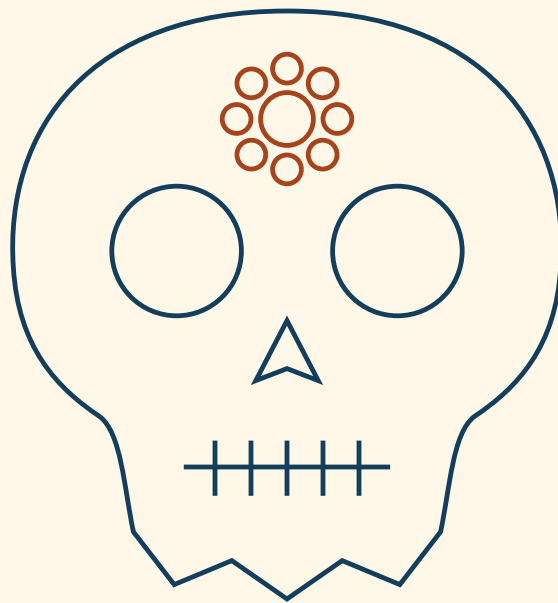


PAPER-MACHE CALAVERA WORKSHOP

Step-by-Step Student Guide + Printable Templates



MAKE • DRY • PAINT • DECORATE • REFLECT

A classroom art and culture project

DayoftheDeadArt.com | California Teacher Resources



Workshop Overview

Learning goals, cultural context and schedule

WHAT STUDENTS WILL LEARN

- Build a lightweight three-dimensional calavera form using paper and paste.
- Practice layering, drying, painting and decorative design techniques.
- Recognize the calavera as an artistic symbol widely associated with Día de los Muertos.
- Create an original design using color, pattern, flowers and personal meaning.

CULTURAL NOTE

Calaveras - artistic skulls - are widely associated with Día de los Muertos. They appear in sugar art, printmaking, sculpture, face painting and other creative forms. Present them as part of a living Mexican cultural tradition centered on remembrance, family, creativity and honoring people who have died.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM SCHEDULE

- Session 1 (45-60 min): plan the design and build the base form.
- Session 2 (45-60 min): add paper-mache layers; allow full drying time.
- Session 3 (45-60 min): paint the base and decorative details.
- Session 4 (optional): gallery walk, artist statement and reflection.



Materials + Safety

Prepare the workspace before students begin

MATERIALS PER STUDENT OR PAIR

- Recycled newspaper or thin scrap paper, torn into strips
- Small balloon OR crumpled paper/cardboard skull base
- Masking tape
- White school glue + water (recommended classroom paste)
- Mixing bowl and craft brush
- Acrylic or tempera paint
- Medium brush + small detail brush
- Pencil or washable marker
- Optional: tissue flowers, ribbon, sequins or paper decorations

SIMPLE CLASSROOM PASTE

Mix 2 parts white school glue with 1 part water. Stir until smooth. Make only what you need for the session and keep tables covered.

SAFETY + CLEANUP

- Use non-toxic, age-appropriate art materials.
- Never cover a student's face or head with wet paper-mache.
- Wash hands after handling paste and paint.
- Dry projects completely in a ventilated area before painting.
- Teachers should handle sharp or hot tools if the lesson uses them.

Build the Calavera Form

Student steps 1-4

1

PLAN YOUR SHAPE

Sketch your calavera first. Decide where the eyes, nose, teeth and main patterns will go.

2

MAKE THE BASE

Lightly inflate a small balloon or shape crumpled paper into an oval. Tape on folded-cardboard cheek and jaw shapes.

3

CHECK THE SILHOUETTE

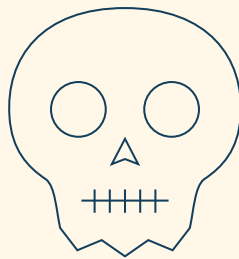
Look from the front and side. Adjust the jaw and cheeks with tape. Keep the form lightweight and stable.

4

TEAR PAPER STRIPS

Tear strips about 1 x 5 inches. Torn edges blend smoothly. Prepare a pile before adding paste.

