

# Quinceañeras

CELEBRATION, JOY,  
AND ETHNIC PRIDE

September 24–December 4, 2022  
Campbell Gallery,  
Spurlock Museum of World Cultures

This exhibit highlights the joy of quinceañera celebrations in the U.S. and contextualizes popular culture representations of this important coming-of-age event for Latinx/es and Latin Americans. Quinceañeras brings together artifacts, photographs, and documentary videos.

Curated by Professor Angharad N. Valdivia,  
Stephanie Pérez, Ariana Cano, and Dr. Dora  
Valkanova.



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## Vestidos de quinceañera. Estados Unidos. 1983–2019 Quinceañera dresses. United States. 1983–2019

El vestuario de la quinceañera es la parte central de la celebración y con frecuencia es el componente más costoso o laborioso. El traje de la quinceañera es formal, y la feminidad se presenta con un vestido de fiesta elegante que evoca a los vestidos de novia y de las princesas. Estos vestidos se hacen en varias formas, tallas, y colores, y tradicionalmente se hacen en colores blanco, rosa, o pasteles para simbolizar la niñez y la virginidad. Las quinceañeras contemporáneas hacen resaltar a sus personalidades con colores vivos y elementos brillantes, y a veces lucen trajes de pantalón y chaqueta en vez de un vestido.

Quinceañera attire is usually formal, and femininity is typically displayed with an elegant ball gown reminiscent of wedding and princess dresses. These gowns come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors, and are traditionally white, pink, or pastel shades to symbolize girlhood and virginity. Contemporary quinceañeras show off their personalities with bold color choices and sparkly elements, and sometimes wear suits instead of gowns.

## Anillo de XV años, Illinois, 2014 XV Años ring, Illinois, 2014

Las quinceañeras a veces reciben una pulsera, un par de aretes, y una cadena como obsequios de parte de su madrina y padrino. Estos regalos, hechos de oro o plata y adornados con piedras preciosas, son símbolos de las pertenencias de la madurez. Además, el peinado y el maquillaje de la quinceañera a veces se coronan con una tiara, indicando que la fiesta se enfoca en ella. Estos adornos simbolizan que la quinceañera ha dejado la sencillez de su niñez y que integra a las reglas sociales de la feminidad.

Quinceaneras might receive jewelry from their godparents, like a bracelet, earrings, and a necklace. The jewelry, in gold or silver and adorned with birthstones, becomes symbolic of the quinceañera's adult possessions. In addition, quinceañeras wear elaborate make-up and hairdos often topped with a tiara, indicating that the quinceañera is the center of attention. Such adornment symbolizes leaving behind a carefree simplicity in girlhood and entering societal norms of constructed femininity in womanhood.



## Arreglo de cristales, Illinois, 2019 Crystal bouquet, Illinois, 2019

A veces las quinceañeras asisten a las clases de confirmación para prepararse espiritualmente para la madurez. Se realizan rezos y ofrendas al altar de la Virgen Maria, a quien se le pide interceder para la protección de la niña mientras llega a ser mujer. Un rosario y candelas especiales llaman a la mente la comunión católica, cuyo se bendicen en la misa con una biblia, las joyas, y el cojín que se usa para hincarse durante la misa.

Sometimes, quinceañeras attend confirmation classes that spiritually prepare them for adulthood. Prayers and ofrendas (religious offerings) traditionally are made to the altar of the Virgin Mary, who is asked to intercede for protection of the girl as she is becoming a woman. A rosary and special candles call to mind Catholic communion and are blessed along with a bible, all of the jewelry, and the pillow used to kneel for mass.





## Pastel de quinceañera, Illinois, 2022

### Quinceañera cake, Illinois, 2022

Las quinceañeras serían incompletas sin un pastel/una torta para terminar la cena y las festividades. Con los colores y temas de la fiesta, el postre varía en tamaño, la cantidad de niveles, y sabores. Al fin de la fiesta, los invitados se llevan recuerdos a casa como regalos de agradecimiento de parte de la familia de la quinceañera. Muchas veces, en los centros de mesa se hacen de arreglos de flores verdaderos o artificiales, y de estos se hacen recuerdos también.

