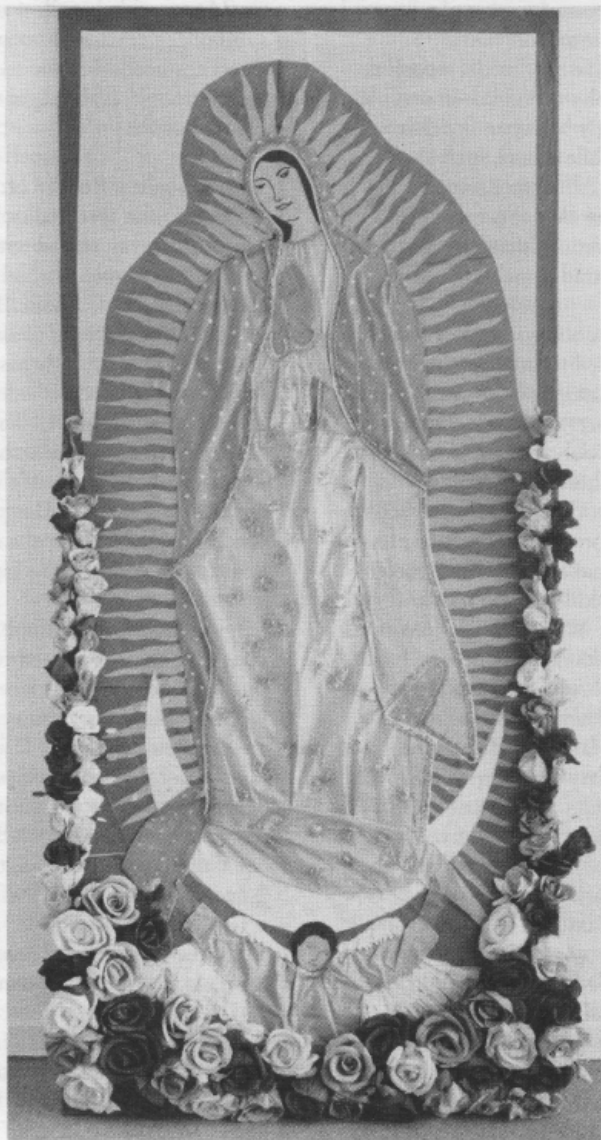


*Día de los Muertos* altar, 1991 (detail)



The altar is becoming increasingly popular as an art form with a wide variety of contemporary American artists. This is especially true among members of the Mexican and Chicano communities in the United States. For some, the altar is a way of reinvesting art with spiritual potency or becoming reconnected with aspects of their respective cultural traditions. Others choose to work with the altar because its basic form is more universal than, for example, the framed painting on canvas. Some artists utilize new media—such as photography or video—in ways only loosely based on the altar format, while others, such as Herminia Albarran Romero, incorporate elements passed on over generations that are structured in a more traditional fashion.

Altars have always had particular importance in the culture of Mexico. Ranging from small home altars (*altares*) with just a few objects to elaborate room-size displays, these altars typically function both as sites for spiritual communion and as opportunities for their makers to exercise their technical skill and aesthetic judgment. While certain features of Mexican altars are identifiable with particular areas, such as the states of Oaxaca or Michoacán, or with particular family traditions, the actual variety—even within a given region or family—is extraordinary. Every altar, no matter how “traditional” its elements, is a unique work expressing the individual taste of its maker.

The *Día de los Muertos* altar (Day of the Dead altar), known as an *ofrenda* or “offering,” is the most elaborate and most popularized form of the Mexican altar. As in this installation, the *Día de los*

*Muertos* altar typically combines elements from indigenous Mesoamerican shrines with those of Spanish Catholicism. Among the objects and images reflecting the influence of Spanish Catholicism are the elevated altar table, or tables, the candles, *papel picado* (cut paper), and the various images of saints. One of the few pre-Columbian elements to survive in its original form are the scattered marigold (*zempazúchitl*) petals, used because their yellow color symbolizes death and because the direct connection of the seed to the petal symbolizes the regeneration of life after death.

The strongest influence of Mesoamerican spirituality is to be found, however, mixed with and overlaid by elements which appear to be ostensibly Catholic. The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, is strongly associated with the goddess Coatlicue. It is believed that the Hill of Tepeyac near Mexico City where the Virgin appeared on the cloak of the mestizo peasant Juan Diego in 1531 was originally the site of a shrine to this Aztec goddess. The jagged light emanating from behind the Virgin echoes pre-Columbian images of an oval-shaped sun, while the black bow hanging from her left wrist is a Mesoamerican symbol for an unmarried woman. The colorful *papel picado*, which derives from Spanish traditions, occasionally serves as a medium for traditional Mesoamerican designs. Other aspects of the altar, such as the offering of food and other amenities to the dead, have precedents in both Spanish and Mesoamerican culture.

