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## Mexican artist brings experience into San Rafael's Dia de los Muertos

Oaxacan artist brings experience into San Rafael's Dia de los Muertos



Courtesy of Art Works Downtown  
Mexican artist Ernesto Hernandez-Olmos plays one of his handmade instruments.

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Growing up in Oaxaca, Mexico, Ernesto Hernandez-Olmos spent his weekends traveling to different sacred sites with his father. These spots became his playground, places where he explored and connected to his culture and its traditions. It's something the multifaceted artist has carried with him into his artistic pursuits, while educating adults and kids alike about native cultures and their art forms.

After studying plastic arts in Mexico, Hernandez-Olmos moved to the Bay Area in 1997. He then branched out, putting a contemporary spin on traditional music from Oaxaca, making instruments based on Meso-American designs and taking part in Toltec-, Zapotec- and Aztec-inspired performances for schools, cultural events and traditional gatherings around California and the globe.



Courtesy of Ernesto Hernandez-Olmos

Ernesto Hernandez-Olmos' "Mujer Kuna" was a part of the Marin Arts Council's "Las Expresiones" exhibit.

His three murals can be seen in Oakland, and his paintings have been on display at the de Young Museum, the Legion of Honor and the California Academy of Sciences.

For many years, he's been a familiar face at San Rafael's Dia de Los Muertos celebrations. Sheltering at his Mexican hometown this year due to the pandemic, he's still taking part in this month's online festivities, including teaching a paper flower-making workshop at 5 p.m. Tuesday and one on the significance of a traditional altar in the Oaxacan-style at 3 p.m. Oct. 26.

**Q** What's your connection with Marin?

**A** For at least 18 years, I have worked with Douglas Mundo at the now Multicultural Center of Marin, working with the Canal community, supporting Day of the Dead events, Cinco de Mayo and many other projects for them. I worked with different nonprofits in the area like the Canal Welcome Center, Canal Alliance, Youth in Arts and Alcohol Justice. One of my interests is using music and sound to help with mental health. I tried to bring my programs to the area as well as sound healing for the community. I've now started working here in my own communities, teaching kids music and building instruments.

**Q** When did you get into art?

**A** I had a lot of imagination like any child, but I was a very quiet kid. I would sit looking at the wall, looking for figures on the walls of this old home that were telling me stories. I laid there all night, and I got pencils and I would trace the faces or the animals and found these imaginary images. I started drawing and tracing the figures and that's when I got more involved. I started taking classes on folklore art, and later I went to architecture school, but I got out and signed up for art school. That's when I really defined my career.

**Q** What drew you to music?

**A** I always love flutes, how people played the flutes and the ocarinas. My grandma, when I accompanied her to the market, she'd buy me these instruments and that piqued my attention. And I always loved dancing and to move my body.

**Q** Why is it important for you to keep these cultures alive?

**A** After the devastation and invasion of Christopher Columbus to the Americas and the mass killing of native people, this invasion tried to destroy any powerful culture that lived before they arrived. They tried to make us forget who we were. When you don't know where to go, who you are or where you come from, you are like a tree without roots. But, when your roots are strong and you know who you are, it will not be easy to take you down. I am representing my culture, making people remember through the beautiful traditions like Day of the Dead, which is usually misunderstood.

**Q** What do people misunderstand?

**A** The first is, not all of Mexico celebrate Day of the Dead the way we celebrate it in Oaxaca; it's completely different. I always try to bring the roots of where the arts or this tradition comes from. It's important when we talk about papel picado, a beautiful decoration, but it has a magical meaning. It was used to be pure and heal people, or to communicate with the sacred elements, asking for water, for example, or for harvest, and destroying maleficent things. This is my crusade — to wake up not just Latinos but everybody to at least respect these ancient cultures.