Quinceañera parties are incomplete without a cake to top off the banquet and festivities. These elaborate pastries often match the color and motifs of the party, and range in size, tiers, and flavors. At the end of the night, party guests are typically given a recuerdo (keepsake) to take home as a thank-you gift from the quinceañera's family. Many times, the centerpieces of each banquet table are composed of real or artificial floral arrangements, and these become recuerdos in effect as well.

## Coreografía, Illinois, 2022

### Choreography, Illinois, 2022

Uno de los procesos más largos de las quinceañeras son los bailes que se curan, aprenden, y se encarnan como una parte grande y espectacular de sus fiestas. Las prácticas de las coreografías usualmente ocurren desde una semana a tres meses, y a veces hasta seis meses, antes de la fiesta. Estos bailes incluyen la entrada, el vals, el baile de la última muñeca, el baile con los padrinos, y el baile sorpresa. Con su corte de honor compuesta de familia y amistades, las jóvenes quinceañeras exploran a sus raíces culturales, clase financiera, género, y sexualidad.

As one of the longest processes of the entire quinceañera experience, quinceañeras curate, learn, and embody a set of dances that compose a large part of her presentation and the spectacle of the party. Choreography dance practices for the quinceañera typically occur a week to three months, and sometimes up to six months, before the party. These dances include la entrada ( grand entrance), el vals ( waltz), el baile de la última muñeca (the Last Doll dance), el baile con los padrinos (godparents' dance), and el baile sorpresa (surprise dance). Along with her corte de honor (court of honor) made up of family and friends, quinceañeras explore their cultural roots, class, gender, and sexuality.





## La última muñeca, Illinois, 2018 The final doll, Illinois, 2018

Las fiestas de quinceañera son un tiempo de primicias y nuevos comienzos, pero también son la etapa final de la niñez. La última muñeca se presenta a la quinceañera para significar que la quinceañera ya no jugará con las muñecas como mujer. Con un baile para marcar este momento, ella pasa la muñeca a alguien más joven que ella. La transición de los zapatos planos a los tacones altos trae un significado similar, en cual la quinceañera dejará a la niñez y ahora se vestirá como adulta.

Quinceañeras are a time of firsts and new beginnings, but also the end of old things. La última muñeca (the last doll) is presented to the quinceañera to signify that the quinceañera will no longer play with dolls as she enters womanhood. With a brief dance to symbolize this moment, she passes the doll off to a younger girl in her family. The transition from flat shoes to high heels during the party carries a similar meaning, as the quinceañera departs childhood and will now dress the part.



## FEATURED INTERVIEW

with Georgia Barton, Ariana Cano, and Stephanie Perez  
(condensed for clarity and publication)

### **Where and when was your quinceañera held?**

SP: My quinceañera was in 2005. It took place in Los Angeles. My mom is a single mom and she had a quinceañera when she was growing up, so in order to follow in the legacy of all of our cousins, aunts, grandmothers, she decided that I should have one and I happily accepted. The women in my family had quinceañeras. It kind of started with my great grandmothers: my aunts had my great aunts had quinceañeras, my aunts, my mom's cousins, my mom, and a lot of relatives in Guatemala also had a quinceañera each.

AC: So my quinceañera celebration, I feel, was kind of traditional and very much similar to a lot of quinceañeras out in the IE – the Inland Empire – in the sense that I did have a small salon, I did have padrinos, I had damas, I had chambelanes. I had kind of all the components in the sense that I did get to go to church, I took the pictures at a park. I then had my baile sorpresa, my vals, the whole thing. We got a DJ. Back in the day, like in the 60s, even in the 80s, our dresses were traditionally white, and so, because of that, I think I was still kind of in that mindset of having a white with green dress, like with a little bit of green, and that's kind of the style that I went for.

