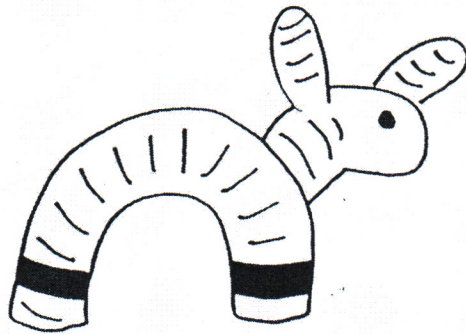


# DAY OF THE THREE KINGS

January 6

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In Mexico and Central America, the celebration of Christmas begins on December 16, but young children receive gifts on January 6, the Day of the Three Kings (El Día de los Tres Reyes).



On January 5, children write letters to the wise men (Magi) and put them in their shoes. Nacimientos (nativity scenes) are set out the evening of January 5 and the Magi place the children's gifts near the nacimientos. Children leave a bundle of hay or a pot of water for the Kings' camels.

A traditional big bread (Rosca de los Reyes) is baked and cut into small pieces and enjoyed by all the family. The bread has a small doll baked inside. The person who finds the doll in his or her bread piece is blessed with good luck and gives a party for the gathered guests on Candlemas Day, February 2, the day Mexicans and Central Americans bless the seeds for a bountiful harvest (see page 48).

Mexican and Central Americans have been far ahead of North Americans in their love of making and giving toy miniatures to children as gifts. Miniatures are made for the Day of the Three Kings from clay or chicle. Chicle comes from the Sapodilla tree.

The Day of the Three Kings is as much a part of Central American culture as Thanksgiving is in the United States.

# ♥X♥ BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS ♥X♥

January 17

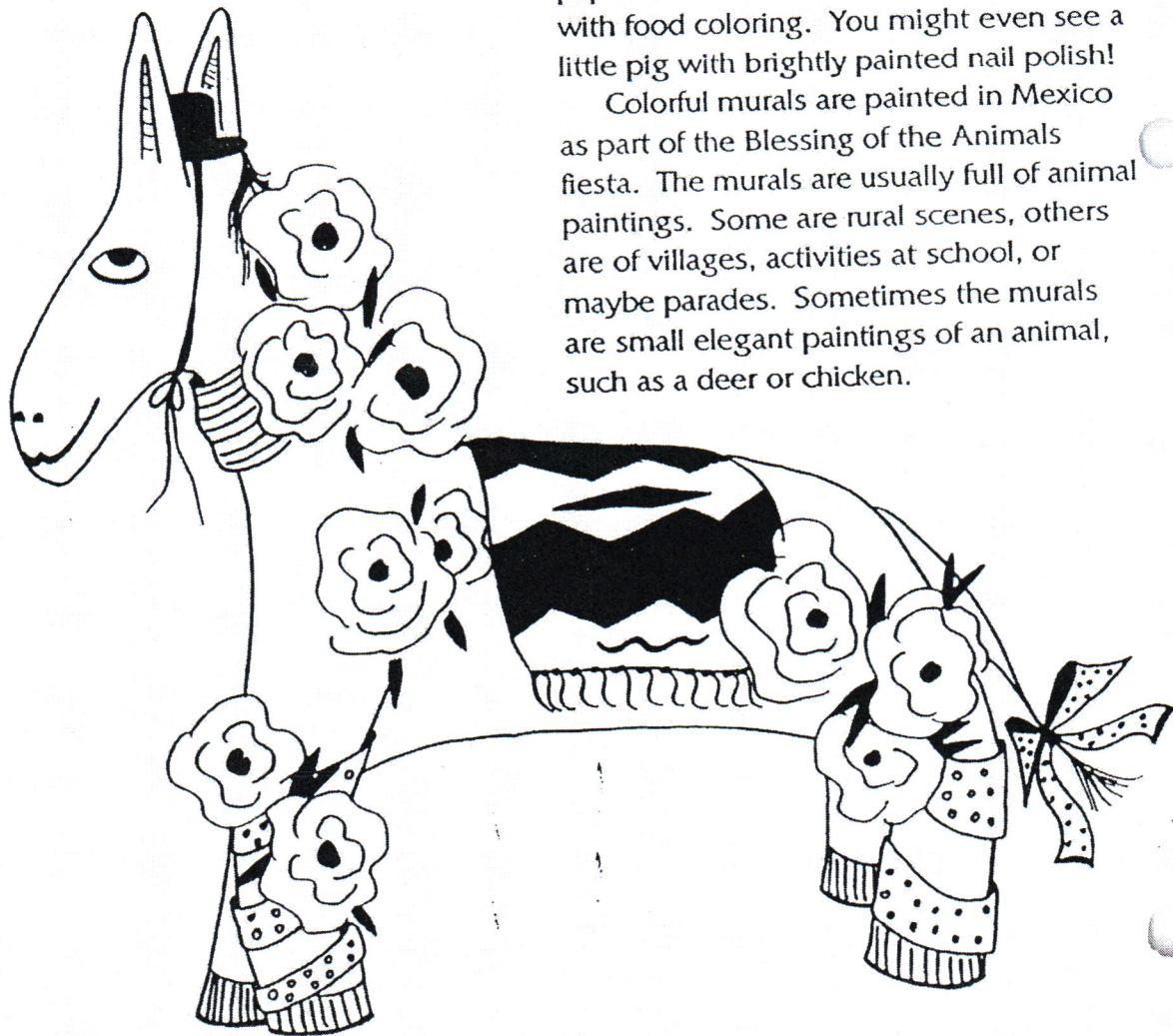
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The Blessing of the Animals is a popular fiesta throughout Mexico and Central America. Animals are revered and thought by some to have mystical powers. This fiesta is a blending of attitudes from both early Native American civilizations and the European influences.

