

Spoon Skulls

Glow-in-the-dark icons to celebrate Dia de Muertos (art + social studies)

Sugar Skulls are a folk art tradition from central and southern Mexico, made as part of the Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration. Traditionally, a sugar mixture was pressed into a clay mold to make a skull shape that was dried and then inscribed with the name of the deceased on its forehead. The decorations were used to adorn churches, altars, and cemeteries as a way to honor the deceased and enjoy memories of them.

Sugar Skulls are still an important part of Dia de Muertos, and today they are decorated with colorful icing and sometimes non-edible sequins, beads, or feathers. They are designed to be whimsical and humorous icons, not morbid or frightening monsters like many Halloween traditions. Colorful and ornate images of Sugar Skulls often decorate costumes, are painted on faces, or are worn as jewelry.

Students can create and decorate a long-lasting skull from clay pressed into a common tablespoon used as a mold. Add colorful designs with fluorescent tempera paint or markers, place under a black light and enjoy a glowing Dia de Muertos!

GRADES 1-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Divide each package of clay into 1 oz pieces and place in a zip lock bag. Pieces may be larger or smaller, depending on the spoon to be used.
2. Cut wire into 1-1/2" pieces.

Process

1. Press the clay firmly into the round scoop of the spoon and slightly down the top of the handle. A few drops of water can be added to the clay if it is starting to dry. Smooth away any cracks that form with damp fingers.
2. Remove it by prying it gently away from the spoon with fingers.
3. With the flat side down and the curved side up, determine the placement of eye sockets in the center of the skull and make two indents with index fingers.
4. Form a loop with the wire and twist ends together. Insert ends of wire into the soft clay so that only the loop protrudes.
5. For best results, allow the clay to dry before decorating. Markers should not be used on wet clay. If project needs to be completed quickly, use acrylic paint and small brushes and



Materials (required)

Das Modeling Clay, White, 2.2 lb (30538-1042); plan on 1 oz per student

1 tablespoon measure

Blick Copper Wire, 18 gauge, 25 ft (33415-1018); share one spool across class

Materials for decorating, recommend:

Sharpie® Neon Markers, set of 5 (19916-1059) and Sharpie® Ultra Fine Point Markers, Black (21315-2003)

Handy Art Glow-in-the-Dark Acrylic Paint, set of 6 colors, 2 oz bottles (01674-1009); share one across class

Blick Matte Acrylics, 59 ml, white (00727-1023) and black (00727-2023)

Blick Scholastic Golden Taklon Round size 2 (05858-1002); need one per student

Optional Materials

Krylon® Low-Odor Finish, Clear Gloss (23710-1001)

Scratch-Art® Sticks, package of 100 (14907-1045)

Creativity Street® Rhinestones, 375-piece package (61762-1001)

Crafty's® Plumage, 1/2 oz package (approx. 145 feathers) (60909-1003)

Process, continued

paint the front side of the skull. Once paint is dry, turn over and allow air to get to the back side so that clay can finish drying.

- Decorate the hardened skulls with markers, rhinestones, feathers, sequins, or other materials.
- When dry, spray a light coating of a clear acrylic finish to prevent the design from wearing away.
- String the skull onto a string or cord to hang as an ornament or wear as a pendant.

Options

- Fully cover the skull with black paint, allow it to dry completely, then etch the paint away with a pointed wooden scratch stick. This will give the skull a spooky, aged look (see example at right).
- Use a teaspoon to make mini-skulls for small pendants and earrings.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 — Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.

K-4 • Students know the differences between materials, techniques, and processes.

5-8 • Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas.

9-12 • Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.

Content Standard #4 — Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

K-4 • Students identify specific works of art as belonging to particular cultures, times, and places.

5-8 • Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures.

9-12 • Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places.



Step 1: Press clay into a teaspoon and slightly down the handle to make skull shape. Loop a piece of wire and press ends into the top of the skull.



Step 2: Press into the clay with index fingers to form eye sockets.



Step 3: Decorate with fluorescent markers, glow-in-the-dark paint, sequins, feathers, and more. Hang on a string or cord, turn out the lights and enjoy Dia de Muertos!