

Ukrainian Egg Art and Customs

by

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Introduction to Folklore

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My grandmother, Eugenia Curran, was born into a Ukrainian family in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. When she was younger, she learned how to decorate Ukrainian Easter eggs, an art that Ukrainian women have been practicing and passing down to the next generation for thousands of years.

Ukraine is a country in Eastern Europe, bordered by Russia, Poland, the Black Sea, and other countries. Ukrainians are cultural descendants of the Slavs, a peaceful culture that farmed the fertile land of central Europe, north of the Black Sea. (Kuropas 7-10)

In ancient times, Ukrainians believed that before the beginning of time, the universe lay dormant, and then it suddenly sprang to life. The egg served as a good analogy and symbol for the creation of the universe, because it also lies dormant until it comes to life. In spring time, eggs were decorated to celebrate the renewal of life and the sun's light and warmth. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 15)

Eggs were believed to have supernatural powers. If a woman had trouble getting pregnant, she would be given an egg decorated with an image of a chicken because the chicken, being a particularly fertile animal, served as a symbol of fertility. Eggs were also believed to have protective power. For example, people would carry eggs around the perimeter of a house fire to stop it from spreading. Decorated eggs would be kept in a bowl in the main room of the house, to serve not only as an ornament, but also to keep the family healthy. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 16)

In 988 C.E., Eastern Orthodox Christianity was introduced into Ukrainian culture. Christians were able to easily transform the Ukrainian beliefs and customs into Christian ones. For example, egg designs that represented the elements of air, fire, and water were easily transformed to mean the Christian Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the supernatural powers that the egg had, such as affecting fertility, could simply be attributed to the almighty God, rather than the egg itself. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 17) Christian Ukrainians believed that an egg worn around the neck would cure a serious illness by transference. Another belief was that eggs could ensure a successful harvest. Farmers would bury eggs out in their fields with the crops and also inside beehives. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 20)

One Christian tradition is to bring *krashanky* (singular: *krashanka*), boiled eggs that are dyed a single bright color, to Mass on Easter Sunday. The word *krashanka* comes from the root word “*kraska*” which means “color.” (Nataalka’s) The priest blesses the eggs, and then they are brought home and eaten as part of Easter dinner. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 26) An interesting custom involving the *Krashanky* eggs is to drop *krashanka* egg shells into streams to let lost souls know it’s time to celebrate Easter, as described by Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow:

The *krashanka* figured prominently in the old Ukrainian stories about the *Blazhenni*.... They were the (kindly ones) [sic.], worthy beings who lived, far away to the south, on the banks of a river which was fed by all the streams of the world. The *Blazhenni* inhabited a never-never land beyond the distant waters, on the edges of the earth, variously known as Saturday River and Sunday Water. A lost race, weak and worth and beloved by God, they were said by some to be the souls of children who died before their baptism, dwelling where they could never see the sun. They knew nothing of the world of men and so at Easter time the women, who celebrate their festival, threw red *krashanky* egg shells into the

streams. The flowing waters carried the tokens away to the distant land, bringing back the message that Easter had been celebrated, so that the Blazhenni could observe the festival themselves.

The Blazhenni were said to lead a holy life and to eat no meat, except on the day when they celebrated Easter, and this was the day when the red egg shells reached them. This feast day was on the second Monday after Easter, except in Bukowina, where the Blazhenni received their Easter eggshells after a period of forty days. Behind the beliefs in this mysterious cult lies the deep grief of bereaved mothers. In a time of high infant mortality, mothers somehow felt relieved that the souls of their children were dwelling in a safe loving place. (17-18)

A more well-known craft is the pysanka (plural: pysanky) egg, which is a raw egg covered with a design made from several layers of dye. Pysanka comes from the root word “pysaty” which means “to write.” (Natalka’s)

The process of decorating pysanky Easter eggs hasn’t changed much since pagan times. Here are the materials needed to produce the art: (See also the attached photographs.)

%Fresh raw eggs, from any kind of bird. Chicken, goose, and duck eggs are often used. Chicken eggs are the most commonly used eggs.

%Beeswax.

%A *kista*, which is a kind of stylus. It has a small metal funnel that holds a small amount of beeswax to draw onto the egg.

%A candle and matches or a lighter.

%Various colored dyes to dip the egg in.

%A glossy coating such as varnish or some type of art spray.

%Optional: a dark #3 pencil for sketching the design out on the egg ahead of time.

The only preparation necessary for the eggs is to rinse them in warm water with no soap; soap can get inside and damage the egg. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 46) The actual decoration process involves drawing a design on the egg in beeswax, and then dyeing the part of the egg with no beeswax on it. This process is repeated for several different layers of color, usually in order from lightest to darkest.

When the design is ready to be drawn on the egg, the kista's funnel is first heated in the candle flame and then some beeswax is collected in the funnel. The first part of the design is then drawn in beeswax on the egg using the kista; this is where the plain white egg shell will show through. Next, the egg is immersed in the first colored dye for five to ten minutes. Wherever beeswax is applied, the shell will be insulated from the dye. Then the next part of the design is drawn onto the egg where only the first color is meant to show through, and then the second color dye is applied. The process is repeated until all the layers have been applied. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 51-54)

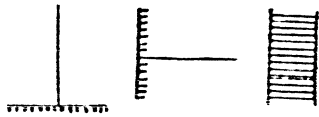
When the design is complete, the wax is melted off the egg by holding it above—not in—the candle flame and wiping it with a piece of cloth. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 55) A coat of gloss is generally applied to help the egg last longer. The eggs are put on display in the main room of the home, either in simple individual cups or together in a basket.