On January 17, people decorate their chickens, ducks, pigs, oxen, dogs, and other animals with flowers and ribbons and take them to the church to be blessed by a religious leader.

In many villages, animal parades take place as well. Some animals are adorned with flowers, many are draped with crepe-paper streamers, and a few are painted with food coloring. You might even see a little pig with brightly painted nail polish!

Colorful murals are painted in Mexico as part of the Blessing of the Animals fiesta. The murals are usually full of animal paintings. Some are rural scenes, others are of villages, activities at school, or maybe parades. Sometimes the murals are small elegant paintings of an animal, such as a deer or chicken.





# CANDLEMAS



February 2

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February 2 is Candlemas Day all over Mexico and Central America, the day of the blessing of the seeds or crops. Today, there are many kinds of Mexican and Central American fiestas held in conjunction with Candlemas. In the country, elaborate festivals include lit candles and food. Traditionally, amate-paper witches are made and placed in fields and gardens to protect the crops. These dolls are called *brujas*. White *brujas* are believed to bring good spirits, while brown *brujas* are believed to ward off evil spirits. The *brujas* are stacked on the ground by the crops. In the Otomi culture of San Pablito, the state of Puebla, there are as many different doll patterns as there are fruits and vegetables to protect.





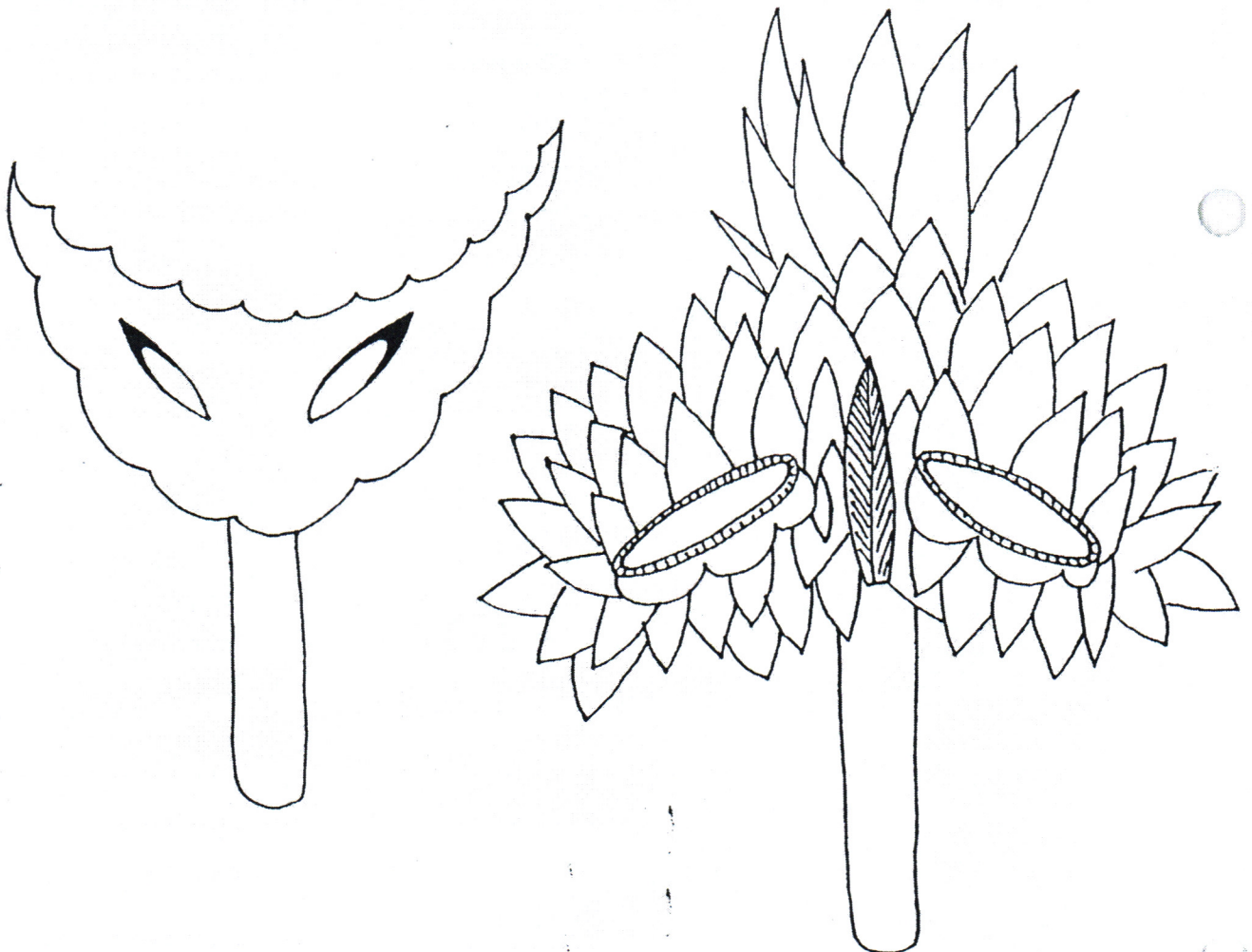
# CARNIVAL



February

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Huge carnivals are held in Brazil, but delightful smaller ones are held all over Mexico and Central America. Part of the tradition of Carnival is wearing masks and colorful costumes and dancing in parades. Usually the first marchers are uniformed youngsters from schools. Carnival fiestas are held in homes, private clubs, or in public places, such as schools and even government buildings. Carnival occurs on Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent), although the date is changeable because it is based on the lunar calendar. The Carnival celebration was introduced to Mexico and Central America by the Europeans.



