

The Pysanka

The art of the decorated egg, or the pysanka (from the Ukrainian verb *pysaty*, to write), dates back to ancient times. The practice originated in the prehistoric Trypillian culture¹. Folk tales reveal that the people who lived in the region now known as Ukraine worshipped the sun. It warmed the earth and thus, was a source of all life. Eggs decorated with nature symbols were chosen for sun worship ceremonies and became an integral part of spring rituals, serving as benevolent talismans.

In prechristian times, the sun god (Atar) was the most important of all the deities; birds were the sun god's chosen creations for they were the only ones who could get near him. Humans could not catch the birds, but they did manage to obtain the eggs the birds laid. Thus, the eggs were magical objects, a source of life. The egg was also honored during rite-of-Spring festivals--it represented the rebirth of the earth. The long, hard winter was over; the earth burst forth and was reborn just as the egg miraculously burst forth with life. The egg, therefore, was believed to have special powers.

With the advent of Christianity the symbolism of the egg changed to represent, not nature's rebirth, but the rebirth of man. Christians embraced the egg symbol and likened it to the tomb from which Christ rose. With the acceptance of Christianity in 988, the decorated pysanka (plural - *pysanky*) continued to play an important role in Ukrainian rituals of the new religion. Many symbols of the old sun worship survived and were adapted to represent Easter and Christ's Resurrection.

Superstitions

The Hutzuls--Ukrainians who live in the Carpathian Mountains of Western Ukraine--believe that the fate of the world depends upon the pysanka. As long as the egg decorating custom continues, the world will exist. If, for any reason, this custom is abandoned, evil--in the shape of a horrible serpent who is forever chained to a cliff-- will overrun the world. Each year the serpent sends out his minions to see how many pysanky have been created. If the number is low the serpent's chains are loosened and he is free to wander the earth causing havoc and destruction. If, on the other hand, the number of pysanky has increased, the chains are tightened and good triumphs over evil for yet another year.

Superstitions were attached to the colors and designs on the pysanky. One old Ukrainian myth centered on the wisdom of giving older people gifts of pysanky with darker colors and/or rich designs, for their life has already been filled. Similarly, it is appropriate to give young people pysanky with white as the color predominant color because their life is still a blank page.

Another Ukrainian superstition insists that girls should never give their boyfriends pysanky that have no design on the top and bottom of the egg; the baldness on either end signifies that the boyfriend will soon lose his hair.

Christian Legends

Old legends blended folklore and Christian beliefs and firmly attached the egg to the Easter celebration. One legend concerns the Virgin Mary. It tells of the time Mary gave eggs to the soldiers at the cross. She entreated them to be less cruel and she wept. The tears of Mary fell upon the eggs, spotting them with dots of brilliant color.

Another legend tells of when Mary Magdalene went to the sepulchre to anoint the body of Jesus. She had with her a basket of eggs to serve as a repast. When she arrived at the sepulchre and uncovered the eggs, the pure white shells had miraculously taken on a rainbow of colors.

Making Pysanky

Each province, each village, and almost every family in Ukraine had its own special ritual, its own symbols, meanings and secret formulas for dyeing eggs. These customs were preserved faithfully and passed down from mother to daughter through generations. The custom of decorating pysanky was observed with greatest care, and a pysanka, after receiving

¹ A Neolithic-Bronze age culture that existed in Right-bank Ukraine circa 4500 to 2000 BC. It is named after a site in the Kiev region where its artifacts were first uncovered in 1898. It is best known for its ceramic pottery, made of red clay with decorations of white and black.

the Easter blessing, was held to have great powers as a talisman.

Pysanka are traditionally made during the last week of Lent, Holy Week in the Catholic and Orthodox calendars. (Both faiths are represented in Ukraine.) They were made by the women of the family. During the middle of the Lenten season, women began putting aside eggs, those that were most perfectly shaped and smooth. If possible they should be the first laid eggs of young hens. There had to be a rooster, as only fertilized eggs could be used. (If non-fertile eggs were used, there would be no fertility in the home.)

The dyes were prepared. They were made from dried plants, roots, bark or berries. Yellow was obtained from the flowers of the woadwaxen, and gold from onion skins. Red could be extracted from logwood, and dark green and violet for the husks of sunflower seeds and the berries and bark of the elderberry bush. Black dye was made from walnuts. The dyes were prepared in secret, using methods handed down from mother to daughter to attain the necessary brilliance, clarity and lasting color. Often chemical dyes of rare colors were purchased from traders.

Styluses were prepared. A piece of thin brass was wrapped around a needle, forming a hollow cone. This was attached to a small stick (willow was preferred) with wire or horsehair.

The pysanky were made at night, when the children were asleep. The women in the family gathered together, said the appropriate prayers, and went to work. It was done in secret—the patterns and color combinations were handed down from mother to daughter, and guarded. No one was allowed to peek.

The purpose of creating the pysanky was to transfer goodness from the household to the designs, and to push away evil. Spirals and other designs were placed which would trap evil, and thus protect the family and home from dangers and evils.

Sharing Pysanky

Pysanky are typically made to be given to family members and respected outsiders. To give a pysanka is to give a symbolic gift of life, which is why the egg must remain entire. Furthermore, each of the designs and colors on the pysanka is likely to have a deep, symbolic meaning. Traditionally, pysanky designs are chosen to match the character of the person to whom the pysanka is to be given. Typically, pysanky are displayed prominently in a public room of the house.

In a large family, by Holy Thursday, 60 eggs would have been completed. They would then be taken to the church on Easter Sunday to be blessed, after which they were given away. Here is a partial list of how the pysanky would be used:

1. One or two would be given to the priest.
2. Three or four were taken to the cemetery and placed on graves of the family.
3. Ten or fifteen were given to children or godchildren.
4. Ten or twelve were exchanged by the unmarried girls with the eligible men in the community.
5. Several were saved to place in the coffin of loved ones who might die during the year.
6. Several were saved to keep in the home for protection from fire and storms.
7. Two or three were placed in the trough where animals ate, so they would have many young.
8. At least one egg was placed beneath the bee hive to insure a good harvest of honey.
9. One was saved for each grazing animal to be taken out to the fields with the shepherds in the spring.

Everyone from the youngest to the oldest received a pysanka for Easter. Young people were given pysanky with bright designs; dark pysanky were given to older people.

A bowlful of pysanky was invariably kept in every home. It served not only as a colorful display, but also as protection from lightning and fire. Some of the eggs were emptied, and a bird's head made of wax and wings and tailfeathers of folded paper attached. These "doves" were suspended before icons in commemoration of the birth of Christ, when a dove came down from heaven and soared over the child Jesus.