

Ukrainian Pysanky (Easter Eggs)



The tradition of decorating Easter eggs was prevalent among the Slavs, but the most celebrated Easter egg is the Ukrainian Easter egg. The Ukrainian name for Easter eggs is pysanky (pronounced peh-sahn-keh). The word pysanky comes from the Ukrainian verb pysaty (pronounced peh-sah-teh) meaning to write.

Pysanky are created using the batik method-applying beeswax to the parts of the egg that are not to be dyed. With a special tool called the kystka (pronounced keyst-ka) and molten beeswax, the writer or artist creates a pattern on the egg. The egg is then dipped in the lightest colored dye to be used on the egg. The area underneath the applied beeswax resists the color of the dye. An additional pattern is then applied with more molten beeswax to the dyed area, and then the egg is dipped into a darker colored dye. This process is repeated, applying patterns on the dyed areas of the egg and dipping it into successively darker dyes, until the pattern on the egg is completed. The last colored dye that the egg is dipped in (usually black) is the colored background for the pattern. The egg is then held over a lit candle to melt the applied wax. The molten wax is wiped off with a cloth, and the egg's brilliant colors come to life!

Pysanky are an exceptional manifestation of Ukrainian culture. These gems of folk art have reached a very intricate degree of development. The beauty of pysanky consists of the wealth and diversity of ancient pagan symbols. The springtime custom of creating pysanky predates the Christian era. The designs date to the Pagan era when the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth, the plants, the animals, fire and water were worshiped and revered by all. According to Pagan worship of the sun in Ukraine, during the season of spring, the sun brought back life to the earth. The days were brighter, warmer and longer. The earth's soil was fertile again causing the trees, the fields, and the flowers to blossom. The wild animals appeared again and began mating and giving birth. Eggs were a symbol of fertility and life. Since the egg brings into existence new life, it was considered an amulet or a

To Pagan Ukrainians, life without amulets was inconceivable. Individuals were surrounded by lifelong dangers such as severe storms, floods, droughts, fires and disease along with the terror of incomprehensible natural phenomena's such as solar and lunar eclipses. Pagan Ukrainians believed that evil spirits caused all calamities. Amulets, which had the power to protect them from these evil spirits, were essential.

Amulets or protective symbols such as the sun and certain animals were painted on the doors and walls of dwellings, embroidered on clothing, carved on various tools or weapons with the purpose of protecting the individual from evil spirits. In an effort to enhance their protective power, chicken eggs were also painted with these symbols.

Both designs and colors hold their own meaning. The color red means love, or passion, while yellow is a wish for wisdom. Orange represents a combination of both love and wisdom. A chicken foot symbol meant protection of the young, a deer's antlers for strength, a perwinkle for fidelity, a pine tree branch for long-life.

With the arrival of Christianity in 988 AD, this old pagan spring custom was accepted by this new religion and practiced in connection with the greatest Christian holiday-Easter.

The amulet power of pysanky was enhanced by beeswax and plant dyes. Fragrant beeswax had magical powers in the Pagan era and was used as a healing ointment. Dyes were usually made from various plants. Plants were supposed to have supernatural powers and were used in folk medicines. Beets were used for the color of red; pine tree needles were used for green, while onions were used for yellow.

All these factors contributed to the magical power of pysanky as an amulet that brings health, happiness, well being, prosperity, and the protection of the individuals from evil spirits. The art of decorating pysanky was practiced in all regions of Ukraine. The consistency in designs by region had

charm that averted misfortune and brought good luck. Eggs could be buried near a tree to help it grow, in a shelter to protect the livestock or in a habitat to protect the family. This applied especially to the chicken egg, which contained the embryo of the sun bird-the rooster who announced the arrival of the sun each day and chased evil spirits away with his song. Evil spirits were believed to fear the rooster.

to do with the availability of the flora in the area. With the arrival of an atheistic Soviet regime a policy which discouraged religion and national customs saw the decline of the art of pysanky in Ukraine. Fortunately, today Ukraine is a free and independent nation whereby its people continue to practice the art of pysanky. This art has been passed down through generations of Ukrainians in Ukraine and Ukrainian immigrants in the United States and other countries. (bwl 3/04)

