



Image Credit: Billy Hassell, Game of Chance, 1990, Oil on canvas, 1998.10.16

# Day of the Dead: A Cultural Celebration

## OVERVIEW

This lesson will focus on student's knowledge of the Mexican celebration Day of the Dead. Branching off from this knowledge, students will then create a vibrant skeleton.

## STANDARDS

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Can we show an anatomically correct skeleton while honoring people for Day of the Dead?

### STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students Will:

- Learn about the Mexican holiday and traditions of Day of the Dead
- Learn about the skeleton
- Draw an anatomically correct skeleton
- Demonstrate knowledge of the skeleton through their work of art

### STANDARDS: SECOND AND SEVENTH GRADE | VISUAL ARTS, SOCIAL STUDIES, AND SCIENCE

2nd Grade | VISUAL ARTS 3, 14 | SOCIAL STUDIES 11

7th Grade | VISUAL ARTS 15 | SOCIAL STUDIES 5 | SCIENCE 4

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## ART DISCUSSION

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What story is Billy Hassell telling in this work of art? Is it realistic or abstract? Can a work of art be both at the same time?
- What symbols are shown throughout the painting?
- What are the skeletons doing?
- What is the Day of the Dead? How is it celebrated?

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Billy Hassell is inspired by nature as well as the much deeper role pattern and repetition have in everyday flora and fauna. In his work, Hassell explore patterns, such as scales on a fish or birds in flight, and searched for repeating similarities in the chaos of our natural world.

"They (the patterns) are not merely decorative embellishments, but have a basis in reality and, to some extent, establish location and a sense of place. This sense of place is important to me; it anchors the work."

While the work is stylized and exaggerated, Hassell's compositions are created from direct observation. He depicts birds, fish, and other animals because their presence or absence can be a strong indicator of the well-being of an environment. His work shows stylings and inspirations of American and Mexican folk art.

“What attracted me to this subject, as a context for a painting, was the positive and celebratory look at life after death, to view death as a spiritual journey and not merely the end of life, a time to remember and to contemplate deceased friends and family members and to remember the good times, pleasures, and events of their lives.

In addition to the two main figures in the painting, in the forms of skeletons – a man, distinguished by a serape over his shoulder and a sombrero on his head – and a woman with a dark patterned skirt – there are additional, secondary figures.

The two figures are dancing, the background is a night sky, punctuated by stars in a pattern that is repeated in the skirt worn by the female figure in a kind of whimsical poetic gesture. The rooster represents the morning to come. The boat, a means to transportation and navigation, represents passage through life. The pair of dice represents the game of chance that the painting is named after. And the game of chance is a metaphor for life and the chances we take.”

## CURRICULUM CONTENT

Skeletons are scary, right? Not if you’re celebrating Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead.

### REMEMBERING RELATIVES

Day of the Dead combines the ancient Aztec custom of celebrating ancestors with All Souls’ Day, a holiday that Spanish invaders brought to Mexico starting in the early 1500s.

The holiday, which is celebrated mostly in Mexico on November 1 and 2, is like a family reunion—except dead ancestors are the guests of honor. Day of the Dead is a joyful time that helps people remember the deceased and celebrate their memory.

### TREATS FOR THE DECEASED

First, people set up a candlelit altar in their homes so spirits can find their way back to their relatives. The altar also offers some of the favorite foods of the deceased—just in case they get hungry. Items that were important to the ancestors when they were alive, such as a favorite book or musical instrument, are placed on the altar as well.

Then it’s off to the graveyard for a big party. Families bring a huge feast to eat while they clean tombstones, sing songs, and talk to their ancestors. Parents might even introduce a baby to a grandparent who died before the baby was born.