GB: My tía Mercedes, in the spring of 1983, came to Illinois in her last months of her life because she was diagnosed with cancer, but she didn't tell anyone. But she spent a great deal of time with me. She was always in my little corner. The one thing is that she was talking to my mother about having a quinceañera. Little did I know what it was, but I remember getting up a couple times in the middle of the night and she would be sewing this dress. She just probably had a conversation with my mother saying, "let's make a quinceañera, and she wanted to do something nice for me. I had no idea at the time that those were that was going to be the last year I was ever going to see her. My dress is not just a dress – this dress is something that she made in the last months of her life and she didn't have to do it, but she did it anyway with love.

### **Is there a ceremonial or religious component in a typical quinceañera?**

AC: Depending on the location of the church and whatnot, they then go through that religious sacrament. It's important that these quinces have typically a bouquet - a ramo - for the Virgen that they take. They have symbolic kind of items, like a pillow so they can kneel. They have a rosario and la biblia, and both of those are symbolic as items to use and guide you a quinceañera into womanhood. I remember the church ceremony being very symbolic for me. In order to have a quince as a Catholic, we have to go through a sacrament, and that sacrament is confirmation. You cannot have a mass without having your confirmation in ink and in Catholic religion, you can't have a mass if you're not confirmed yet in that religion, so I went through that process before my quinceañera and it took two years. Through all of that, the priest was telling me, "this is what it means to be a woman," and relating that to the Virgin Mary, La Virgen. It was kind of a vision of a trajectory of my life that was very symbolic for me. After the sacrament, you typically go and take pictures at a park or anywhere pretty with your court, the padrinos, your parents.

## What did your quince look like?

AC: On quince day, you start off with getting ready. Getting ready took me four hours. I had extremely long hair back in the day. I got up I think at like five in the morning and I wasn't done until nine-ish. By that time, I had to go back to my house and, typically for quinces, you go back so the photographer could see you getting ready, even though you're already ready. You're supposedly taking prep shots, like putting on your make up, laying out your dress.

SP: We got up really early. My mom and my aunt helped me do my hair and make-up. We got ready at my grandpa's house, as my chambelanes and damas came over fully dressed, make-up and hair already done. My mom and my aunt helped me get into my quinceañera dress. We all piled into a limo that my grandpa rented for us, and went to the church, where I was baptized, and I had my quinceañera mass there. Then we drove to Burbank to take pictures before we went to the hall the banquet hall in Glendale where we had the quinceañera party.

GB: Mine wasn't so fancy. It was [the] early 80s. All we had was a nice cake, lots of presents, me dressing up, lots of family gathering with presents, and me after danc[ing] with my father which I didn't understand but someone explain me later. And with that, it's very simple: we just honor the girl. That's it. Lots of stuff; we just honor the girl. Some may have a few things added to it, but with me it was very, very simple.

