HOW DID DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS BECOME A CELEBRATION OF MEXICAN IDENTITY?

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is celebrated in Mexico and by Mexican communities around the world on 1 and 2 November. Families remember people who have died by visiting graves and creating ofrendas, or altars, decorated with photographs, candles, flowers, food and personal objects. The tradition has roots in Indigenous Mexican cultures, including the Aztecs, who held ceremonies honouring the dead. After the Spanish conquest, Catholic festivals called All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day influenced the timing of the celebration. Its modern appearance was also shaped by the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, whose skeleton pictures joked about politicians and rich people. In the United States, Mexican American artists and activists helped turn private family ceremonies into large public events during the 1970s. They used the celebration to take pride in Indigenous roots and Mexican American culture.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

This story shows that traditions can change without disappearing. Día de los Muertos combines Indigenous beliefs, Spanish Catholic influence, modern art and political activism. It also shows how communities use celebrations to remember the past and express who they are today. A festival about death can therefore become a powerful statement about survival, family and cultural pride.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

"Why has Día de los Muertos changed but still kept its main purpose?"

Source: Smithsonian Magazine

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/smithsonian-american-art-museum/2026/10/30/traditions-and-change-the-transformation-of-dia-de-los-muertos-in-the-unite