TIP: Your calavera may be symmetrical or stylized - make it your own.





Paper-Mache + Drying

Student steps 5-8

5

DIP + REMOVE EXTRA PASTE

Dip one paper strip in paste, then slide it gently between two fingers to remove drips. Coat it without soaking it.

6

OVERLAP THE STRIPS

Lay strips across the base and overlap the edges. Smooth each strip to reduce bumps and air pockets.

7

BUILD 2-3 THIN LAYERS

Change the strip direction between layers for strength. Thin, even layers dry more reliably.

8

DRY COMPLETELY

Place the project in a ventilated drying area. Drying may take 24-48 hours. Do not paint while the form is damp.

READY-TO-PAINT TEST

The surface should feel firm, dry and room temperature - not cool or soft. If it feels damp, give it more time.

Paint + Decorate

Student steps 9-12

9

DRAW THE FEATURES

Lightly sketch the eye shapes, nose and teeth. Use the printable template as inspiration, not as a rule.

10

PAINT A BASE COLOR

Paint the whole dry surface. White is common in many decorative skull designs, but other colors can work too.

11

ADD PATTERNS + SYMBOLS

Add flowers, dots, leaves, hearts, lines or geometric patterns. Repeat colors and shapes to unify the design.

12

FINISH + DISPLAY

Let paint dry. Add optional paper details with teacher-approved adhesive. Complete the artist statement.

DESIGN FORMULA: 3 MAIN COLORS + 2 REPEATING MOTIFS



Student Design Planner

Sketch first, then build

Name: _____

Date: _____

FRONT-VIEW SKETCH



My 3 main colors:

My repeating motifs:

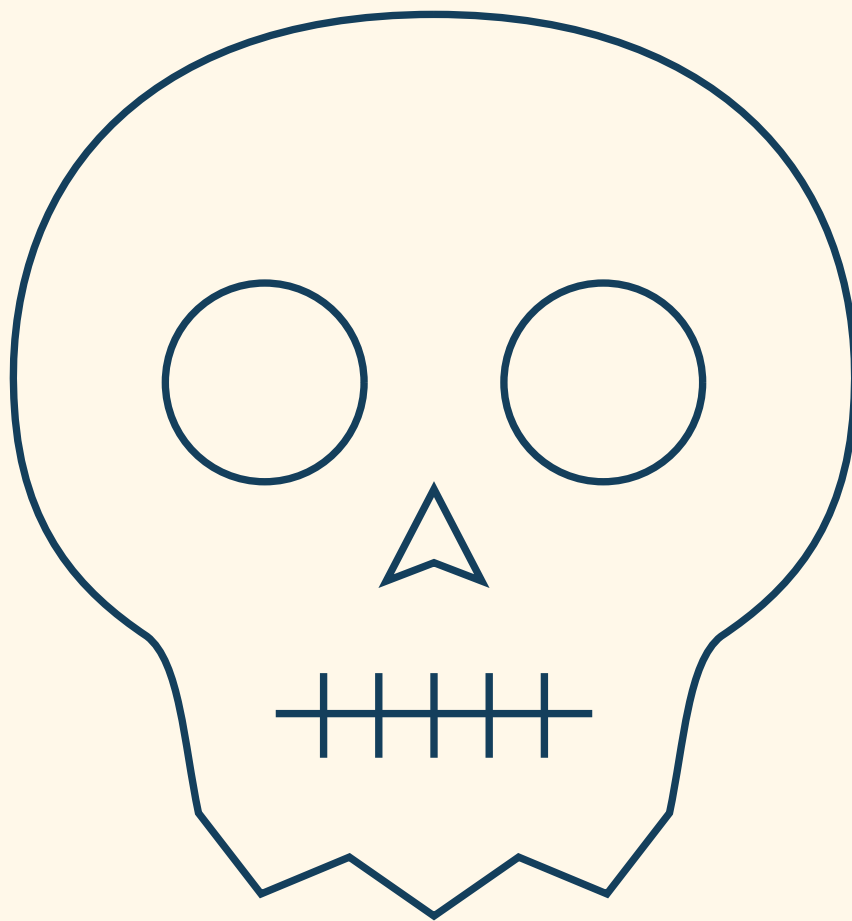
A person, memory, place or idea that inspires my design:

What I want viewers to notice first:

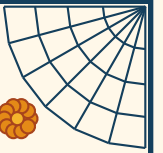
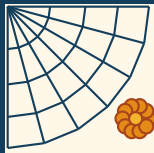
One respectful fact I learned about calaveras or Día de los Muertos:

Printable Skull Template

Trace, plan color, or use as a reference - print at 100%



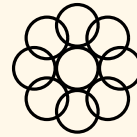
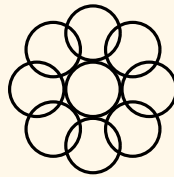
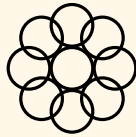
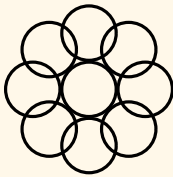
Use this outline to practice a color plan or trace the silhouette onto cardstock.
For a larger sculpture, enlarge this page on a copier before tracing.



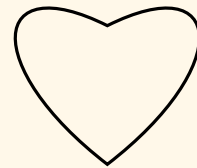
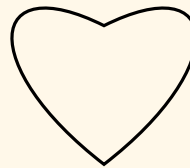
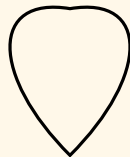
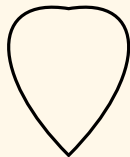
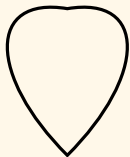
Decoration Templates

Trace, cut, repeat, combine and invent your own

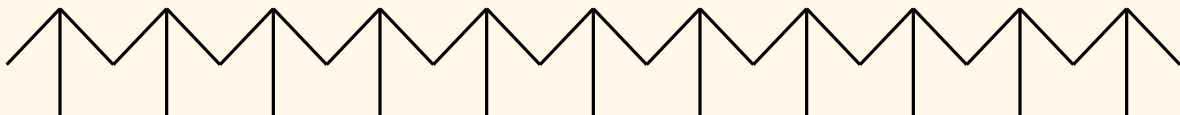
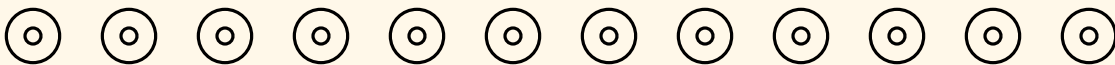
FLOWERS



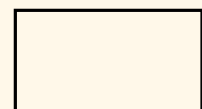
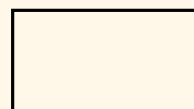
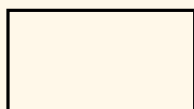
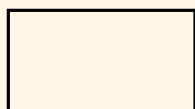
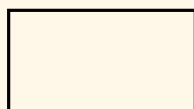
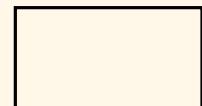
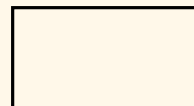
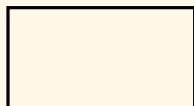
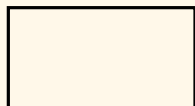
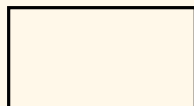
LEAVES + HEARTS



BORDERS + REPEATING PATTERNS



DESIGN YOUR OWN MOTIF





Finish + Reflect

Student checklist and artist statement

FINAL PROJECT CHECKLIST

- ☐ My paper-mache is completely dry and firm.
- ☐ My calavera has clear facial features.
- ☐ I used color and repeating patterns intentionally.
- ☐ I included at least two decorative motifs.
- ☐ My design is original and respectfully presented.
- ☐ My workspace and tools are clean.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My calavera is titled:

The colors and patterns I chose are:

The idea, memory or inspiration behind my design is:

One thing I learned during this workshop is:

GALLERY WALK

Notice one technique, one meaningful detail and one question in a classmate's work.