper banners (*papel picados*), and incense (*copalli*) (figure 10). The dedicated generally began their construction on the morning of the start of the fiesta, *Dias Todos Santos* or *Dias de los Muertos*. *La Ofrenda*, construction varied depending on the community and individual traditions and could be assembled within households, at local cemeteries, or in or around churches.[39] The preparations were very important and performed many times in a ritualistic order. The first preparation for *La Ofrenda's* assembly was to sweep and dust the area free of debris followed by spreading a fabric cloth or scattering woven grasses over a raised area. On the cloth or grasses were placed *petates*, which were traditionally woven from palm leaves or local fibers (figure 11). Upon these mats were arranged the symbolic food, drink and mementos.[40] The mats were symbolic of the Aztec concept of the creation of life, the certainty of death, and renewal of life and one of the links to the indigenous ancestry of the ritual. Called a *petlatl* in the native Nahuatl language, the *petate* was such an essential aspect of daily Aztec life that the mat's significance was recorded in several sixteenth-century Mesoamerican codices. In many Nahua households people were born on *petates*, throughout their lives they slept on *petates*, and finally were ceremonially wrapped up in *petates* for burial or cremation. This tradition was

[39] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 43.
[40] Kristin G. Congdon, Catalina Delgado-Trunk and Marva Lopez, 314.

represented in the sixteenth-century pictorial Aztec account, the Codex Tudela.[41] In the codex, the *petlatl* is shown being used in a burial ritual (figure 12).[42]

In the creation of *La Ofrenda*, all the items offered to feed the souls of the dead were placed on the *petates* which were displayed at various levels and locations within the boundaries of *La Ofrenda*. The types of food and drink varied between regions and included earthenware bowls filled with hearty stew. These stews, displayed in an array of green, red, brown, and black hues, were made with different mole sauces. Some sources from the sixteenth-century suggest that the mole was a sauce created by missionary nuns to celebrate the arrival of the Archbishop to La Puebla de Los Angels, in Mexico.[43] Other origins for mole present testimony to its Aztec ancestry based on the word *molli* in Nahuatl meaning 'sauce.' Nonetheless, for many the mole sauce has become a culinary symbol of Mexico's mestizo heritage or mixed indigenous and European origins. For this reason the mole dishes were symbolic entrées and find their honorary spot on *La Ofrenda* (figure 13).

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[41] David Carrasco and Scott Sessions. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures.* (England: Oxford University Press, Online edition, 2006) Created in the sixteenth century in Mesoamerica, the Codex Tudela is a cultural encyclopedia named after Jose Tudela de la Orden. It is a pictorial Aztec codex with Spanish commentary and is a part of group of codices called the Magliabenchano Group. It records some of the ritualistic, religious and cosmological events of Aztec life.

[42] Mexicolore.co.uk accessed 03/16/2016.

[43] Mexonline.com. accessed 10/01/2016. The Mexonline.com authors of this article provide several descriptive folk theories for the creation of mole. They do emphasize that the exact date, locations, and creator or creators cannot factually be proven as of yet, however there are elements of truth to the tales that make them celebrated folk tales. Evidence does prove that in the sixteenth century the mole sauce was being made many different ways. Fray Bernardino de Sahagun describes mole in connection with various recipes he witnessed being prepared by the Aztecs in his work, General Histories of the Things in New Spain.

Another altar offering, the tamale represents again a link to *La Ofrenda* and was a staple of pre-Mesoamerican culture. Symbolically the tamale was said to represent the Latin American indigenous creation myth, through its use of the main staple crop, maize or corn. The creation myth, which was transcribed in the *Popol Vuh, The Sacred Book of the Maya*, describes the birth of mankind coming from the formation of tamale patties made into maize dough figures that represented the first indigenous people coming to life. Allen Christenson, translator of the Popol Vuh, also references the Aztec relation to maize through the explanation of the Nahuatl word *tonacoyotl*, meaning "our flesh," which he declares is a phrase that also refers to "maize."[44] Several other sources describe the religious and ritualistic importance of tamales to festivals. In Bernardino de Sahagun's *General History of the Things of New Spain* and his *Primeros memoriales* are detailed accounts about not only the many tamale types created by the Aztecs, but the role the tamales had as a ritualistic offering to the gods and the deceased. In his work Sahagun references several annual ceremonies including the reference to a certain type of tamale, the water tamale, which was used as an offering to the deceased.[45] Because of the use of the tamale as a symbolic offering in Aztec ceremonies you could say the tamale became a perfect food 'offering' to leave on the mats of *La Ofrenda* (figure 14).

Pastries, confections, and loaves of bread follow as food offerings for the deceased and found a symbolic and artistic place within the framed structure of *La*

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[44] Allen J. Christenson. Popol Vuh: *The sacred Book of the Maya: The Great Classic of Central American Spirituality, Translated from the Original Maya Text*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 2003), 193-195.
[45] Miguel Leon-Portilla. *Bernardino de Sahagun: first Anthropologist*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 148-49, 168-69.

Ofrenda. Bread of the Dead (*pan de muerto*) is a loaf of sweet bread molded into the form of a corpse or it can be adorned with images of skulls or bones (figure 15). For Latin Americans, *pan de muerto* has always held special syncretic value blending indigenous and European Spanish backgrounds by becoming a substance that was eaten by both cultures to commemorate the dead. The Aztec made loaves of ritualistic bread out of amaranth seed dough. Amaranth was the next largest staple to maize grown for consumption and substance by the Aztecs. Brandes points out Sahagun's firsthand accounts of the Aztecs using the amaranth dough for specific ceremonies to honor the dead:

> All the (wooden) serpent (representations) which were kept in the people's houses and the small wind (figures) they covered with a dough of (ground) amaranth seeds. And their bones were likewise fashion of amaranth seed… And (for) whoever had died who had not been buried, they also at this time made representations of mountains. They made the all of amaranth seed dough. Thereupon they dismembered the amaranth seed dough (figures)… little by little they went, taking some of it when they ate it…They… placed these images of the dead on… wreaths of grass, and then at dawn placed these images in their oratories, on beds of grass, rush or reed; having placed them there they offered them food, tamales and mazamorra (a dessert made of maize gruel and fruit). Or stew made of fowl or dog meat, and later burned incense to them in a pottery incense burner.[46]

Significant about this account is that it presents a rare vision of what an altar construction looked like and supports the other altar offerings, *mole*, *tamales*, and *copal*, which became an essential part for the commemoration of *La Ofrenda* in the colonial Mexican period. Furthermore Brandes provides information pertaining to Spanish rituals

[46] Stanley Brandes, "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning." 206-207.

performed at cemeteries also offering commemorative food and mementos to the dead. Of the province of Zamora, in Old Castile he remarks:

> From the 1500's on, All Souls Day celebrations required a catafalque, situated in the main chapel of any given church; the catafalque was encircled by candles and "twenty-five rolls of bread." From late medieval Majorca there are several testaments that conclusively document the custom of situating bread on tombs during All Souls' Day. In his will dated 12 December 1344, Jaime Corbera stated: "I wish and arrange… that my heirs should give each year, on the Day of the Deceased [i.e., All Souls' Day], on my sepulcher, five sueldos of bread, candles, and other obligatory objects, in such manner as on this day is custom to do.[47]

Brandes proceeds with more examples of bread and other mementos being used as ritualistic offerings at altars in remembrance of the dead, reminding the reader at the end of his statement that his list is only a 'modest sample' of the many examples from Spanish accounts and locations throughout southern Europe where bread became an important ritualistic feature in association with celebrating the dead on All Souls' Day, prior to and during the colonial era in New Spain.[48]

Along with *mole*, *tamales*, and *pan de muerto,* other food items were an integral feature of *La Ofrenda* and consisted of seasonal fruits and vegetables, such as bananas, oranges, pumpkins (*calabaza*) and squash (*chayote*), red rice (*arroz-rojo*), chocolate and confections, and sometimes liquor, all of which carried their own symbolism.[49] The selection and creation of the individual items became a personalized artistic choice for each creator of an *Ofrenda*.

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[47] Stanley Brandes, "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning," 208. Brandes provides the reference sources of (Lorenzo Pinar 1991: 95) for the province of Zamora and (Gabriel Llompart Moragues 1965: 96-97) for the testimony by Jaime Corbera.
[48] Stanley Brandes, "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning,"208-09.
[49] Inside-Mexico.com accessed 10/02/2014.

