

StreetWise

A nonprofit newspaper published twice a month to empower Chicago's homeless through employment

Sweet Skulls of Death Museum exhibit celebrates 'Day of the Dead'

by David Ferris

Joaquin Gomez stands patiently by his sugar pots, waiting until the brew is hot enough to make his skulls.

He uses a wooden spoon to stir a medium-sized cooking pot filled with sugar, water and lime juice. The bubbling concoction will soon be a batch of white sugar skulls.

Gomez is demonstrating the art of making these skulls out of sugar for "Dia de Muertos," or "Day of the Dead," the Mexican holiday when the living commemorate those who have passed away. The Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, at 1852 W. 19th St., brought Gomez to Chicago from Mexico to be part of its exhibit, entitled "Calaveras Pa' Todos" ("Skulls for Everyone") that runs until Dec. 4.

On Day of the Dead in Mexico, sugar skulls are indeed for everyone. They grace the ofrendas, or altars, that Mexicans erect to honor dead family and friends. Like key chains or stationery, a skull may be personalized with a name inscribed on it and given to a friend as a gift.

Sugar skulls are not grisly Halloween items.

Covered with sequins, bits of shiny foil and colored frosting, they are the Mexican way to turn the mournful occasion of death into a celebration. Skull makers adorn a skull with sequins, just as Mexicans adorn memories of the deceased with the Day of the Dead celebration.

"They are something you laugh at, something you play with," says Rene Arceo Frutos, art director at the Mexican arts museum. "Something you have reverence for, but something you can almost eat."

At the skull-making table, Gomez silently monitors his pots.

One has been at a rolling boil for some time, but Gomez is unhurried, unconcerned. After 40 years of practice, he knows when it's ready.

Gomez is 62 years old, slight and dark-skinned, with thinning hair combed back. He is dressed in a thick sweater that accentuates his thin neck.

A Sunday crowd of about 15 Latinos and whites watches Gomez fashion skulls. Most are silent, but curious museum visitor Connie Tapia, of Maywood, peppers Gomez with questions. "Why do you do it?" she asks in Spanish.

Gomez answers in kind because he speaks no English. "It's in my blood," he says slowly. "It's on my mind all the time."

Gomez comes from the city of Toluca, west of Mexico City, in the country's high Central Mountains. His father was a candy maker, using Mexico's tropical fruits to make confections. During Day of the Dead season, Gomez's father would make skulls to sell to the community.

Originally, Gomez was never very interested in the candy business. Instead, when he grew up, he operated a bakery for 16 years. But he found

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Photos by Erin Leben

Joaquin Gomez (top) readies a bubbling sugar-skull mixture to pour into clay molds. David, Joaquin's son, uses sequins and frosting to decorate the sugar skulls — part of the 'Day of the Dead' exhibit that runs until Dec. 4 at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1852 W. 19th St.

Days of the Dead

Skulls

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that he missed candy making. He remembered well the practices of his father's art, and started making candy again, especially skulls.

In Toluca, Day of the Dead is a thriving business from early October to early November (the actual holiday is on Nov. 2). Gomez says that 90 families are out in Toluca's market, selling candies, flowers, and other trinkets that become part of local *ofrendas* for miles around.

"My table is five meters (almost 17 feet) long," Gomez boasts.

He fills the table with his decorated wares, some skulls covered in chocolate. Prices range from 200 pesos (15 cents) for the smallest to 50,000 pesos (\$16) for the biggest. Gomez also takes sizable orders for his skulls from Mexico City and other large towns.

Gomez can't estimate how many skulls he makes in a year, but he does know that one year's production uses 1,100 pounds of sugar. From August through September, he makes skulls in Toluca. The month of October is spent in Chicago at the museum.

At the museum, Gomez dips a metal spatula into the pot and examines the strand of sugar that remains stuck to the spatula. He takes the strand into his hand and rolls it speculatively between his fingers.

Still not quite ready.

On the adjoining table are stacks and stacks of skulls. The biggest are larger than a cantaloupe and the smallest no wider than a large grape. The pile of skulls on the left are bare; the pile on the right have been decorated with a riot of squiggly lines and shiny sequins.