## What elements typically comprise quinceañera choreography?

AC: Typically, a traditional quinceañera has components starting at least one to two years in advance. Typically, I would choreograph some 6 to 3 months before the quinceañera itself, we would start practices. These practices would be either weekly, twice a week, three times a week, depending on the hours, like maybe two hours, three hours a week. And so we would go on doing these practices and dancing and all the way up to quinceañera week. We would practice every day, we would go to the salon. A quinceañera and her court don't start their entrada until a lot of people are at the party. Their entrada is kind of like entering into the space of the salon and it is choreographed typically. From the choreography, you move on into the eating, if they have like a mariachi or any music to have in the background of dinner. After that, we start the dances. It typically goes from el vals, which is the big more traditional dance, so they're dancing the vals; it's a whole performance. They then dance with their dad. They then have the Última Muñeca dance, in which the quinceañera gets a doll that represents her girlhood. Her playing with a doll has a lot to do with her gender and how, as a girl, you play with dolls. She then typically gives it off to one of her younger siblings or a younger girl, and so it could either be a dance or sometimes it's just walked in, but this younger girl then takes the doll and she leaves off with it. It's kind of symbolizing like, "I'm done playing with dolls now; you're gonna be the next quinceañera." After that, they then dance with her dads or their moms – a lot of quinceañeras now dance with their moms. They then move on into the Baile con Padrinos, and in this baile, they dance with all their Padrinos. Typically, at least at the very minimum, dancing with their padrinos de honor, and it's just a way to honor what they did for them, in the sense of financially for the quince, in the sense that they also are now padrinos or madrinas even religiously, meaning that they're going to guide the quinceañera in life. After that, the quince court typically changes into their baile sorpresa wardrobe, from formal wear to something more comfortable and that they can dance in. They start the baile sorpresa, which is not really a surprise dance because everybody expects it, but it's a surprise dance. You dance it with your friends, and then the party starts.

## How did you feel on your quinceañera day? What was your favorite memory?

AC: To be honest, it was just like any other party. Like any other party you know turning 15 wasn't really as symbolic to me. It was another year, it was something traditionally that I went through or culturally that I went through, but it didn't really you know I didn't feel like I transitioned into a—definitely not into a woman or womanhood. It's a process to the quinceañera, so it's not just the quinceañera event — a one-time thing—but it's a process into it. So during that time, this girl is 14, 15, sometimes 16 years old, in that age of beginning to explore her identities. So navigating what a quince to means to me, in the sense of what it means culturally, what does it mean to be a Latina/Latino, what does it mean to celebrate this quinceañera celebration as a Latina/Latino, what does this mean to me. So I guess, in a sense, they're navigating, for instance, choosing either English songs versus Spanish songs, choosing a traditional quinceañera versus a more western-centric quinceañera, in the sense that you are doing a lot of traditional things, like the cake for example. A Mexican traditional quince cake is puffy, uses a lot of a merengue, which is seen as gaudy in American, western-centric kind of ways. So choosing all these cultural things that make it look a lot more modern, a lot more sophisticated, a lot more was considered American is more appealing. It's like they are either consciously or subconsciously choosing to identify in a certain way. In the same way, their gender plays a role like that, so they're exploring the idea of, "Hey, I don't wanna wear heels, I'm not comfortable wearing heels, I don't like the fact that women have to wear heels, I'm gonna dance this in Chucks." Some girls end up doing their whole quinceañera in Chucks. There's a portion of that where they do switch out from a little a hairpiece to their corona, from their either flats or shoes into their heels, and again all of this is symbolic explaining, "You're going from a girl to womanhood." Some girls navigate that differently; some girls are like, "Well, no, I never played with an última muñeca; I played with a stuffed animal, so I'm gonna have that, or I'm not gonna have that at all and we're gonna take that out," "I'm not gonna dance with my dad because my dad was never there or because I don't have a strong relationship with my dad, so I'm gonna dance with my mom." Through these examples, they are navigating their gender identity, their racial identity, or cultural identity etc.

SP: I think my favorite memory for my quince was getting to do a first dance with my grandpa who helped my mom raise me. I surprised him by playing The Temptations' "My Girl" and inviting him out onto the dance floor. It meant a lot to me to share that moment with my grandpa and just as the best father figure in my life. Growing up, I don't think that I had much of a context of the quinceañera other than it being a very fun, big party with all of my family, with all of my friends, but now that I'm a lot older, I take into account that my mom raised me as a single mom and I was a latchkey kid, so we helped raise each other. This party was a testament to the success that she had — and it didn't have to be material but success that she had — in raising a child by herself. And the fact that I survived to 15! I didn't really think about it at the time, but in retrospect, I think that it had a lot to do with how proud she was to be a mom and how proud she was of me. So my quinceañera was very fun and very festive, but it was also a very loving experience.