After many of the food and drink items were situated on the mats (*petates*) the next items arranged on *La Ofrenda* were as previously mentioned, small portable images of Catholic saints (*retablos*), honorary images of the deceased, skeletons (*calacas*) and skulls (*calveras*), candles (*ceras*), paper banners (*papel picados*), marigold flowers (*cempausuchitl*) and incense (*copalli*). The pictorial images displayed were a very personalized aspect to *La Ofrenda*. Frequently devout people would arrange religious images and icons on the altar, placing them in a centrally visible location to showcase their importance and status (figure 16). These honorary objects were represented in many forms, from rosaries' and icons, to Madonnas, to statuettes and framed pictures of the Catholic saints they felt guarded, guided, and governed their family in daily life. If the deceased had a special patron saint or Madonna they celebrated, it was undoubtedly included in the array of items on *La Ofrenda*. Generally this was done by framing the religious image and creating what was called a *retablo*. The origin of the word *retablo* came from the Latin (*retro-tabla*) and literally meant, 'behind the altar.'[50] It was surmised that their placement in the back of Catholic altars started in the early medieval period and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they were commonly referred to as *retablos*.[51] Flourishing during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *retablos* were considered sacred venerated images that guarded the family *Ofrenda*.[52] Besides the inclusion of *retablos* other images were present on *La Ofrenda*, including images of ancestors or the recently deceased. Dedicated to varying deceased individuals, the framed

[50] Mexicanretablos.com Colonial Arts. accessed 06/02/2016.
[51] Oxford Bibliographies.com accessed 06/02/2016.
[52] David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, 251.

pictures were usually placed in a central position on the altars construction enhancing their honorary status. The choice of sacred images and honorary mementos displayed on *La Ofrenda*, created a story and record of the family's or individual's life. For the participants, *La Ofrenda* served as an experience with personal associations for deceased loved ones defined by the focused context.[53]

Along with framed pictures, the placement of candles (*ceras*) in the arrangement of *La Ofrenda* was both symbolic and artistic in nature (figure 17). Historians continue to discuss the first use of Roman Catholic altar candles in services to the deceased, many agreeing on their common use starting in the eighth century, however for their use in the context of *La Ofrenda*, altar candles were first brought over from Europe in expeditions by conquistadors and Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit missionaries.[54] They were used not only as a light source but also represented the symbolic present of God. The candle represented Catholic religious observances portraying elements of Christ, the wax being the flesh of Christ, the wick symbolized the soul of Jesus, and the flame became the, 'Divinity which absorbs and dominates both.'[55] Together the symbolic elements of the candle helped early missionaries promote the doctrines of Christianity. Likewise, the candles utilization in *La Ofrenda* was to represent and honor God, but the candles also expressed the individual's or family's devotion to Christianity. Furthermore, certain candles placed on *La Ofrenda* represented the soul or souls of the deceased being

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[53] Marie Romero Cash and Siegfried Halus. *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico.* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1998), 52-53.
[54] Fr. John Bolen. *The Wax Candle in the Liturgy.* CatholicCulture.org. accessed 10/06/2016.
[55] Catholic Encyclopedia Online. Catholic.org accessed 06/05/2016.

commemorated and served to illuminate and emphasize the visual rendering of the elements framed in *La Ofrenda*.

An impressive ornamentation of *La Ofrenda* was the inclusion of beautiful and artistically crafted skeleton figurines (*calacas*) and skulls (*calaveras*) (figure 18). These symbolic objects were decorative features used to represent the souls of the deceased being honored. The incorporation of *calacas* and *calaveras* into the framework of *La Ofrenda* was a personalized unique artistic expression, and people would add as many or as few figurines and skulls as they wished. The figurines and skulls were fabricated from various materials such as bone, wood, paper, metal, fiber, flour, and sugar, and displayed in any size and format. One of the most popular items is the sugar skull (*calavera de azucar*). *Calavertias*, as they were more commonly called in Mexico, were ornamental skulls made out of crystallized cane sugar and brightly decorated with various designs and colorings. They became a sweet treat for the dead and for the living, symbolizing a joyous uniting of family members once again. After the commemoration of *La Ofrenda*, the sugar skulls then were a special sweet treat consumed by the family members.[56] For Carmichael and Sayer the skeleton and skull representations placed on an *Ofrenda* showed cultural elements found in both Mesoamerican ancestral rituals and European Spanish commemorations. As evidence, Carmichael and Sayer look at personal accounts by leading scholars studying the symbolism of skeleton and skull representations for the *Dias de Muertos* festival and *La Ofrenda*. One of these scholars, anthropologist Hugo

[56] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 50.

Nutini (1928-2013) supported the convergence between pre-Hispanic and European Spanish symbolism in regard to the skulls in his conjecture:

> At first glance, sugar skulls appear to be a survival from pre-Hispanic times, perhaps having to do with the human skulls that were kept as trophies by households or *tepochcallis* (men's houses) and offered to or displayed in honor of a particular god at certain festivals… But the human skull as a symbol of death has a long history in Christendom, and it could equally well be that the sugar skulls in the *Ofrenda* are of Catholic origin. (Nutini: 1998)[57]

Personal research agrees partially with Nutini but it is important to emphasize is that the use and symbolism of sugar skulls or skulls in general is also evidenced in earlier Mesoamerican cultures including Mayan and Olmec civilizations.

The final objects, paper banners (*papel picados*), incense (*copalli*), and marigold flowers (*cempasuchil*) were exhibited on *La Ofrenda* and again represented symbolic items used as pathways for the deceased ancestors to return to the places they lived. The *papel picado* were pieces of vibrantly colored tissue paper designed with elaborate cut out motifs (figure 19). These light and airy banners were strung up above and around *La Ofrenda* further emphasizing its framed representation. Symbolically the holes in the paper were thought to allow the spirits of the dead to float into the earthly realm.[58]

Another colorful arrangement that framed *La Ofrenda* was the inclusion of many different flowers native to Latin America. The most symbolic flower to this celebration was the marigold (*cempasuchil*) which literally means twenty flower in Nahuatl (figure 20). It has been associated with the Aztecs since pre-Columbian days and the petals

[57] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 47-48.
[58] Kristin Congdon, 314.

symbolize the cosmic levels of the Aztec universe of earth, death, and the underworld. When the perfume of marigolds are combined with the fragrance of burning incense, the pungent smell profoundly recognizable and for this reason it is said to ritually help lead the dead back to their altars and households. To help the souls on their journey back to the earthly realm, marigold petals are often laid out in a pathway from the altar outward, so that the spirits of the dead can follow the perfumed trail home. The placement of the marigolds in and around the framework of *La Ofrenda's* construction, creates a finishing context to the ritual and unites all the offerings of the altar.



Figure 10:

Photo courtesy Fran Meneley, Title Unknown, 2007.
From: Tales from Oaxaca – *Dia de los Muertos* – Cemeteries, Oaxaca, Mexico.
Traditional *Ofrenda* representation



Figure 11:

Photo courtesy Fran Meneley, Title Unknown, 2008.
From: Tales from Oaxaca – *Dia de los Muertos* – Cemeteries, Oaxaca, Mexico.
Ofrenda with emphasis on *petates* (mats)



Figure 12:

Burial Image with *petate* Folio 58. Codex Tudela, mineral and vegetable dye on parchment sixteenth century.
- Jose Tudela de la Orden –
Testimonio Compañía Editorial facsimile edition, Madrid, 2000.
Showing use of *petates* (mats)



Figure 13:
Photo courtesy of reydocbici.com, 2010.
Ofrenda with *platos* de *mole*



Figure: 14

Photo courtesy of Mislav Popovic, Title Unknown, 2009, mixed media.
Ofrenda with emphasis on *tamales*



Figure 15:

Photo courtesy of Stevie Mack and Kitty Williams, *Nelson Perez Family Ofrenda*, 2015, mixed media, Teotitlan de Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico.
Example *Ofrenda* with *pan de muerto*



Figure 16:

Laura Zuckerman, *Ofrenda to My Mother Blanche Zuckerman*, 2007, mixed media 30 ft long installation. From the "Grave Matter: Art of Mourning and Meaning." Exhibition, Loveland Art Museum, Colorado
Example of religious imagery



Figure 17:

Photo courtesy of Tristan Savatier Photography, Untitled, San Francisco, 2014.
Ofrenda with emphasis on candles



Figure 18:

Photo courtesy of Judith Haden, Title Unknown, 2007, mixed media.
Oaxaca Mexico
Ofrenda with emphasis on sugar skulls



Figure 19:

Eneas de Troya, *Altar Tradicional de Día de Muertos* en Milpa Alta, México DF., 2009, mixed media. *Ofrenda* with emphasis on *papel picados* (paper banners)



Figure 20:

Photo courtesy of festivaldevidamuerte.com, Title Unknown, 2014.
Ofrenda with emphasis on *cempasúchitl* (marigolds)

CHAPTER THREE:

TRADITIONAL VERSUS CONTEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS

With the introduction of *La Ofrenda* exhibits in museums and cultural centers, some of the traditional elements of *La Ofrenda* remain strongly evident, but many of the traditions of the past have been blended and modified over the years with new contemporary objects, materials and context being incorporated into the modern *Ofrenda*. Given the fascination of "museum culture" with original artifacts, it might be expected that the bulk of *Ofrendas* displayed in museums were somehow the remnants of Latino-American families own private devotional altars' which consisted of devotional images of saints and madonnas, blessed objects such as rosaries, holy water and salt, to candles, small mementos and replica reliquaries, however, this rarely the case. This section examines five *Ofrenda* presentations displayed museums across the United States of America. The first two installations, Sandra Cisneros' piece: *A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother* (2015) displayed at The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, and curator Joanna Hahn's exhibit piece: *La Ofrenda Exhibit #1* (2014) at the Indiana State University Museum demonstrate the use of authentic traditional *Ofrenda* elements in a piece created specifically for a museum setting. The next two works, Carmen Lomas Garza's: *Ofrenda Para Antonio Lomas* (1995) and Joseph Mariscal's: *Altar Para Daddy*, both featured at the Oakland Museum of California, show the evolution of *Ofrenda* construction from being very traditional to use of more conceptual representation. Last, Amelia Mesa-Bains': *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* (1984) displayed in The Smithsonian Museum of American Art, further questions the movement

of traditional *Ofrenda* to highly conceptual pieces and how they are represented and received in institutions.

Sandra Cisneros*: A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother,* (2015)

Whereas many institutions tend to offer more contemporary and unconventional *Ofrendas*, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History featured a wonderful example of a traditional *Ofrenda* in the work of Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros' work, *A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother* (2015) included many of the symbolic elements found in historic *Ofrenda* works (figure 21). Her work featured the traditional set up of a tiered altar decorated with candles and marigolds made of paper framing the other traditional elements. She also included artfully arranged food offering centerpieces made from wax to survive the length of the installation, *retablos* portraying saints and photographs of past relatives prominently featured in honorary focal points. Through closer examination of Cisneros' piece it is clear that it represents many of the symbolic memento offerings to the deceased that are found as a part of a traditional *Ofrenda*. Cisneros further represents the authentic character of an *Ofrenda* through her use of many personal objects belonging to her mother during her life. Cisneros artistically placed each object in her installation to honor her mothers' life. At the same time she also created an educational piece for the public to promote the understanding of traditional *Ofrenda* practices.

