

Mexican traditions and art therapy

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Mexico is a country of many traditions and rituals. Soon we will be celebrating the day of the dead “all souls day” a celebration full of mysticism where the Mexican families go to the cemeteries visit the graves of their relatives, they wash, paint and decorate them and light votive candles. This cathartic process to face the pain caused by the loss of a beloved person, changes according to the different regions of the country. When there are no grave stones a simple cross is decorated with fabrics, ribbons and paintings. The decorations on the grave stone can be daring and witty. There are places where the gravestones in the shape of miniature chapels are painted in colorful shades of intense pink, sky blue and brilliant yellow, thus making the cemetery look like a small village of doll houses.

Death can become funny and ironic and it is named in different ways such as “bony-one” or “skinny”. The act of dying is called “to straighten the leg” or “to skip out”.

Another important part of this celebration is the offerings that are prepared in the homes and where according to tradition the dead visit us once a year. A photograph of the deceased is placed in an altar decorated with many motives made of perforated paper in very bright colors to represent the wind as an element that moves the paper. Water is the second element that is used so that the dead can quench his thirst. Bread is put out to represent the product that is given by the earth, and the lighted votive candles to represent the element that purifies everything. The altar is decorated with yellow flowers that are scattered in a very decorative way in every corner, and skulls made of sugar with happy expressions instead of dark or sad ones, painted and decorated in attractive colors to represent eternity and to remind us that the world of the living is a sigh that comes and goes very fast.

Art plays a very important part in these festivities, altars are decorated and grave stones are painted without realizing that they are doing art therapy, in other words they are using art to feel better.

In Mexico the interest in art therapy has spread, different institutions have shown their desire to learn about this topic, the result being that art therapy has had more diffusion.

The city of Leon Guanajuato organized a Congress in Human Development. The organizers came to Mexico City to a workshop in art therapy and decided to open a space for art therapy in the congress through the Integral Center of Art Therapy (CITA) by means of a conference and a workshop. This Congress was sponsored by the Leon Institute of Technology and the Department of Education of the State of Guanajuato.

The School of Psychology of the National Autonomous University of Mexico organized a course in Art and Psychology. CITA was invited on several occasions to present before the psychologists that attended, art as a therapeutic tool, and not like psychology has traditionally used it, to interpret and not to cure.

CITA has as one of its fundamental activities the service to the community.

We are participating with several former students in a project to help homeless children with art therapy. With these children we are working on the reincorporation to their homes, drug abuse, self esteem and the establishment of goals so that they will have a life project.

The School of High Level Studies Fes Zaragoza organized workshops with rural teachers with less preparation and fewer resources of areas near Mexico City and the State of Mexico. In these workshops doctors, psychologists, teachers and CITA were invited. CITA helped them work with the children in a symbolic level and make their learning process easier.

Celebrating in Mexico the festivities of the day of the dead we can say as art therapists that we bury the problems so that the person can be born again.

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