AC: I think a lot of these quinces are closer to their moms, and I would say that was kind of true for me. But at the time, dancing with my dad felt nice, like it was our moment where — maybe we don't really talk like me and my mom do, maybe you don't understand as a Mexican father, maybe you don't understand everything that I go through or not — but we were sharing this moment, so I remember that. I remember I felt like he was proud of me.



## Dr. Angharad Valdivia

Angharad N. Valdivia is Research Professor at the Institute of Communications Research, and Professor in the Departments of Latina / Latino Studies and Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She was editor of *Communication Theory* and the *International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*. Valdivia is a Fellow of the International Communication Association. She is co-editing *Rebooting inequality* (NYU Press) with Isabel Molina-Guzmán and *Mediated Quinceañeras* with Drs. Jillian Báez and Diana Leon-Boys.

## Ariana Cano

Ariana Cano is a doctoral student in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research analyzes how Indigenous, Chicana, and/or Latina womxn's self-presentations on social media sites challenge mainstream media stereotypes and tropes.



## Stephanie Pérez

Stephanie Pérez is a doctoral student in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her current projects include the Latina ingenue as a transgressive trope in young adult fictional television, affect and joy in quinceañeras, and spectral Latinx girlhoods in popular media.

## Dr. Dora Valkanova

Dora Valkanova is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Critical Media Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. Dr. Valkanova earned her Ph.D. in Communications and Media with a minor in Cinema Studies from the Institute of Communications Research at UIUC, where she previously taught in the Department of Media and Cinema Studies.



## Additional Resources

### Choreography Playlist



For more information on this exhibit,  
please visit our website

<https://uiquince2022.wixsite.com/quince>



# Exhibit Opening Celebration

September 24 4:00–6:00pm

## Screening Series



### September 20

*Quinceañera* (2006, dir. Richard Glatzer & Wash Westmoreland) - 90 mins

Discusión entre / Discussion with Dr. Angharad Valdivia, Ariana Cano, and Stephanie Pérez, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Ambientada en el barrio de Echo Park de Los Ángeles, que se está aburguesando rápidamente, la quinceañera Magdalena (Emily Rios) y su primo Carlos (Jesse García) atraviesan la madurez en la que lidian con sus identidades mexicano-estadounidenses, sus sexualidades, y su familia.

Set in the rapidly gentrifying Los Angeles neighborhood of Echo Park, quinceañera Magdalena (Emily Rios) and her cousin Carlos (Jesse Garcia) experience a coming of age in which they grapple with their Mexican-American identity, sexuality, and family.



### October 18

*Vida* (2020, Episode 20, dir. Tanya Saracho) - 45 min

Discusión entre / Discussion with Dr. Michael DeAnda, DePaul University, and Silvana Scott, University of Texas at Austin

Lyn (Melissa Barrera) planea una "doble quinceañera" para los treinta años del cumpleaños Marcos (Tonatiuh). Una fiesta extravagante e inspirada por las telenovelas de los años 80 y la música de los años 90, Marcos la declara "un rito de iniciación de cual Marquitos solo había soñado."

Lyn (Melissa Barrera) throws Marcos (Tonatiuh) a double quinceañera for his thirtieth birthday. An extravagant party inspired by 80s telenovelas and 90s music, which he proclaims is "a right of passage that little Marquitos only dreamed of."



### November 1

*My Dream Quinceañera* (2020, dir. Jackie Merry & Omid Afshar) - 85 mins.

Discusión con / Discussion with Honey Robinson, University of Southern California

Honey comparte la experiencia de planear su quinceañera, abarcando la práctica cultural como parte de su herencia cultural mexicana como una adolescente Afro-Latina, mientras ella abre su propio camino a la individualidad y su personalidad en el contexto estadounidense.

Honey shares the experience of planning her quinceañera, embracing the cultural practice as part of her Mexican heritage as an Afro-Latina teenager, while blazing her own path of individuality and personality in the U.S. American context.