Like many personal private *Ofrendas*, Cisneros incorporated religious and personal items in her work. On the right side of the *Ofrenda* is an image of the Virgin de

Guadeloupe. A picture of a saint or a *retablo* is traditionally part of an *Ofrenda* as a way to reflect religious beliefs, but Cisneros personalizes the picture of the Virgin de Guadeloupe which is featured on a souvenir scarf given to her mother by the artist's grandmother. The scarf served to celebrate three generations of her family and as an acknowledgment of her ancestry and religious beliefs. Cisneros continued to weave symbolic associations into her piece through the use of mementos placed on and around the *Ofrenda* to represent her mother. On a shelf on the left side of the altar Cisneros positioned a small jewelry box that had been on her mother's dresser her whole life and contained prized items gathered over her mother's lifetime.[59] Cisneros' use of small personal items, both her own and those which belonged to her mother, represented traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics which symbolized items the deceased enjoyed in life. Cisneros' use of her mother's jewelry box full of treasured objects follows traditional *Ofrenda* standards perfectly, however, there were aspects to Cisneros' installation that did not follow conventional *Ofrenda* practices used by someone creating a personal private altar. A major variation in Cisneros' work was that the installation remained on exhibit for over a year instead of being ritualistically constructed and then dismantled in three days following traditional customs of creating an *Ofrenda*. Further, the altar was built in a museum, promoting public interaction, rather than an intimate *Ofrenda* created by family and for a small group. These deviations by Cisneros may not be a part of a traditional *Ofrenda*, however artists and many museum curators understand the need to

[59] Fabiola Enriquez-Flores. *Exploring Dia de los Muertos with Sandra Cisneros.* (Smithsonian National Museum of American History- Kenneth E. Behring Center. November 11, 2014) accessed 12/18/2015.

achieve a balance of traditional and contemporary. This allows more people over a longer period of time to appreciate and experience an *Ofrenda*. Under the restraints of having her piece up for a year, Cisneros did a fantastic job of achieving a representation of a traditional altar mainly because she understood that including many family objects was the way to present an *Ofrenda*, even if it was placed into a public setting.

Joanna Hahn: *Ofrenda Exhibit #1*, (2014)

Many museums across the United States with smaller but rapidly growing Latino-American populations are developing *Ofrenda* exhibitions to reflect their cultural changes of the community. The Indiana State Museum has incorporated a *Dias de Muertos* festival program into their annual agenda since 1999 and, for the last four years, has included an annual altar event. Museum Curator and Manager of School Programs Joanna E. Hahn explained to me that the *Dias de Muertos* festival started out as one of several city-wide events intended to reflect the multicultural background of Indiana, including the Latino-American populations. Unfortunately, by 2002 many local organizations withdrew support for the various festivals, due in part to a lack of clear mission directive on the part of the museum.[60] In the Latino community support waned mostly due to the fact that much of the participation came from migrant workers who lived a transitory existence who either left the area or were hesitant to participate potentially exposing themselves as illegal. The museum did not want the event to

[60] Indiana State University. indianamuseum.org Joanna Hahn Curator and Manager of School Programs (ISU). accessed 02/25/2015.

disappear entirely, so in 2012 under the new direction of Hahn, a decision was made to continue the event by add to the event's agenda and encouraging more public participation. A new addition to the annual *Dias de Muertos* celebration at the museum was an annual *La Ofrenda* exhibition. Hahn related that the Indiana Museum's *La Ofrenda* exhibition was developing and each year new ideas and presentations are to be added to the schedule of events. The museums *Ofrenda* exhibit had nineteen *Ofrendas* on display, all of which varied in appearance but most expressed traditional historical stylistic values. Hahn stated the program would reflect a message of "Altars with Artistic Freedom."[61] Hahn chose one piece in particular to represent traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics. The piece, *Ofrenda #1* was placed in the main entryway of the exhibit (figure 22). The *Ofrenda* was created using many traditional techniques. First, a large brightly decorated tablecloth was placed on the ground and then a symbolic three tiered altar was constructed in the center. The tablecloth symbolized the traditional mat (*petate*) and the tiered altar in the center held the ceremonial objects including sugar skulls, candles, food and drink offerings, photographs, *retablos* and marigolds. According to Hahn, the installation was constructed by a family, which agreed to allow the *Ofrenda* to be publicly displayed. While the welcoming *Ofrenda* displayed in the museum's exhibit accurately incorporated many traditional *Ofrenda* elements, others were not due to the necessities of a display in an exhibition. In addition to a much longer than traditional three day display period, an aspect of the *Ofrenda's* sacred and private symbolic nature

[61] Indiana State University. indianamuseum.org Joanna Hahn Curator and Manager of School Programs (ISU). Online interview with Joanna Hahn accessed 02/15/2015.

was forfeited to allow for the work to be viewed in a public museum setting. A growing concern for many traditional purists and museum and cultural center curators is the question of if *Ofrendas* can ever really be considered traditional objects when placed in the context of public installations. Ultimately, an *Ofrenda* displayed in a museum becomes an example of tradition and promotes educational awareness of the culture. However it can not be considered a strictly traditional *Ofrenda* because part of the private, spiritual and ephemeral aspects are lost in order to become objects of mass appreciation. Nonetheless for Hahn and the museum there was a positive impact produced by the exhibit with an increase in attendance, topping 15,000 visitors in 2016. Hahn felt this renewed interest indicated the exhibit was considered important to the growth of the community. In the future Hahn's desire is to continue to attract participation from multiple sources around the community including local artists, schools, and organizations. One way the museum began to accomplish this goal was building a relationship with the Mexican Consul office in Indiana to help promote the cultural event. Each year Hahn hopes to retain a recognized, featured *Ofrenda* artist to help promote the importance of *La Ofrenda* as a celebrated form of art and to feature its aesthetic qualities.[62] Hahn considers the *Ofrenda* exhibition to be a work in progress, hopes to have a permanent exhibit at the museum and is committed to promoting a continued educational *Ofrenda* exhibit. Hahn concluded, "I may or may not be able to accomplish this depending on interest, but it is something I will strive for."[63] Hahn's work to

[62] Indiana State University. Online interview with Joanna Hahn 09/29/2015.
[63] Indiana State University. Online interview with Joanna Hahn 09/29/2015.

introduce and educate a larger public about the history and practice of constructing an *Ofrenda* somewhat mitigates some of the traditional elements lost. Nevertheless, this *Ofrenda* is still too ambiguous to be considered truly traditional because normally the creators of the *Ofrenda* would have been acknowledged instead of the piece being represented anonymously.

Oakland Museum of California

The Oakland Museum of California shares a similar approach to that of the Smithsonian Museum with regard to the educational and display parameters for an *Ofrenda* and how it is represented within the context of an exhibition. The Oakland Museum provides to the local public a cooperative educational and artistic experience bringing together artists and the community. Further, museum staff have created an overview of *La Ofrenda's* pre-Hispanic origins to illustrate changes that have developed over the centuries to the present.[64] An important goal for the museum for their twentieth anniversary of its *Dias de Muertos* and *La Ofrenda* exhibition was to bring various Bay Area communities together with the intent of healing cross-cultural conflicts and remembrance of a shared local history. Prior to 1999 the Oakland Museum's representation of Latino-American art was limited and many in the Bay area community began to demand changes to the structure and organization of the museum.

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[64]Oakland Museum of California. museumca.org Songs and Sorrows *Dia de los Muertos* 20th Anniversary. accessed 02/25/2015.

Starting in 2014 with community support and the involvement of curators Evelyn Orantes and Bea Carrillo-Hocker, the Oakland Museum brought new focus to the annual *La Ofrenda* exhibition with a renewed mission to offer to the public a modern understanding and appreciation of the rich cultural heritage displayed in an *Ofrenda*. Orantes and Carrillo-Hocker wanted to stress to the public how, "pre-Hispanic funerary artifacts, Mexican folk art, contemporary art and installations, convert the iconic imagery and the aesthetic and spiritual values of the festival into a new style more representative of the evolving nature of the Latino-American population throughout their region."[65] The museum accomplished their goal by inviting local artists and community members to display works of art exploring *La Ofrenda's* significance to the *Dia de los Muertos* festival.[66] Both traditional and contemporary *Ofrendas* were presented as well as artistic works representing the ritualistic and spiritual nature of the celebration. With a large and diverse selection of works the Oakland Museum showed how the altar exhibition and spiritual tradition has grown over time from its earliest pre-Columbian origins to the culture of present day Californians.