The artist who transforms the sweet skulls into celebratory items is David Gomez, Joaquin Gomez' son.

David's work usually draws less attention than his father's. He sits behind the stacks of skulls, engrossed in decorating a skull with the jumble of baubles before him. He glues sequins into the eye sockets and draws frosting tears down the cheekbones. Squeezing a bag of frosting, he sews scraps of shiny colored foil onto the skull and curlicue designs on its crown.

The younger Gomez is clear on the relevance of his work. "It's out of respect for the dead," he said. "To help people remember."

Arceo Frutos, the museum director, wants people to remember Day of the Dead through the "Calaveras Pa-



Photo by Erin Leben

This "Papel Picado," or paper tissue cut-out doll, is of a man selling sugar skulls to children in a market.

Todos" exhibit. This is the exhibit's eighth year. The three months of the exhibit draw 20,000-25,000 visitors of diverse backgrounds.

The exhibit is a chance at a unique education because so few Mexicans have brought their Day of the Dead traditions with them to Chicago.

Arceo Frutos blames it partly on the weather.

The centerpiece of Day of the Dead is to bring food and flowers to the graves of the dead in cemeteries on the night of Nov. 2, and to stay the night, communing with the dead.

But Chicago is not Guernavaca; few could bear the cold of an entire night in a Midwest cemetery in early November. And most cemetery owners in this country take a dim view of the living spending the night among their tombstones. Groundskeepers will often throw away the items Day of the Dead celebrants leave, like food and crafts.

Still, Arceo Frutos has heard rumors

of local Mexicans celebrating Day of the Dead in their homes, and he is involved with efforts to find those people and document how the holiday is celebrated here.

"Death is something you see on a daily basis," Arceo Frutos says.

He argued that Americans need a new way to interpret the death they are seeing more and more on television and on the street. Through the exhibit the museum hopes to expose Americans to a new way of viewing death, Arceo Frutos says, by seeing it as a part of the cycle of life.

At the cooking table, the elder Gomez sweeps up the shards of broken skulls from a previous batch with an ice scraper. He takes the scraps in his hands and dumps them into a fresh pot of water, already warming on the burner.

"Hmmm," an observer comments to his companion. "Recycling."

The Mexican Fine Arts museum hired the Gomezes on the recommen-

dation of the National Museum of Popular Arts in Mexico City, which was familiar with their work. Usually artists who come to demonstrate their crafts are not invited back for another season.

But the Gomezes are an exception. Their skull making is the biggest draw in the whole exhibit, and their product sells like crazy in the museum gift shop. Not many skull makers crank out skulls as quickly as these two. By working steadily and using relatively simple designs, the Gomezes make hundreds of skulls a day. The tiniest skulls sell for 25 cents, the biggest for \$35. "We often sell out," Arceo Frutos says.

The sweet broth has finally boiled long enough.

Gomez sets out on the table an array of odd shaped globes of clay, each made up of two halves held together with a rubber band. "These are the molds," he explains to the onlookers.

With care, Gomez lifts up the boiling pot and pours frothing sugar into the largest mold all the way to the rim. Then he pours the excess fluid into a smaller mold. Left on the inside of each drained mold is a coat of sugar thick enough to be a sturdy skull.

"How long does it take to dry?" an intently observant man asks.

"Only three minutes," Gomez replies, bent to his task of pouring.

The three minutes pass, and the skulls are ready. Gomez snaps the rubber band off of the largest mold. With a crackling noise, a skull comes rolling out. Gomez places it at the front of the table where everyone can see. It glistens under the track lighting. The teeth, nose cleft, and eye sockets look real.

The crowd bends in close.

Tapia, the curious visitor, is still just that. "What will happen when the kids take over?" she asks.

"There's almost no interest among the children," Gomez says, shaking his head. Four of Joaquin's five sons work in the bakery and aren't interested in skull making. "Only him," Gomez said, gesturing to his son David, decorating the skulls his father made.

David Gomez explains that Day of the Dead is an occasion for sadness and happiness, like using sequins and sugar to decorate a skull.

"It depends on how you feel about the person," Gomez said. "If you remember the good things about that person, it can make you happy. But there are others that make you sad because you remember them precisely, and miss them." **SW**