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NEW YORK IN FOCUS

Colorful Witnesses to Those Who Went Before

By JOE POMPEO
Published: October 21, 2007

[MEXICO'S](#) Dia de Los Muertos, or Day of the Dead celebration, has become an increasingly popular part of New York's mainstream Halloween festivities. But members of the city's expanding Mexican population have observed this macabre religious holiday since they were children, preserving centuries-old traditions like the building of elaborate and colorful altars to honor dead friends and relatives.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

These altars, adorned with flowers and skulls and purified with incense, include pictures of loved ones who have died, and offerings of the trinkets and indulgences that they enjoyed in life: candy, toys, bread and tequila.

"It gives life to the dead when they come," said Margarita Larios, a former factory worker who moved to New York in 1974 from a small town outside Mexico City. Speaking in Spanish from her tidy East Village apartment, she said she is convinced her dead friends and relatives visit her in spirit during the holiday, which runs from Oct. 31 through Nov. 2.

An exhibition of 19 altars, including one by Ms. Larios, opens Tuesday at the Rocking Horse Cafe on Eighth Avenue as part of the cafe's annual Day of the Dead art exhibition and auction.

Designed mostly by visual artists, some of whom reflect on their intentions here, the altars draw on a range of styles and materials, among them fabric, ceramic and carved bone.

The holiday can be a sad reminder for people like Ms. Larios, who is 59, that her loved ones are no longer with her. But it also brings solace. "I feel happiness knowing they are here in spirit to celebrate," she said.

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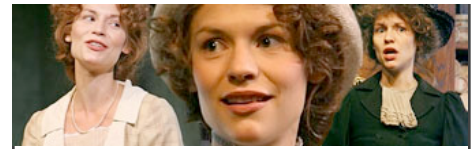
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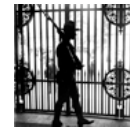
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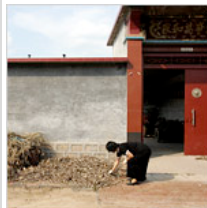
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