Carmen Lomas Garza: *Ofrenda Para Antonio Lomas,* (1995)

Included in the exhibit was artist Carmen Lomas Garza's piece, *Ofrenda Para Antonio Lomas*, 1995 (figure 23). The work combined both traditional and spiritualistic elements in a contemporary flair with the inclusion of her cut metal work along with

[65] Oakland Museum of California. accessed 02/25/2015.
[66] Oakland Museum of California. accessed 02/25/2015.

personal objects from her home. The artist fashioned decorative steel cut panels and placed them in the center of the piece which represented the honorary image for her *Ofrenda*. The steel cut panels symbolized several traditional characteristics of an *Ofrenda* and were artistically cut to reveal a image of her deceased grandfather Antonio Lomas at work in one of his favorite places, his backyard garden.[67] The panels became the honorary image that would traditionally be displayed on an altar and the inclusion of her grandfather's image in his garden took the place of a personal memento of something he loved in his life. Further, the steel cut panels blended in with the paper banners that surrounded the *Ofrenda*. This was significant because the decorative airy holes cut into the paper banners and similar areas of open space in the black steel cut panels symbolized the pathways followed by spirits of loved ones visiting for a short period of time. Along with the steel cut panels and paper banners Garza included traditional elements of sugar skulls and marigolds, food and drink as well as more mementos that represented her grandfather's life.[68] To the left of the altar Garza placed a simple turquoise chair from her grandfather's home intentionally left empty as a symbolic invitation for her grandfather to come and partake of all the offerings she gathered for his *Ofrenda*. On the right she arranged her grandfather's rake, hoe and garden hat; items that represented who her grandfather was in his life. Viewed closely, Garza's installation was highly personalized and expressed many traditional symbolic aspects found in an *Ofrenda*. However from a distance, the work completely transformed from an *Ofrenda*, and

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[67] Oakland Museum of California. accessed 02/25/2015.
[68] Joyce Jones. "All in The Familia." Washingtonpost.com December 8th, 1995. accessed 02/26/2015.

became a conceptual art piece that represented her grandfather's kitchen with the steel cut panels functioning as a window through which her grandfather was shown working in his garden. Fundamentally, Garza's installation is not authentic, instead it becomes a new method of contemporary *Ofrenda* representation. Garza's contemporary method of combining traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics with modern art concepts is being embraced and explored by other Latino-American artists and reflects a continued blending and growth of cultural ideals. Laura E. Perez acknowledges this change in Latino-American art stating;

> Chicana/o and other U.S. Latina/o intellectuals, in the fields of religion and visual arts, along with U.S. Latina/o artists, are radically redefining our understanding of religious and cultural syncretism or American Pluralism beyond what is still Eurocentric idea that vestiges of the pre-colonial survive as largely incoherent fragments within the engulfing colonial culture…In a culture where we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention 'art' and 'spirit' in the same sentence, altar and related art forms bring into view the important questions of how our religious beliefs shape and impact our social lives, and the role that art plays in that process.[69]

Perez's comment is correct in that it is very difficult for many people to understand and further, accept the growing hybridity in Latino-American art that is an amalgamation of traditional values and contemporary growth. Garza's *Ofrenda para Antonio* typifies a modern syncretism.

[69] Laura E. Perez, 94-96.

Joseph Mariscal*: Altar para Daddy*, (1985)

During the same anniversary celebration The Oakland Museum of California featured another piece that even further pushes the boundaries of a traditional *Ofrenda*. Artist Joseph Mariscal incorporated some traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics while creating sculptures modeled upon *Ofrendas*. His work, *Altar para Daddy* (1985), was made of ceramic and painted with bright colors and organized to represent tiered *Ofrenda* levels that displayed honorific photographic images mixed with small ceramic skulls (*calaveras)* (figure 24).[70] In creating a ceramic sculpture that represents the entire *Ofrenda*, Mariscal challenged past intrinsic values normally part of the ephemeral nature of *La Ofrenda* and instead focused on the permanency of long standing cultural meanings often still celebrated in the daily life of Latino-Americans.[71] Mariscal acknowledges his work deviates from a traditional *Ofrenda*, however his deviation is artistic intention and he chooses instead to represent La *Ofrenda* in a medium that reflects the strength and permanence of his culture. The Oakland Museum of California's members and the supporting community embraced both syncretic artworks and the exhibition was regarded both as art showing contemporary elements and one that expressed traditional aesthetic values of the Latino-American community. Further the historical and social context associated with many of the works attracted the public's support of the exhibit's mission statement to better reflect the Latino-American heritage.

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[70] Oakland Museum of California. accessed 02/25/2015.
[71] Joseph Mariscal. joemariscal.com accessed 02/25//2015.

Amelia Mesa-Bains: *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio,* (1984)

Another installation exhibited by the Smithsonian was at its American Art Museum branch in (2013) featuring an exhibit titled, Our America: Latino Presence in American Art. One piece on display was artist Amelia Mesa-Bains' installation, An *Ofrenda* for Dolores del Rio, 1984 (figure 25). Mesa-Bains has been credited as being one of the earliest artists to take the ephemeral nature of *La Ofrenda* with its focus on a temporary spiritual and ritualistic meaning and place it into a different context. However Mesa-Bains still wanted her *Ofrenda* installation to represent many of the values associated with Latino-American identity as well as to point out many intrinsic characteristics evident in traditional folk art.[72] Author and art critic Linda Weintraub recognized Amelia Mesa-Bains as one of the first artists in a major institution to utilize traditional *Ofrenda* art in a contemporary manner. One of Mesa-Bains' artistic methods was constructing contemporary *Ofrendas* that represented aspects of her mixed Latino heritage. Her art, which was considered installation art, was also a statement piece addressing the importance of tradition and ritual for the Latino-American identity. Weintraub emphasized that Mesa-Bains' creative and artistic work deliberately combined traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics with contemporary materials to create a modern social message piece. She quoted Mesa-Bains as saying:

> In my work, I follow traditional Mexican altar-making practices: I do my own paper cuts, screen my own altar cloths, and make my own paper flowers as well as creating my own '*nichos*' and '*retablo*' boxes. In addition, I am preparing to do my own bread and candy-making…On the

[72] Laura E. Perez, 97.

> personal level, my altars serve as ceremonial centers, enabling me to reach a spiritual sensibility though aesthetic form. They are not directly religious, but have served to pay homage to ancestors as well as other historical figures I find important.[73]

Mesa-Bains' words "In my work" emphasized that she was fully conscious of her role in creating an original work of art inspired by the traditional practice of *Ofrenda* construction. In her works Mesa-Bains expanded *La Ofrenda* and gave it new meaning and new aesthetic qualities appropriate to the contemporary art scene. Yet this generated problems for museum installations of *La Ofrenda*. For example, some viewers approached the installations with the expectation that they were going to be the same traditional altars or were going to carry the same significance as those in their local communities or homes. Through her work Mesa-Bains strove to change this limited point of view. Her first installation for the Smithsonian developed these ideas in an *Ofrenda* dedicated to the celebrated Mexican actress Dolores del Rio. At first glance Mesa-Bains work seemed far from a representation of any traditional *Ofrenda*, however through a closer look, many of the elements that make up the characteristics of a traditional *Ofrenda* were symbolically present. The center of the work was constructed in a tiered honorific format with images of saints, Madonnas and loved ones placed on various levels. The curtains, which were draped on either side of the altar, framed the piece and acted as the tablecloths or mats that are traditionally a part of the *Ofrenda.* On the exposed levels were candles and mementos honoring the image of Dolores del Rio. This represented the traditional format of placing items associated with the deceased on the

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[73] Linda Weintraub. *Art on the Edge and Over. Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970's -1990's.* (Litchfield: Art Sights, Inc., 1996), 93-95.

Ofrenda. At the bottom of the work a trail of dried flower petals flowed outward symbolizing the traditional marigold paths constructed to help the deceased find their honorary *Ofrenda.* The work also featured an honorary image of Dolores del Rio. Dedicating an *Ofrenda* to an individual does not run counter to traditional practices, Latino-American art critics, such as Laura Perez and Mesa-Bains herself, realized there still existed preconceived ideas that prevented some people from regarding Mesa-Bains work an *Ofrenda*. One primary concern was the *Ofrenda's* placement in a museum as an art installation and its lack of apparent traditional religious and spiritual focus. In Perez's opinion this new contemporary emphasis of *La Ofrenda* caused it to become a secularized exhibit with dual meaning; people could either choose to explore the work for its social message and religious meaning or just view as another form of contemporary Latin American art.[74] Both Perez and Mesa-Bains, as well as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, hoped the viewer would take the time to appreciate the traditional cultural aspects of the *Ofrenda* as well as acknowledge its existence as contemporary American art.[75] By its placement as an exhibit at the Smithsonian a dialog on Latino-American Art may be started but *La Ofrenda's* traditional nature is greatly altered in form from its original intent and purpose. Ultimately, Mesa-Bains realized her work was taken in from many different individual perspectives, however she hoped the viewer understood the ritualistic roots upon which her work was based. Mesa-Bains states, "I wanted the viewer

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[74] Smithsonian American Museum of Art. americanart.si.edu. Our America: Latino Presence in American Art. An Ofrenda For Dolores del Rio. Amelia Mesa Bains, 1984. revised 1991. mixed media installation. accessed 02/25/2015.

[75] Smithsonian American Museum of Art. american.si.edu research notes, 2012. accessed 02/25/ 2015.

to be able to pass into another time, to feel the residue of rituals and beliefs from the past and through that encounter, gain an experience from the hearts."[76] Later in 2015 Mesa-Bains's installation art piece was altered when the work was taken down and put in storage and a photograph of the piece was put in its place to represent the original installation. This raises the question: Is the photograph of the installation piece by Mesa-Bains still considered an *Ofrenda* and does it still represent any traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics? From the viewpoint of The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Mesa-Bains' *Ofrenda* installation was altered so that the original intent of the installation was replaced with an artistic photograph that memorializes the figure of Dolores del Rio even exalting her to iconic figure status.[77] Some academics and art critics actually felt that even after the installation was replaced with a photograph, the traditional meaning could still be inferred in the same way that the original Colonial Mexican and pre-Columbian *Ofrenda* honored an idolized figure such as a god or a saint.[78] From Mesa-Bains' standpoint honoring a famous Mexican actress achieves a similar, quasi-religious, traditional and social meaning associated with new conceptual ideas integrated in contemporary *Ofrenda* functionality. It is a large stretch from honoring an actress to venerating a god or saint, although the photograph of the dedication to Dolores del Rio could definitely work as an honorific altarpiece if it was featured on a new *Ofrenda*. An *Ofrenda* of an *Ofrenda*.