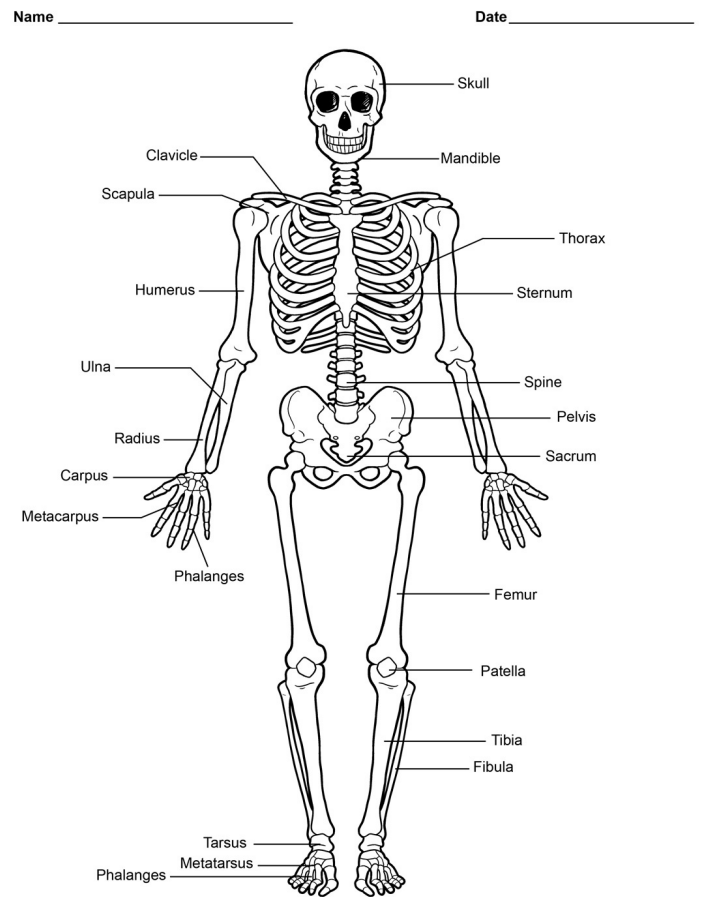
### FUNNY BONES

And don’t forget the skeletons. During Day of the Dead, life-size papier-mâché skeletons and miniature plastic or clay skeletons are everywhere. Why? Mexicans honor their

ancestors on Day of the Dead, but they’re also reminding themselves that death is just a part of life. Hanging out with skeletons reminds people that one day they will be skeletons—but not for a very long time!

The skeletons are posed doing all sorts of wacky things, such as playing guitar, taking a bath, or making tortillas. Apparently people aren’t the only ones who get to have fun on Day of the Dead!

<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/celebrations/day-of-the-dead/>



# Day of the Dead: A Cultural Celebration

## ART INSTRUCTION

### MATERIALS

white and colored construction paper, markers, colored pencils, or oil pastels, scissors, glue, image references (optional)

### INSTRUCTIONS

**1** After look at Billy Hassell's artwork Game of Chance and discussing Day of the Dead, students will then be able to create their own inspired work of art!

**2** On a white piece of paper, draw out your skull and bones with a pencil. Keep your initial lines light in case you need to erase. A skull can be drawn with a circle and a rounded rectangle attaching to the bottom of the circle. After drawing those lines, add in the circles for the eyes, triangles or upside down heart for the nose, and the lines for the mouth and teeth.

Looking at a skeleton for reference, you can draw additional bones such as vertebrae and clavicles. Make sure to draw the bones as a full shaped form, not just a line. The skull and bones will be cut out.

**3** Cut out the skull and all of the bones. Glue them onto a colorful background. Using various colored pieces of paper, or coloring your own, draw fun elements to add to your figure. Billy Hassell added a sombrero and a skirt onto his dancing skeletons. You can add hats, mustaches, flowers, wigs, clothes – anything at all!

Draw your new elements, then cut them out and glue them onto your project.

Tip: When using Elmer's Glue, add a small amount on the piece to be glued, then use your finger or a paint brush to spread it around. A thin, even layer of glue will attach better and faster than a raging river of glue!

## EXPAND

Want to create art for the Day of the Dead but not draw a skeleton? Design a cut paper vase of marigolds! Marigolds guide the spirits to their altars using their vibrant colors and scent.

## TERMS

**REALISTIC** - art work that attempts a photographic likeness of the subject matter; sometimes refers to the choice of subject that is commonplace as opposed to courtly and idealized.

**ABSTRACT** - artwork where objects have been changed or modified so they no longer look realistic. An abstract work of art does, however, use a recognizable object or thing as its reference or origin.

**COMPOSITION** - the arrangement of the elements of art and the principles of design within a given work of art.

**FOREGROUND** -the part of a picture which appears closest to the viewer and often is at the bottom of the picture.

**MIDDLE GROUND** - Objects in the middle ground appear to be behind objects in the foreground

**BACKGROUND** -The background is the part of the painting farthest from the viewer. Objects in the background are usually smaller and less distinct than other objects in the work.

**SYMBOLS** - one object or thing stands in the place of something else, such as an idea, another object, a person, or a place

**SERAPE** - a blanketlike shawl or wrap, often of brightly colored wool, as worn in Latin America.

**SOMBRERO** - a straw hat with a tall crown and broad brim

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