Although the *Día de los Muertos* is currently celebrated on November 1 and 2, corresponding to The Feast of All Saints and All Souls’ Day of

the Catholic festival calendar, some anthropologists believe that these celebrations retain much of the Aztec festivals of Miccaihuitonli (little feast of the dead) and Hueymiccaihuitl (great feast of the dead) which were originally celebrated in July and August.<sup>1</sup> This type of overlaying is characteristic of the way many indigenous peoples around the world have been compelled to mask their own traditional observances behind the imposed cultures of their missionary conquerors.

The most profound difference between these Catholic holidays as they are celebrated by the official Church and in the popular *Día de los Muertos* has to do with the distinct approaches to the subject of death. All Souls’ Day was established by St. Odilo, Bishop of Cluny, in 1030 A.D. in order that the living devote their prayers to the delivery of souls from Purgatory. The possibility of expiating one’s own sins, or the sins of others through prayer in order to effect the final destination of the soul after life, contrasts to the Mesoamerican belief which “made almost no allowance for the effects of moral behavior on disposition after death.”<sup>2</sup>

“Almost nowhere in the vast ethnological literature [on the *Día de los Muertos*] does one find the word Purgatory mentioned. Instead of keeping its original meaning as a day to pray for the souls in Purgatory and shorten the duration of their suffering, All Souls’ Day has become a day to visit with and entertain the spirits of family dead.”<sup>3</sup>

The Mexican belief that “to die is to be reborn”<sup>4</sup> and that death itself is merely a transition between the

somnambulism of our world and a more conscious, fully-wakened state contributes to the sense of exuberant celebration that accompanies the *Día de los Muertos* and which is embodied in the colorful and life-affirming *Día de los Muertos* altar.

For this installation, the artist has adapted elements of a traditional *ofrenda* to the specific conditions of the MATRIX Gallery. Romero herself has produced much of the material included in this installation, including the large-scale image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the finely cut *papel picado*, and the varieties of shaped bread. Her arrangement of these objects and images is, in her words, “an improvisation.”<sup>5</sup>

“The essential nature of *altares* and *ofrendas* as devotional statements changes when they are separated from the socio-cultural nexus of their origin,” wrote Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. “In their new setting, they become examples of multivocal exchange mediating between tradition and change.”<sup>6</sup>

Herminia Albarran Romero was born in 1936 in San Francisco de Asis, Tlatlaya, Mexico. She began making altars at the age of eight, under the instruction of her mother and other family elders. She taught art for many years in rural areas of Mexico under the Acatempan and Misiones Culturales programs. From 1979 to 1981, Romero ran a workshop in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where she taught traditional costuming. She emigrated to the United States in 1981 and has since become active in the art community of the San Francisco Mission District. Ms. Romero’s altars have been the centerpiece of the *Día de los Muertos* celebrations at the

Galería de la Raza, San Francisco, since 1983. In 1989, Ms. Romero received a Folk Art grant from the California Arts Council, enabling her to pass on her knowledge and skills to an apprentice, Karen Nuñez, whose assistance with this installation has been invaluable. She has also received an Artist in Communities Residence grant from the California Arts Council to teach Folk Arts at La Raza Graphics, San Francisco.

Lawrence Rinder  
Curator

1. Robert V. Childs and Patricia B. Altman, *Vive tu Recuerdo: Living Traditions in the Mexican Days of the Dead*, Museum of Cultural History, UCLA Monograph Series No. 17 (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
4. Romero, interview with author, San Francisco, CA, 3 August 1991.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "Cultural Context," in *Ceremony of Memory* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1988), p. 11.

Work in MATRIX:

*Día de los Muertos* altar, 1991,  
mixed media.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Laney College, Oakland, CA, *Día de los Muertos* altar '86; Mission Cultural Center, San Francisco, *Día de los Muertos* altar '87; Galería de La Raza, San Francisco, *Día de los*

*Muertos* altar, '87, '88, '89; La Raza Graphics Center, Inc., San Francisco, *Día de los Muertos* altar, '90.

Selected group exhibitions:

Galería de la Raza, San Francisco, *Día de los Muertos* altar and *Papel Picado* '83-'88; Euphrat Gallery, De Anza College, Cupertino, CA, *Drawing from Experience: Artists Over Fifty* '90 (catalog); San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art and Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, San Jose, CA, *Altars: Contemporary Interpretations* '90.

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