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[76] Linda Weintraub, 95.
[77] Smithsonian American Museum of Art, accessed 02/25/2015.
[78] Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, 40-43.



Figure 21:

Sandra Cisneros, *A Room of Her Own: An Altar for My Mother*, 2015
Smithsonian National Museum of American History
Photo courtesy Kenneth E. Behring Center.
Installation From October 31, 2014 to Jan 31, 2015.
Mixed media, paper, wood, wax, pottery, ceramic, plastic, metal.



Figure 22:

Photo courtesy of Joanna Hahn Curator, Manager of School Programs
La Ofrenda Exhibit #1, 2014 mixed media.
Indiana State University Museum and Historic Sites Corporation (ISU)



Figure 23:

Carmen Lomas Garza, *Ofrenda para Antonio Lomas*, 1995,
Laser Cut 20 gauge steel with mixed media.
Courtesy of Carmen Lomas Garza and Oakland Museum of California



Figure 24:

Joseph Mariscal, *Altar para Daddy*, 1985,
Glazed ceramic with mixed media sculptural piece. courtesy of the artist.
Oakland Museum of California (OMCA)



Figure 25:

Amelia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984.
mirror on plywood, cloth, found and handmade mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter.
Smithsonian American Art Museum
Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program
© 1991

CHAPTER FOUR: PRIVATE, SACRED VERSUS PUBLIC, SECULAR REPRESENTATION OF *LA OFRENDA*

La Ofrenda represents a synthesis of indigenous Mesoamerican and Spanish European Catholic practices. The religious and spiritual context of *La Ofrenda* is extremely diverse and complex due in part because it is perceived and observed differently by individuals, families and communities. Individuals celebrating the traditional sacred elements that are a part of *La Ofrenda* often identify with specific spiritual characteristics associated with the commemorative event. In her article "Key Characteristics of Mexican Spirituality," Dinorah Mendez presents five key characteristics found in Mexican religious context: "a sense of ritual, sense of mysticism, sense of sacrifice, sense of festivity and sense of community." [79] Proficient in historical theological research, Mendez states that these are not the only religious characteristics that exist, she feels these five elements support the intermingled syncretic nature of Mestizo religiosity and lead to a broad range of what is sacred to an individual, family or group. How each individual experiences and outwardly celebrates the spiritual characteristics associated with an *Ofrenda* becomes a very personalized and private affair. However, when the commemorative event is celebrated in public in the context of a museum or cultural center, the private and sacred components to the *Ofrenda* can be at risk of being overlooked. Instead they may be blended or replaced by new conceptual characteristics that emphasize a more secularized public *Ofrenda* not primarily centering

[79] Dinorah B. Mendez. "Key Characteristics of Mexican Spirituality." *Transformation* Volume 28 Issue 3 (2011) 207.

on family rituals or religious adherences. These new conceptual, less religious *Ofrendas* are often used to generate public discussion on social, political and economic issues as well as current events. This chapter explores four *Ofrenda* presentations displayed in three museums across the nation. The first work of art, *Ofrenda de Familia Hernandez* curated and organized by the Tonantzin Historical Society, will demonstrate how the sacred traditional quality of *La Ofrenda* is still being fostered by museums and cultural centers. The following work, by Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador titled, *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler/Santo en El Mundo de los Muertos: Ofrenda al Enmascarado de Plata,* will present a conceptual perspective to *La Ofrenda* which introduces new methods of creating and interpreting the sacredness still evident in contemporary altars. Finally the last two installations Alana Rodriguez's *Los Valientes* (2013), and Maria Elena Rodriguez's piece, *Unknown Border Crossings*, (2013) will continue to explore the conceptual perspective and show how some individuals have begun to use the growing popularity of *Ofrenda* exhibitions to generate public awareness on some of the sociopolitical causes of death.

Tonantzin Historical Society: *Ofrenda de Familia Hernandez,* (2014)

With a desire to, "preserve and educate on Chicanx/Xicanx (Chicano and Nahua) culture and indigenous heritage," the Tonantzin Historical Society has a mission to bring to the public an informative historical program promoting the traditional and sacred

values of the *Dias de Muertos* celebration and the commemoration of *La Ofrenda*.[80] The Tonantzin Society acknowledges that since its creation there have been undoubtedly changes and alterations to the sacredness of *La Ofrenda* and the ritual activities in the festival. For this reason the society felt the historical and spiritual importance of *La Ofrenda* and its festival should not be lost and in 2012 hosted a juried *Ofrenda* exhibit.[81] While other cultural centers and institutions may have a similar mission statement, the Tonantzin Society has a uniqueness that comes from their relatively new creation of the festival in Topeka. With the active encouragement of the multicultural population [Latinos, Caucasians, African Americans, etc.] of Topeka as a whole, support for the mission of the Tonantzin Historical Society to promote the heritage of Latino-Americans in their community was widespread. This support was manifested in several new Latino heritage preservation programs managed by Latino and non-Latino residents of Topeka. In 2014 the city of Topeka announced its first *Dias de Muertos* celebration with a juried *Ofrenda* exhibit collaboratively sponsored by the Tonantzin Historical Society, North Topeka Arts District (NOTO) and local volunteers.[82] The *Ofrenda* exhibit, which ran from October 27 to November 25, showcased several *Ofrendas* constructed by local families who were strongly encouraged by the Society to represent sacred and traditional characteristics in their *Ofrendas*. One installation created by the Hernandez family, offered viewers a look at how customary, spiritual tokens used to commemorate deceased

[80] Topeka Dia de los Muertos, http://www.topekaddlm.com/history.html accessed 10/23/2015.
[81] Topeka Dia de los Muertos, accessed 10/23/2015.
[82] NOTO Arts District Dia de Los Muertos Topeka Day of the Dead. http://notoartsdistrict.com/2012 accessed 10/23/2015.

loved ones are traditionally arranged on a conventional *Ofrenda* (figure 26). Many of these ritual elements, such as pictures of saints, Madonnas and loved ones to marigolds, candles, and mementos, were clearly presented on a traditional tiered altar. The *Ofrenda* was draped with vibrantly colored Mexican blankets and tablecloths symbolizing the sacred indigenous elements of the mat (*petate*). A tiered arrangement was placed directly in the center and symbolized Catholic and indigenous spiritual beliefs of heaven, the earthly realm and the underworld. The levels were decorated sparingly with images of saints, Madonnas and loved ones and were carefully arranged on different levels to provide clear commemorative focus. The *Ofrenda* was further decorated with candles, flowers, and a plate of food. These material objects represented items placed at the altar for the dead to enjoy during the commemoration. The objects used in the construction of the Hernandez's *Ofrenda* were very personal objects and represented elements considered sacred and traditional to the family. For this reason, although the *Ofrenda* was on display at a public location and not in a more private family setting, the religious and ritualistic aspects of the altar were clearly expressed and the sacredness of the *Ofrenda* was preserved. I believe the Tonantzin Historical Society accomplished their goal of preserving and promoting the long-established sacred and spiritual qualities of *La Ofrenda*. However, the question remains as whether the Hernandez Family *Ofrenda* and altars like it truly represent the historic, sacred aspects after they have made their transition into a public institution. It is quiet possible, a sacred element of *La Ofrenda* always exists no matter the location or its construction because it is an offering, a ritual

act, by the creator for the viewer. In Mendez' view a public festival or celebration can be regarded as a ritualistic and sacred event. Mendez asserts:

> Some sociologists consider the fiesta to be a ritual act. With this concept in mind, a community would practice its fiestas in order to protect itself from the negative consequences of its gods or of other human groups. Sometimes it has magical connotations. One need not be religious in order to live the fiesta or to celebrate. One might live that fiesta, at least in its profane form, seeking to better life or to find solace that gives peace to the human spirit. The human spirit not only requires physical rest, but also a variety of intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic activities. This is what the fiesta gives and is about.[83]

In discussing the fiesta (including the *Ofrenda* as part of the fiesta) Mendez argues that it is possible for sacred and secular aspects to coexist. She continues by explaining that fiestas like *Dias de Muertos* allow for a whole community to come together no matter the focus or meaning in a communal participation.[84] As a result, *Dias de Muertos* and *La Ofrenda* can certainly be both a public, non-religious gathering as well as a personal, spiritual celebration.

Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador: *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler,* (2015)

One of the oldest and largest museums dedicated to promoting the richness of Mexican culture is the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, Illinois. Since 1986 the museum has had an *Ofrenda* exhibit with an emphasis on promoting the wide range of artistic talent of the Latino-American population both in the Chicago area and across the nation. In 2015 the National Museum of Mexican Art celebrated its twenty-ninth

[83] Dinorah B. Mendez, 208.
[84] Dinorah B. Mendez, 208.

Ofrenda exhibition, featuring thirteen installations created to honor specific deceased Latino/a artists, celebrities or distinguished members of the community.[85] In the museum's announcement regarding the theme for the exhibit, museum curator Cesareo Moreno explained that his goal was to present to the public "a different understanding of death from the Mexican perspective."[86] Moreno felt the theme was relevant because he realized many people in the United States viewed the concept of death as a sad end to life, often not discussed and certainly not celebrated. Moreno wanted to generate discussion with the public about the potential of an alternative view of death as a joyous remembrance and celebration of life. Moreno also realized that for Latino-Americans, the *Dias de Muertos* celebration and creation of an *Ofrenda* comprised performing deeply-rooted ritual practices but how the rituals were visually presented varied greatly in artistic interpretation.[87] Although many of the installations contained traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics expressing spiritual homage to the deceased, other altars in the exhibit challenged the conventional concept of an *Ofrenda*.