# ♥✕♥ EASTER ♥✕♥

March/April

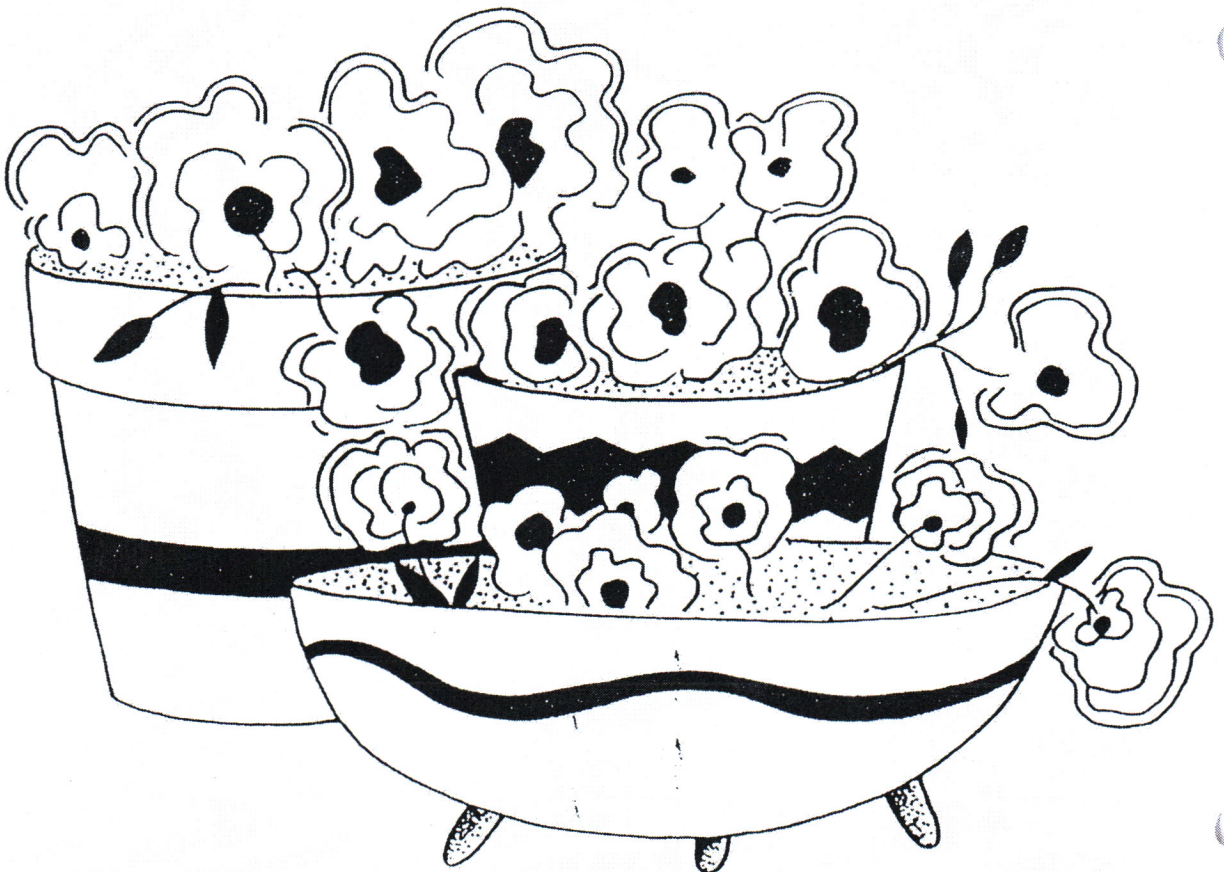
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Easter in Mexico and Central America is in late March or early April. This celebration usually includes Palm Sunday, a celebration that has a permanent place in the Mexican and Central American calendar year.

On the Friday before Palm Sunday in many Mexican and Central American towns or cities, carpets made from flowers are spread and little pots of flowers pop up all over town. Flowers are plentiful in Mexico and Central America.

Palm pieces made from cornhusks or raffia are made in great variety. They are sold in the markets during this time of the year, used to decorate churches, and given to worshippers on Palm Sunday. There are some Aztec ceremonies that have remained in use during this time of the year. After the palm pieces are made, the leftover palms are burned. This ceremony comes from the old Aztec belief that burning leftover palms will prevent lightning from striking their homes.

Mexican and Central Americans make papier-mâché masks to wear for a traditional Good Friday procession. People carry lanterns, play musical instruments, and wave flags. Many wear traditional Mexican and Central American costumes.



# ♥✕♥ ST. JOSEPH'S DAY ♥✕♥

March 19

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St. Joseph's Day is a big fiesta in Costa Rica. Each country in Central America has its own patron saint. A holiday is always celebrated in the saint's honor. The saint for Costa Rica is St. Joseph.

Early on, settlers came from Europe to Costa Rica, but the land wasn't very productive and few people survived there. It was only after its independence from Spain in 1821 and the subsequent civil war giving "freedom to Costa Rica" that Costa

Rica as a country finally developed. Costa Rica's roots are Spanish, Mestizo, and, in a remote region, Indian.



In 1825, the government offered free Costa Rican land to coffee growers. Within twenty-five years, coffee produced from the new plantations was being exported to other parts of the world—transported to the coast in small ox carts. Replicas of these carts are made in different sizes using a variety of materials and different colors. In the country today, many people still use these beautifully decorated carts to carry their fruits and vegetables to the market.

Costa Rica's development is unique in Central America. The population of Costa Rica is about ninety percent Spanish. However, customs from both Spain and Italy are evident in its St. Joseph's Day celebration. The most beautiful art pieces are displayed on this day, especially portraits of St. Joseph.

Special breads are baked, Lenten foods are prepared, and gifts are exchanged. Visits to at least five homes for festive meals are traditional as well.