Most people leave the egg's contents inside, and they eventually dry out as the water evaporates slowly through the egg shell. My grandmother, however, adds a final step of poking two holes in opposite ends of the egg and blowing the contents out. Some artists, my grandmother included, use an electric kista instead of a traditional one. An electric kista has a powered heating element inside it and doesn't require the heat of a

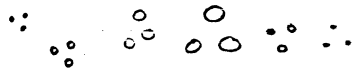
candle. (See photo.)

The following pictures and explanations are taken from a handout from Nataalka's Pysanky Sales and Supplies which was given out in a pysanka class my grandmother attended. These are only examples of some of the symbolism used in making pysanky.

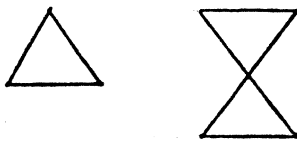
Geometric motifs



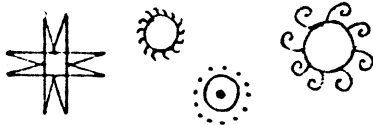
Rakes and Ladders represent tools peasants use in their daily tasks.



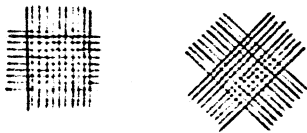
Dots signify tears shed by the Virgin Mary pleading for her Son. They also can represent stars.



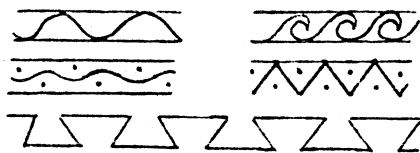
Triangles symbolize any trio, for example: fire, air, water; or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



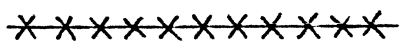
Stars: Before Christianity came to Ukraine, an eight-pointed star was the sign of the sun god, Atar; it later became a symbol of Christ or life.



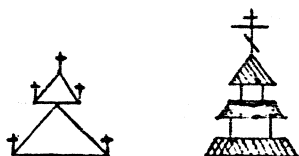
Nets suggest Christians as "fishers of men."



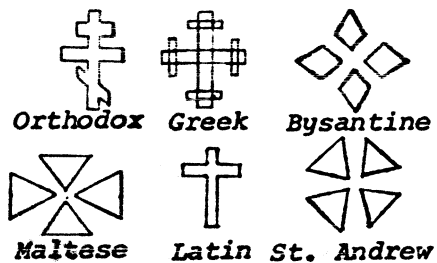
Ribbons and waves encircle the egg, symbolizing eternity.



Crown of Thorns—worn by Jesus on the cross.

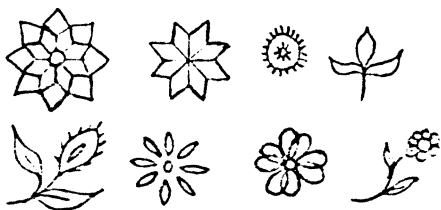


Churches were used as simple decorations.



Crosses denote suffering, death, and resurrection.

Plant motifs



Flowers predominate this category symbolizing the beauty of nature and all flowers. They depict love, charity, and good will.



Wheat Apples Cherries

Evergreen trees are an ancient symbol of eternal youth and of a bountiful harvest.

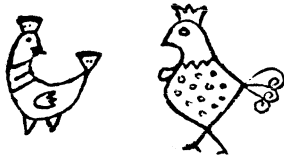


Fruit trees Vines



Branches Pussy-willows

Animal motifs



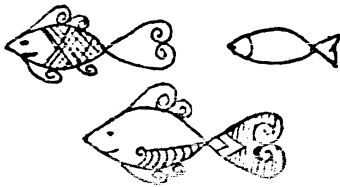
A rooster or a chicken denotes fertility and fulfillment of wishes.



Deer, horses, and rams signify wealth and prosperity.



Wolves teeth symbolize protection.



Fish: The Greek word for fish, “ΙΧΘΥΣ,” was an acronym for “Jesus Christ Son of God Savior.”



Hens’ and ducks’ feet are Trident symbols. The Trident is a symbol of national identity for Ukrainians. (Kuropas 7)

Colors

Colors have symbolic meanings in pysanky art. Here are some of the most commonly used colors and their meanings:

<i>Color</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Color</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
white	purity	blue	health
yellow	spirituality	green	money
pink	success	brown	happiness
orange	attraction	violet	high power
red	love	black	remembrance

The tradition of decorating pysanky Easter eggs has spread further than just Ukraine, where it began. Ukrainians have migrated all over Eastern Europe and to the United States, and they have carried the tradition with them. I was talking to a friend of mine in Croatia recently, and when I showed her pictures of my grandmother's pysanky, she said, "Yes, we have those here. We call them *pisanice*."

An interesting legend about pysanky from the Hutzel people in Western Ukraine says that there is an evil monster imprisoned against a huge cliff, and the pysanky that are made each year form a chain around the Earth and keep the monster where he is. (Luciow, Kmit, and Luciow 20) If the tradition ever dies out, and pysanky are no longer crafted, the monster will be freed and he will unleash evil on the world and eventually the world will end.

Photographs



Some tools used in creating pysanky: a traditional kista, an electric kista, beeswax, a candle, and varnish.





Pysanky made by my grandmother.



References

- Curran, Eugenia. Personal interview. 2 December 2001.
- Kuropas, Myron B. *The Ukrainians in America*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Co., 1985.
- Luciow, Johanna, Ann Kmit, and Loretta Luciow. *Eggs Beautiful: How to Make Ukrainian Easter Eggs*. Minneapolis: Harrison, Smith-Lund Press, n.d.
- Natalka's Pysanky Sales and Supplies. "Ukrainian Pysanky (Decorated Eggs)" (handout to accompany an art class). Woonsocket, Rhode Island: n.p., n.d.