When artists Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador were invited to participate in the *Ofrenda* exhibition they expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to showcase the life of a Mexican wrestling celebrity to a greater public audience that were probably unfamiliar with his career. Their piece, *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler/Santo en El Mundo de Los Muertos :Ofrenda al*

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[85] Gabrielle Pescador. "Our Ofrenda." https://pescadorartofrendas.wordpress.com accessed 10/23/2015.
[86] Sean Keenehan. "Day of the Dead Comes to Life at the National Museum of Mexican Art." (interview with Cesareo Moreno) http://chicagotonight.wttw.com accessed 10/23/2015.
[87] Sean Keenehan, accessed 10/23/2015.

Enmascarado de Plata, (2015) repeated an earlier tribute to him at the 2014 Detroit Institute of Arts Ofrenda exhibit (figure 27). The honorary figure for the *Ofrenda*, Rodolfo Guzman Huerta, known as El Santo was a professional wrestler and actor who starred in many of the Lucha Libre movies produced in the 1960s and 70s. Lucha Libre films starred and portrayed Mexican wrestling figures fighting various forces of evil. These wrestlers were considered superheroes by many in Mexico and El Santo one of the most revered.[88] The Pescadors created the *Ofrenda* not only to honor El Santo's career and life, but also to generate a discussion about how Mexican and Latino-Americans have been stereotyped in the United States entertainment and advertising industries.[89] Constructed in the form of a wrestling arena, with promotional wrestling posters on either side of the stage and a large brightly lit marquee featured El Santo's name, the artistic piece created the illusion of a wrestling match about to take place. The installation was presented as a contemporary art piece with a targeted social message for the public that nonetheless paid spiritual tribute to a celebrated Latino.

While the *Ofrenda* may appear to be simply a wrestling ring, the Pescadors' installation contains several specific spiritual *Ofrenda* elements. The piece was placed in a corner and constructed in a tiered format with the stage providing a foundation, the paper banners and strings of marigolds drawing the eye up to El Santos' name in lights. Further the marquee took the place of a centrally positioned image that traditionally would be arranged to honor the deceased. The posters on either side of the central image

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[88] Cyriaque Lamar. Santo. "The Mexican Wrestler Who Fought, Aliens, Nazis, and Vampires." Gizmodo. Io9.gizmodo.com accessed 4/12/2016.
[89] Gabrielle Pescador, accessed 10/23/2015.

highlighted movies El Santo starred in and symbolized good things that had been a part of the deceased life. Below the signage, paper banners cut out to depict El Santo's trademark silver wrestling mask, honored Santos' life as a wrestler while recalling the traditional *papel picados* through which spirits reentered the corporeal world. Centrally placed in the wrestling ring was El Santo's silver Lucha Libre mask surrounded by silver skulls (*calveras*) customarily featured on an *Ofrenda* to provide a lighter view of death and lift the sadness of grief. Marigold garlands were strung and placed around the arenas edge signifying the invitational pathway for the spirits to return to visit their *Ofrenda*.

The Pescadors hoped their *Ofrenda* would visually draw viewers in and entice them to learn more about the life of El Santo and recognize the need to celebrate and acknowledge other overlooked celebrities and influential Latinos historically and in current society. While it was not necessarily the intention of Juan Javier and Gabrielle Pescador to create an *Ofrenda* that had specific religious meaning, many conventional sacred elements remain. At first glance, this piece defies conventional *Ofrenda* standards in that it is a tribute to a wrestling ring for El Santo. It is a highly conceptualized work that on closer scrutiny retains many of an *Ofrenda's* religious metaphorical imagery. Nonetheless, the installation appealed to people because it challenged the limits of an *Ofrenda's* representation and past traditional characteristics.

Alana Rodriguez: *Los Valientes,* (2013)

Historically an *Ofrenda* was created to be a spiritual commemoration celebrated quietly and privately amongst friends, family and close members of Latino communities.

However, with the introduction of *Ofrenda* installations into museums, cultural centers and public institutions, the private, spiritual basis of *La Ofrenda* has, in many instances, been supplanted to allow for the piece to reflect secular matters of political injustice, suffering and national grief. Since the 1990s artists and curators in the U.S. have been collectively working together to explore new methods of *Ofrenda* construction in public institutions that communicate multicultural discourse concerning current events. Several institutions also realized the importance of fostering strong community involvement, realizing that, "the contents of a museum plays a roll in constructing the nations political identity; in fact museums can be seen as, "powerful identity-defining machines that have the potential to include and exclude, empower and disempower, accommodate and alienate."[90] In 2013 the Detroit Institute of Arts in Michigan wanted to strengthen their multicultural community connections and invited eleven artists to design works to celebrate the creation of *La Ofrenda*. In addition, the museum hosted a panel where all the artists talked about their pieces, discussed social issues and addressed Latino identity.[91] While some of the *Ofrendas* focused on presenting traditional and more religious aspects, others addressed new, more secularized concepts aimed at eliciting discussion about problems in modern society.

Alana Rodriguez's *Los Valientes* , honored members of her family who had served in United States military (figure 28). While the piece seems like a normative

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[90] Ann Marie Stock. "Representing the Nation: Latino Art at the Smithsonian Institution." *Latin American Perspectives,* Volume 39 Issue 3 (2012) 121.
[91] Rosie Sharp. "Ofrendas at the Detroit Institute of Arts." KnightFoundation.org accessed 11/23/2014.

homage to deceased relatives, Rodriguez provided deeper meaning by dedicating the entire piece to all United States veterans through the integration of specific tributes. Rodriguez spent four years in the Navy as an intelligence specialist and said her experience in the military had given her a great respect for her homeland and for the city of Detroit where she had grown up. Consequently, she felt it appropriate to have her *Ofrenda* pay tribute to all of the people who had served in the military.[92] Her *Ofrenda* was organized with objects meant to convey her views on the importance of honoring family, home and nation. Rodriguez's work was organized on a gridline with a rod iron screen as the backdrop. Different leveled platforms provided shelf space to display items for her piece. Deposited on the shelves were images of family members who had served in the military as well as military memorabilia, reflecting her esteem for veterans both living and dead. Her piece reflected a civic, nonreligious theme which was amply demonstrated though the incorporation of strictly secular paraphernalia, such as tall green military ammo cans surmounted by photos of her relatives. Affixed to the upper left corner of the screen was an American Flag, a significantly smaller Mexican flag, a U.S. navy service shirt and a hat from a dress uniform. At far left, a military message board rested on the floor, before which stood a rifle balancing a helmet, a pair of boots and an ammo can near by. Together these are meant to stand in tribute to the Fallen Soldier.[93] By integrating national and militaristic objects into her work, Rodriguez's sacred altar was undoubtedly transformed into a secular tribute, evoking reflections on national

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[92] Alysa Zavala-Offman. "Retail Detail: One Local's Journey to Becoming a Boutique Owner in Detroit." Detroit Metro Times. Metrotimes.com accessed 3/01/2017

[93] Battle Cross for the Newest Generation. Battlecrossgneration.org accessed 10/23/2016

identity rather than simply emphasizing the religious qualities. When I look at the piece, I see both secular and sacred qualities presented. A tribute the military is apparent and invites and encourages discussion. An appeal to the spiritual is more subtle. The spiritual element is signified by blankets and mats, photos of relatives and candles with images of saints and Madonnas. Traditional Latin food items, alcohol, small trinkets and *calveras* are tangible presents for the deceased, and the inclusion of *papel picados* and marigolds symbolize the pathways used by the deceased in returning to visit the living and celebrate life. This work shows that the spiritual connotations of an *Ofrenda* need not disappear entirely even if the work presented has secular emphasis or is constructed to generate discussion reflecting ideas beyond the altars traditional purpose.

Maria Elena Rodriguez: *Unknown People Lost in Border Crossing,* (2013)

Another piece featured at the 2013 Detroit Institute of Arts "*Dia de los Muertos*: A Special Exhibit of *Ofrendas*" exhibition, was Maria Elena Rodriguez's piece, *Unknown People Lost in Border Crossing*. This example presented a duality of secular and sacred components yet strongly emphasized the former (figure 29).[94] Rodriguez created her *Ofrenda* to serve as a remembrance to the nameless people who had lost their lives attempting to cross between the United States and Mexico. In addition, the piece served as a harsh commentary and provocation for debate about illegal immigration and the dangers of border crossing for people from Mexico and United States of America. Rodriguez's *Ofrenda* presents and focuses on all of these issues for the border between

[94] Rosie Sharp, accessed 11/23/2014.

Mexico and the U.S. Rodriguez constructed her work in a traditional tiered *Ofrenda* format starting with a collection of various personal objects scattered over a sandy floor. The objects strewn over the sand ranged from pieces of clothing to empty fast food and drink containers signifying the garbage left behind by people crossing the border. Conceptually the items symbolized the mementos of honored people on a conventional *Ofrenda*. On the first level were candles with images of saints and Madonnas, food offerings and fast food containers, a borderline of marigolds, and photos of unnamed people and places. On the second tier was a framed silhouette of a man prominently positioned and meant to serve as the honorary focal point for the *Ofrenda.* The backdrop made of wood and cement constituted a barrier, meant to represent the border the unknown people attempted to cross. A yellow sign similar to school crossing but instead featuring a family running to or from somewhere was affixed to the walls and was flanked by graffiti inscriptions that declared, "No Human Being is Illegal," and "Raiz up."

