

## The Pysanka: A Hand Painted Ukrainian Tradition

The pysanka is a form of Ukrainian folk art that is often considered one of the most colorful and creative uses of the egg in artistic expression. The Ukrainian folk art tradition, handed down from generation to generation and rooted in ancient Ukrainian history, is a technique that involves an intricate process of layered beeswax and dye. The decorated eggs are symbolic, narrative, and cherished in Ukrainian society.

Development of pysanky is dated back thousands of years when peoples of the pre-Christian Slavic territories decorated eggs with the belief that they possessed great powers. With the advent of Christianity, however, the eggs came to symbolize the resurrection and the promise of eternal life. In today's Ukrainian society the decorated eggs can symbolize the release of the earth from the shackles of the winter and the coming of spring with its promise of new hope, new life and prosperity. Many legends still surround the folk tradition. Some believe that as long as pysanky are decorated, goodness will prevail over evil throughout the world. It is also believed that to give a pysanka is to bring luck and happiness to a family.

Along with the rich and intricate history and legend, the development of pysanka is itself a splendid process. Through applying wax and placing in dye, in layer upon layer, intricate designs are derived. Though exacting, the process is well worth the effort. The art of pysanky, where even the simplest designs are beautiful and effective, provides a means of symbolic and meaningful expression.

The creation of pysanky occurs in several steps:

First, a light pencil line of the design is drawn on the egg. The pencil lines are used as guide lines and will not show on the completed egg.

Next, the head of a medium kistka (writing tool) is heated in the flame of a small candle. After scooping beeswax into the hot kistka, the artist marks over the pencil lines, keeping the kistka at right angles with the egg, and allowing the wax to flow evenly. As the artist works, the beeswax turns black, which is beneficial.

A heavy kistka is used to complete the design. The wax lines will be white on the finished pysanka since the wax will seal the color under it.

The artist then places the egg on a spoon and lowers it into a container of dye. (The spoon can remain in the dye). When the desired color is obtained (usually 5 to 15 minutes), the artist removes and dries the egg with a tissue, patting dry.

The process is repeated for each color. Ordinarily, the sequence of colors is dyed from the lightest color to the darkest color.

When the artist is finished applying colors, the melted wax is applied to the eggshell. This hot beeswax will harden almost instantly. The beeswax covers and seals the shell where the wax was

applied. As a rule the first application of beeswax is done on the white shell Wax is not applied to the final color. When the shell has completely dried from its dye, the artist will remove the beeswax.

As a final step, the artist applies a coat of transparent varnish over the entire egg, adding protection and luster.

With some understanding of the process and history of pysanky, you are now ready to take part in this time-honored folk art. Through creating your own pysanka design, you can become part of thousands of years of history and legend.

### THE SYMBOLISM OF UKRAINIAN PYSANKY

Ukrainians today are one of the few groups of people who still strongly adhere to many of the ancient traditions associated with the art of Pysanka, embracing its multifaceted imagery. Ukrainian eggs embody a myriad of symbols expressed through design and color.

Everyday images are used to convey earthly concepts, emotions and profound spiritual notions. Below are a few examples:

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| 0Windmills signify happiness.                         | 0Birds represent the presence of God, innocent and purity.   | 0Baskets signify knowledge and motherhood as a giver of life. |
| 0Pine needles signify eternal life.                   | 0Diamonds represent immortality.                             | 0Roosters signify a rich family life with many children.      |
| 0Waves represent immortality and harmony.             | 0The star signifies the birth of Christ - God's love of man. | 0Horses signify wealth and prosperity.                        |
| 0Floral motifs symbolize wisdom, beauty and elegance. | 0Roses symbolize Christ's humanity.                          | 0Flowers represent beauty and elegance.                       |
| 0Fish represent Christ and or Christianity.           | 0Door and stairs symbolize an invitation to reach for God.   | 0Wheat signifies a bountiful harvest.                         |
| 0Apples and plums signify health and wisdom.          | 0Spirals symbolize immortality.                              | 0Trees symbolize strength.                                    |
| 0Crosses are symbols of life and of Christian faith.  |  |   |

Similarly, the colors of each design are essential to the meaning of Pysanky:

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|---|---|--|
| 0WHITE: Purity, light, rejoicing, virginity.  | 0GREEN: Growth power of plants, spring.   | 0RED and WHITE: Respect, protection from evil powers.            |
| 0BLACK: Reverence Center of the Earth, eternity, absolute.  | 0ORANGE: Power, endurance, everlasting, sun, ambition.                          | 0BLACK and WHITE: Mourning and respect to spirits.               |
| 0YELLOW: Wealth, prosperity, sun, stars, moon, harvest, warmth, perpetuation of the family, growth, power of the plants Spring. | 0RED: Love, life, happiness, hope, passion blood, fire, ministry of the church. | 0FOUR or MORE COLORS TOGETHER: Family happiness, peace and love. |
| 0BROWN: Mother Earth, harvest, generosity.  | 0PINK: Success, contentment.  | 0Customarily, no more than five colors are used on a Pysanka.    |
|   | 0BLUE: Sky, air, good health, truth, fidelity.                                  |  |