The text below is information that correlates with the slides on the Day of the Dead Calaveras Classroom Presentation. It is here for your convenience, as a general guideline of information you may choose to include in your classroom discussion.

SLIDE 1: INTRODUCTION

People who celebrate Día de los muertos believe that on November 1st and 2nd spirits visit their relatives and friends on Earth. A few weeks before the holiday, families prepare to welcome the souls of their relatives and ancestors who return at this time every year.

Day of the Dead is not the same as Halloween. It is a time for remembering loved ones and honoring their memories. It is a time for families and friends to come together to reflect on life and pass on family stories.

The holiday is the result of blending indigenous and Catholic traditions. Many traditions in Latin America resulted from mixing rituals already familiar to indigenous groups with new rituals from Europe. It is a product of religious syncretism.

Optional: Day of the Dead originated as the Festival of the Dead, observed by the Mexica (meh-ChIC-ah) empire. The Mexica are now known as the Aztecs and ruled the Valley of Mexico up to the Spanish invasion.

The Festival of the Dead lasted two months and celebrated that year’s harvest. The Mexica did not believe in heaven or hell, because Christianity was unknown to them. They believed that deceased spirits when to rest in Mictlan (meek-tlan), the Mexica underworld. Once a year, the spirits returned to earth and were reunited with their families. To welcome them, the Mexica prepared food offerings taken from the harvest, burned incense, and scattered marigold petals.

SLIDE 2: Calaveras Everywhere!

Today, we see Calaveras everywhere! Do you recognize this character? She is from The Book of Life. How is she dressed? What does her outfit say about her? How would you describe her?

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1 The blending of beliefs. When the Spanish invaded America, the people who lived here had never heard of Christianity. They practiced a variety of indigenous religions. As Christianity spread through both coerced and voluntary conversion, the indigenous people of the Americas began combining rituals, beliefs and symbols from both the new European (Christian) religion and the religions that they had been practicing before the invasion.

2 The term Aztec was coined by Alexander von Humboldt, a German explorer. It is derived from the word Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Mexica.
SLIDE 3: Today we will learn how the Calavera—especially a calavera named Catrina became so popular and why she is now the main symbol that we identify with Día de los muertos.

SLIDE 4: José Guadalupe Posada

Jose Guadalupe Posada is the artist who made La Catrina famous. One of Mexico’s earliest recognized artists, he lived and worked in Mexico City, where he created designs and illustrations for the prensa del centavo (‘penny press’ or ‘one cent newspaper’), the cheap tabloids that were sold on the street.

These publications featured gruesome crime stories, gossip about politicians, ghost stories, songs, and recipes, and funny poems and rhymes. Most people couldn’t read, so the pictures were important in telling the story.

Look at the page from this tabloid. It’s called “El Gran Panteon Amoroso” (The Great Temple of Love). It shows the different types of characters and couples that one might see walking the streets of Mexico City.

SLIDE 5: La Catrina and El Catrin

This couple, taken from the tabloid we just saw, represents a wealthy Mexican couple at the turn of the 20th century. How are they dressed? Their fancy clothes and hats let us know that they have money and take the time to dress stylishly.

Fancy people are often called Catrins or Catrinas in Mexico. If you’ve played Lotería, you’ve probably seen the image of an old-fashioned catrin.

SLIDE 6: La Calavera Catrina

The most famous calavera of all is this Catrina with the feathered hat. With a big grin and a huge hat, she is hard to miss and easy to remember. Created as a zinc engraving, Posada re-used this image various times. The publisher of the tabloid where he worked kept using this image to illustrate poems, songs, and stories for many years even after the artist’s death. Distributed by the thousands to a mostly illiterate audience, the visual impact of the image is shown through the way that Catrina has come to symbolize Mexican humor and to personify Day of the Dead rituals and observances.

SLIDE 7: Catrina Becomes Famous

After Posada’s death, an artist named Diego Rivera, one of Mexico’s most famous artists, payed homage to Posada and Catrina in his mural Dream of an Afternoon in Alameda Park. Rivera portrays himself as a young boy, holding Catrina’s right hand in his, while her left arm is held by her creator, José Guadalupe Posada.
SLIDE 8 (OPTIONAL): Sugar Skulls

Today, we see Calaveras most commonly is the ofrenda\(^3\) (oh-FRIEND-ah), or offering. These Calaveras, made of sugar, are colorful and can be personalized.

Sugar skulls are made by mixing sugar, meringue powder, and a little water together. The mixture is pressed into a plastic mold and allowed to set. It is then pushed out of the mold and allowed to dry. Once the skull is ready, it is decorated with icing, foil, and sequins. You usually see people’s names written on the skulls, too. It is considered thoughtful to give someone a sugar skull with their name on it!

SLIDE 9 (OPTIONAL): Sugar Sculptures

Like Día de los muertos itself, the sugar skull is also the result of European practices blending with indigenous American traditions!

Sugar decorations were first produced in the Americas in the late 1600s, about 150 years after the Spanish invasion.

The practice came to Mexico and South America through Italian missionaries. Sugar cane was grown throughout plantations in the Caribbean, making processed sugar plentiful and cheap.

Mestizo artisans were taught to create inexpensive religious decorations, like the crucifix in this image, from sugar. Back then, they used clay molds instead of plastic molds.

SLIDE 10 (OPTIONAL): Ancient Skulls

Skulls were very important to the Mexica. They decorated their temples with the skulls of captured warriors from rival groups. The skulls were displayed on a rack called a Tzompantli\(^4\) (Tzom-PANT-lee).

Tzompantli represented the offerings they made to their gods in the form of a human sacrifice. These sacrifices were thought to feed the Gods.

The great Tzompantli of Tenochtitlán\(^5\) is believed to have held between 30 and 60 thousand skulls and completely intimidated the Spanish when they first stumbled upon it!

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\(^3\) “Offering”, the Day of the dead altar
\(^4\) Literally, “Skull banner”
\(^5\) Tenochtitlán was the capital of the Mexica empire.
SLIDE 11 (OPTIONAL): Stone Tzompantli

Stone depictions of *Tzompantli* can still be found in Mexican ruins and museums. They show the importance of making offerings to their gods. The skull is one of the symbols that was carried over into Day of the Dead from the original *Mexica* traditions.

SLIDE 12 (OPTIONAL): Sugar Skulls Today

No one knows who first began decorating *ofrendas* with sugar skulls. It’s a tradition that we can only speculate about. We can assume that it began pretty soon after sugar decorations were introduced, which was less than 200 years after the Spanish first arrived. This means that it began very soon after the Days of the Dead were established in Mexico.

Why would indigenous artists create skulls for altars instead of crucifixes or other religious decorations? The memories of *Tzompantlis* as offerings may have been fresh in the minds of the artisans.

Some scholars suspect that they used the sugar skulls to keep part of their ancient traditions alive. They may have been worshipping their ancient gods in secret by offering the sugar skulls. We’ll never really know.

SLIDE 13: Skulls Everywhere!

Today, skulls are the main symbol for Day of the Dead. People paint their faces like *Catrinas*, often decorating their hair with flowers or wearing fancy hats.

**Questions to ask**: How would you feel if someone gave you a sugar skull? How is this skull different from the ones you see at Halloween?

**Optional**: Complete the Sugar Skull activity in the PDF packet.