The inclusion of the picture of the unknown person to whom the altar may be dedicated, to the politically charged graffiti on the backdrop and the trash strewn throughout the installation completely changes the nature of the piece from a commemorative *Ofrenda* to a sociopolitical statement. While presented as an *Ofrenda* dedicated to people killed in border crossings whose identities are unknown, Rodriguez's work clearly pushes the boundaries of the sacred versus the secular in an *Ofrenda* presentation. Rodriguez does not include any direct reference to a honorary figure or ancestor; rather, the work pays tribute to an anonymous group of people. Further, the

piece is not an *Ofrenda* that commemorates human life but is instead a statement piece that is a call to action to prevent a humanitarian tragedy. Of the four works in this chapter, this installation is an *Ofrenda* in name only, functioning as a secular piece that really is more a conceptual work of art. Rodriguez's politically and socially charged statement piece is reflective of what has been termed "Border Art."[95] Border Art is a conceptual art movement begun in 1984 that specifically centers on creating art containing messages about physical or imagined boundaries and includes issues on social, political and economical factors which are result of borders between nations.[96] Some of the elements of a traditional *Ofrenda* are recognizable, however, they only serve as placeholders and conduits for the overall activist message of the piece.

[95] Antonio Preito. "Border Art as Political Strategy." Information Services of Latin America. Retrieved December 6, 2015.
[96] IIa N. Sheren. *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera Since 1984*. University of Texas Press, 2015. p. 23-24.



Figure 26:

Tonantzin Historical Society, *Ofrenda de Familia Hernandez,* 2014, mixed media. Photo courtesy, Tonantzin Historical Society Topeka, Kansas



Figure 27:

Juan Javier Pescador and Gabrielle Pescador, *Santo in the World of the Dead: Altar to the Silver Masked Wrestler/Santo en El Mundo de Los Muertos: Ofrenda al Enmascarado de Plata*, 2015, mixed media.
Photo courtesy of National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago Illinois



Figure 28:

Alana Rodriguez, *Los Valientes*, 2013, mixed media.
Detroit Institute of the Arts, Michigan
Photo courtesy KnightsFoundation.org



Figure 29:

Maria Elena Rodriguez, *Unknown People Lost in Border Crossing,* 2013, mixed media.
Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan
Photo courtesy of KnightsFoundation.org

CHAPTER FIVE. REDEFINING *LA OFRENDA*

Ramifications of Permanency and Future Artistic Directions

At its heart *La Ofrenda* is a family-centered ritualistic and spiritual commemoration performed for a limited period of time to honor and remember the dead. Often the physical process of building an altar with its symbolic objects helps remind and educate family and friends on the multicultural aspects of their heritage. Generally, museums and cultural centers organize *Ofrenda* exhibitions with the intent to retain the altar's fundamental temporal, spiritual and traditional characteristics as much as possible. Increasingly many institutions include works by contemporary artists who create conceptual *Ofrendas* using various materials and mix-media. Reflecting the ever-changing aspects of Modern art, some *Ofrendas* are now being constructed using a wide variety of non-traditional techniques such as computer technology, video and performance art. These new methods of artistic representation are challenging and changing not only *La Ofrenda* but can be perceived as an *Ofrenda*. This chapter provides a glimpse into four nontraditional altar representations and addresses the ramifications they present to the future of *La Ofrenda*. The first piece by artist Mizael Sanchez and curator David Carrasco from the Peabody Museum of Natural History, is an example of possible problems for museums that retain permanent *Ofrenda* installations. The three works that follow, address new state-of-the-art contemporary methods of *Ofrenda* creation and presentation. First, the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum offers a look into the museum's use of virtual technology, both to educate a larger audience on Latino

culture and to allow visitors to build their own *Ofrendas* on the computer. Next, the work of Eliana Cetto, *Gathering Embers*, shows the integration of performance art and video imagery in an *Ofrenda* presentation. Finally, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra provides a very unconventional presentation through a musical and literary performance meant to commemorate *La Ofrenda.*

Mizael Sanchez and David Carrasco, (2002)
Peabody Museum of Natural History, Cambridge Massachusetts

In 2002 the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University constructed an *Ofrenda* in the museum's permanent collection of Mayan and Aztec cultural artifacts. Unlike other *Ofrendas* temporarily exhibited for a short period of time, the Peabody Museum's *Ofrenda* installation remains a part of their ongoing *Encounters with the Americas Gallery* (figure 30). The work was created with the intent to present the public with a unique and symbolic fusion of Mesoamerican and Spanish Catholic rituals that comprise *La Ofrenda* and the *Dias de Muertos* festival.[97] Curator David Carrasco saw the construction of the *Ofrenda* and the objects comprising it as a tool to raise public awareness about traditional and spiritual festivities celebrated throughout Mexico and Latin American. To help make the *Ofrenda* a successful educational device, Carrasco organized a committee of scholars and artists to pinpoint the problems that might arise in the incorporation of a permanent *Ofrenda* installation. A main concern of the committee was retaining the "authenticity and immediacy" of the

[97] Day of the Dead/Dia de los Muertos On Going Exhibit. https://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/287. accessed 10/23/2015.

Ofrenda.[98] To develop a solution, Mexican artist Mizael Sanchez and his team were contracted to construct the altar and incorporate objects which represent traditional *Ofrenda* characteristics while also allowing for the piece to remain permanent. Sanchez and his team used objects from the museums collection of Mexican Folk Art, intermixed with *Dias de Muertos* memorabilia either crafted personally by the artist, by members of the local community, or acquired as ready-made *Ofrenda* art. Now a permanent artifact in the museum's *Encounters with The Americas gallery,* the vibrantly colored, eight by seven foot cabinet houses the altar and is built with two swinging panel doors. The piece, which resembles a triptych, remains open during museum hours and closes after hours to protect the Mexican Folk Art pieces displayed inside. When the two panels are opened, viewers are able to see the contents of *La Ofrenda*. Inside the cabinet is a tiered altar with the central focal point being a ceramic skeleton Day of the Dead candlestick with two tree-of-life ceramic statue on either side. Sanchez explained that the ceramic objects from Michoacan, Mexico represent traditional Mexican spiritual beliefs of the cycle of life, death and life again. Other elements placed on the *Ofrenda* include candles, paper banners, images of Christ, Madonnas and saints, skeleton figurines and food items made out of ceramic and papier-mâché are meant to again signify the fusion of Spanish European and Mesoamerican ritual practices. At first glance, the *Ofrenda* in the Peabody Museum connotes traditional meanings. However, a more critical look reveals the uniqueness of the installation, not only because it is a permanent display piece in the

[98] Liza Weisstuch. Peabody Museum, Friends Celebrate Day of Dead. Campus and Community Harvard News. News.harvard.edu (November 7, 2002) accessed 10/23/2015.

museum, but because the assortment of objects that are intentionally incorporated into the *Ofrenda* are used to draw viewers into the history of their origins and spark conversation. While the spiritual and ritual aspects to the altar are indirectly referenced, the traditional commemorative purpose of the *Ofrenda* is not included. When opened up, the piece is primarily used as a historical reference, and a truly effective teaching tool. Further, the creators provide ample information on the history of *La Ofrenda* by talking about the objects in the piece both at the museum and in online presentations.[99] However, the ramifications of it consistently open to the public year after year and the use of objects with no personal reference directly alters the original intent of an *Ofrenda* as a temporary, individualistic, commemorative altar to honor the deceased.

Latino Virtual Museum, (2009)

In the 1990s, museums and culture centers across the nation acquired the ability to implement virtual technology into their existing websites to be used as a tool for promotion. Virtual museum tours created highly interactive and personalized viewing experiences for visitors. Further, the virtual programs allowed viewers to manipulate the museum's site to their specifications within the parameters of the program. In 1997, the Smithsonian Latino Center was established to promote awareness and education about Latino art and artists, special exhibitions and programs, and cultural events at any of the

[99] Day of the Dead/Dia de los Muertos, accessed 10/23/2015.

Smithsonian Institute museums and affiliates.[100] Later in 2009 the Smithsonian Latino Center launched the Latino Virtual Museum. Now in its eighth season, the Latino Virtual Museum allows visitors the opportunity to explore its various resources via the internet. Through the museum's interactive website users are able to connect to a virtual gallery that completely provides links to information on the *Dias de Muertos* festival and *La Ofrenda*. Publicized as an "interdisciplinary approach" helping visitors furthering their understanding of the Latin American festival, the site invites visitors and educators to participate in a 3D experience in which online viewers can navigate the platforms of information about the history of both the festival rituals and materials associated with the event.[101] While much of the online gallery is directed at educators, providing detailed information and resources to download and use in classrooms, it also provides a virtual interactive theatrical performance where online visitors are encouraged to participate by clicking on various historical source links.[102] The links provide visitors the opportunity to artistically create their own virtual *Ofrenda* and print out their own work (figure 31).[103] Viewers manipulate the screen choosing from an assortment of symbolic objects usually found on a physical *Ofrenda* and place the virtual items around the *Ofrenda*. While creating the *Ofrenda*, visitors are able to click on links to historical information describing intrinsic characteristics and ritualistic connotations of *La Ofrenda*.

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[100] Smithsonian Latino Center. latino.si.edu/PDF/SLC_LVM_Smithsonian_Latino_digital_collections_reference_guide 2012.PDF accessed February 25, 2015.
[101] Smithsonian Latino Center. latino.si.edu The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum (LVM. accessed 02/05/2015.
[102] Smithsonian Latino Center, Ibid.
[103] Smithsonian Latino Center, Ibid.

While the virtual *Ofrenda* site provides ample information on the symbolic and historical characteristics of the altar, the site does not allow the user to create, hold, taste or smell the actual material objects. Being able to interact with the tangible objects and work them into an *Ofrenda* is one of the most important individuals connections to spirituality of the *Ofrenda*. Another problem with the virtual *Ofrenda* experience lies in the honorary image and choice of personal objects that can be placed on the altar. While you can upload a picture to place on the piece, it is not an option for the symbolic objects or mementos that may represent a deceased loved one. The artistic creative choice is replaced by generalized options and the whole experience has almost the feel of a simplistic online game. Like the *Ofrenda* at the Peabody Museum, Latin Virtual Museum's *Ofrenda* is a valuable educational resource, but lacks artistic ingenuity of a traditional *Ofrenda*.

Eliana Cetto: *Gathering the Embers,* (2014)

Modern artistic techniques are continually expanding and incorporating new and inventive methods to celebrate an *Ofrenda* in public. Many of these artistic representations combine contemporary art approaches and become new, innovative ways to convey commemorative messages. The work by Eliana Cetto, *Gathering the Embers* (2014), incorporates performance art and video imagery and a pre-recorded vocal track to create what she terms, "an interactive *Ofrenda* that praises the under-recognized history of powerful women that help define our contemporary fight against patriarchy " (figure

32).[104] Cetto created her work to be a performance piece that involves the audience as active participants. Before the show the audience is asked to write names of women they would like to have commemorated in the performance on long strips of red cloth. The performance began with Cetto sitting in a chair in the center of the stage adorned with the red strips of cloth draped over her head with her mother standing to the side. As the performance began a screen behind the two women streamed a series of images representing an altar with an accompanying oration pre-recorded by Cetto and her mother. Cetto spoke of, "cycles of life and death," and lamented and paid homage to under-recognized women who have passed away. Cetto's mother, included in the dialogue, related situations of racism experienced by the female members of her family. When the video and dialogue started Cetto's mother gathered up the long strips of red cloth and ceremoniously braided them to honor the names the audience provided. At the end of the performance the braided cloth was wrapped around Cetto's head to signify a crown and her dialog explained that the crown was to remind all women in the audience that they are queens.[105] Cetto's rendition of an *Ofrenda* is innovative and unusual but does contain commemorative aspects and attempts to display some traditional *Ofrenda* symbolism. The work was created as commemoration to specific people and by placing the names of these individuals on the strips of red cloth they become the honored deceased for the performance *Ofrenda*. The performance also reflects the *Ofrenda* characteristic of temporary celebration of the deceased as everyone gathers performance

[104] Eliana Cetto. Gathering the Embers. Elianacetto.com accessed 10/23/2016.
[105] Cetto, Ibid.

and after it is over, they leave, until the next performance. In the end Cetto's work is simply highly conceptual. Her piece does not include the physical *Ofrenda* objects, so part of the ritual aspect to using those specific objects and constructing them on an altar is lost. Symbolism traditionally found on an *Ofrenda* is lacking, the celebration of the deceased has been replaced with a somber condemnation of patriarchal values, and the quiet reflection on an *Ofrenda* is drowned out by a feminist call to action. Cetto's performance is once again a statement piece that loosely uses the form of *La Ofrenda* to covey her message.

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra: *Musical and Literary Ofrenda*, (2016)

The rise in popularity of celebrating *Dias de Muertos* has inspired people from various artistic disciplines to explore new methods of representing the festival's commemorative altar, *La Ofrenda*. Many *Ofrenda* creators and artists search for innovative concepts to incorporate into their work in order to create a contemporary twist on the traditional altar presentation. This was the goal for the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra and Lawndale Art Center in Houston, Texas in 2016. Partnering with Imprint, an organization of writers and the Houston Hispanic Forum, The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra decided to create an interdisciplinary *Ofrenda* incorporating participation from local artists, composers and Imprint (figure 33). The event, titled, *Musical and Literary Ofrenda,* featured five composers who presented original compositions performed to reflect their personalized artistic interpretation of the feeling that an *Ofrenda* embodies. Between each of the five musical pieces, four poets from Imprint, recited original prose

vividly describing the ritual traditions performed while making an *Ofrenda* for the *Dias de Muertos* fiestas.[106] While the audience listened to the musical and literary performances, the artist created *retablos* were displayed on the walls behind the performance. Before and after the performance the audience was encouraged to more closely view the *retablos* auctioned at the end of the event.

The interdisciplinary event was unique, original and creative and allowed viewers to enjoy the different artistic interpretations simultaneously. As defined at the beginning of this thesis, *La Ofrenda* or "the offering," had traditionally been a physical, temporary altar constructed for commemoration, prayer and spiritual reflection. It is a ritual space organized with items of food, drink, honorific gifts and a multitude of mementos, which serve to pay homage to the deceased. Too many of the traditional characteristics were missing from The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra musical and literary *Ofrenda* event and there was simply no clearly defined altar space. Of the four reading at the event only one of the authors directly addressed an *Ofrenda*.[107] Further, while the featured *retablos* were temporarily displayed their sale at the end of the event served as a fundraiser rather than an honorific commemoration. Delving deeper, the physical ritualistic actions, which are at the heart of the creation of an *Ofrenda*, were neither part of the music nor prose. The event was not an *Ofrenda* but rather an ode to *La Ofrenda*. Just as Russian composer Modeste Mussorgsky's composition, "Pictures at an Exhibition," made no claim to

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[106] Lawndale Art Center 28th Annual Dia de los Muertos. *Musical and Literary Ofrenda* Houston Museum District. Houmuse.com accessed 10/23/2015.
[107] River Oaks Chamber Orchestra. Musical and Literary Ofrenda.rocohouston.org accessed 10/23/2015.

actually be the pictures themselves, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra event should have been more properly titled, *Musical and Literary Reflections on Ofrenda*.[108] Artistic expression allows for an assortment of conceptual *Ofrenda* representations, but when the traditional elements of the commemoration become secondary to interpretation, the essence of an *Ofrenda* can be lost.

[108] Peter Gutmann. Pictures at an Exhibition, 2002. classicalnotes.net accessed 05/01/2017.



Figure 30:

Mizael Sanchez and David Carrasco, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University, On Going *Ofrenda* Exhibit, 1990 to present, mixed media with Ceramic Sculpture from the Alice P. Melvin Collection of Mexican Art.
Photo courtesy of Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, Connecticut.



Figure 31:

Smithsonian Latino Center, Latino Virtual Museum, Online *Ofrenda*, 2009, computer interactive technology.
Image courtesy of Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum.



Figure 32:

Eliana Cetto, *Gathering the Embers,* 2014, digital graphic and performance art. Photo courtesy of Elianacetto.com



Figure 33:

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, *Musical and Literary Ofrenda*, 2016, Performance with mixed media.
Photo courtesy of HoustonPress.com

CONCLUSION

Despite the growing cross-cultural popularity of the *Dias de Muertos* festival and interest in *La Ofrenda*, some modern interpretations of these centuries-old celebrations have moved too far from the original sacred, spiritual foundation. Originally an honorific reflection of deceased family or friends, *La Ofrenda* is now being used to commemorate everything from its traditional associations, to honoring special interests, to becoming statement pieces for social, political or national issues. A growing trend in the twenty-first century has been for artists to reinterpret *La Ofrenda* incorporating challenging, innovative methods and mediums, such as graphic and digital arts, performance and conceptual art pieces. In a more traditional vain, many museums and cultural centers continue to strengthen the historical authenticity of *La Ofrenda*. They feature the altar as an educational exhibit using the elements of the *Ofrenda* as tools to preserve cultural integrity and inform public audiences on some of the syncretic elements of the Latino culture. Conversely, other museums and public institutions are reaching beyond the convention of focusing on culturally specific characteristics, instead choosing to include modern artistic concepts that reflect leading contemporary styles from both Latino artists and all interested in creating an honorific *Ofrenda* installation.

This thesis provides an extensive examination of the history of the *Ofrenda* drawing on a multitude of sources from modern ethnographers and art historians to sixteenth-century chroniclers of Mesoamerica. Next a fundamental symbology of the structure, materials and meaning used in the creation of *La Ofrenda* is examined. The body of the thesis offers a comparative analysis of *Ofrendas* featured in public spaces

including museums, cultural centers and other venues. Sources for this material include literature on the subject, artist statements, museum guides and websites, reviews by critics and personal interviews with curators. First, the thesis provides an examination of the differences between traditional, authentic *Ofrendas* and the contemporary pieces specifically created for public display. Following offers a comparison between private and sacred altars and those in museums and cultural centers that are presenting a more secular, conceptual and contemporary presentation of *La Ofrenda*. The thesis concludes with works that vastly challenge the concept of what can be deemed an *Ofrenda* including a critique of the pieces and the negative ramifications they can create.

However, it is possible for the *Ofrenda* to evolve and change while maintaining many of the key elements. Some contemporary artists have chosen to only use the frame of *La Ofrenda* to speak to broader, more inclusive aspects not found in a traditional altar. The Pescadors introduced their audience to the world of Mexican wrestling, creating not only a vibrant piece that honors a man but also calls attention to a popular facet of Mexican culture in general. Alana Rodriguez pays tribute in her work to her family's proud military tradition while also honoring all who have been a part of the armed services. Further it is a statement of her proud national identity. Carmen Lomas Garza presents a tribute to her grandfather that actually becomes a look into his world. Her use of the metal background, her mixed media and use of colors creates an effect that almost becomes a three-dimensional painting. These three works may not fall under traditional *Ofrenda* techniques but retain enough symbolic aspects to offer unique modern interpretations. The pieces show a restraint in reinterpreting *La Ofrenda* and a conscious

reflection on the original form in which they are based. Part of the benefit of works like these are that they may appeal to a wider audience, perhaps not appreciative of the traditional *Ofrenda*.

The observances of *Dias de Muertos* and *La Ofrenda* are centuries old and evolution is inevitable. Still, hopefully there will always be practitioners of the honorific, complex, vibrant *Ofrenda* that celebrates life, death and the return of life again. The ritual aspect of the event is the result of a long, historical, merging of cultures that has helped it flourish for centuries. Thanks to the changing cultural face of America more museums, cultural centers and other public institutions are introducing or trying to bring renewed interest to *Dias de Muertos* celebrations and encouraging the continued interest in *La Ofrenda.*

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