

Introduction

Sparkling colors burst forth from the decorated shell of a Ukrainian egg in a miracle of beauty.

Well over 2000 years ago, before the time of Christ, people were carrying on the custom of decorating eggs. In creating these delicate treasures, the peasant folk were influenced by the belief that great power is embodied in the egg and they decorated eggs in the spring to celebrate the warming of the sun as it brought new joy and vigor to life.

The tradition of decorating eggs has been passed on to us today through strong family ties here in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Our grandmother, Marie Procai, learned this art as a child, around the turn of the century, from her ancestors in Ukraine and taught it to us. Easter egg decorating has been a part of our lives from childhood.

When we became old enough we demonstrated the art, which grandmother had taught us, for many years at the Minnesota State Fair and we have also taught egg decorating to various groups of children and adults.

Our family was featured in an article about Ukrainian Easter Eggs in the *National Geographic* Magazine of April 1972. There have also been numerous other articles in magazines and newspapers, including one in the photo magazine section of the *Sunday Minneapolis Tribune*, dated April 2, 1972, in which color photographs of our eggs were featured. Johanna Luciw, our mother, operates the *Ukrainian Gift Shop* with her mother, Marie Procai, and her sister, Luba Perchysyn. Together they have created a successful

business where Ukrainians, as well as Americans of other national origins, come from many distant places to purchase handmade eggs, ceramics, and other folk art.

With the increasing popularity of Ukrainian Easter Egg decorating, we thought that a book answering the basic questions of design and coloring should be written. Today, this art can be learned and enjoyed by many people, old and young alike, and it is in the spirit of sharing that this book has been written. In these quickly changing times, it is our hope that the tradition will be kept alive and growing.



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The Legends

For years the legends concerning the eggs were communicated verbally from one generation to the next and many of them have been forgotten or lost because they were not recorded. However, we have collected some of the remaining legends concerning pagan and Christian beliefs from various sources and have recorded them here. They are enchanting in their simple beliefs in nature and a higher power.

Pagan Beliefs

It was thought in ancient times that the silent universe suddenly burst forth into human activity and life. In like manner, the egg which also seems dormant and quiet, brings forth life in a triumphant way. Because of the symbolism represented in the egg it became an object to be honored and it was decorated to celebrate the renewal of nature and life. Spring was the logical season for celebration since the cold, dark winter was past, the sun warmed the soil again, and life was no longer such a constant struggle. What a welcome change!

There were spring festivities then. Eggs were dyed in two or three colors in the same wax resist process that is used today.

The eggs were believed to contain great powers; for example, if a woman was barren and desired a child, she would be presented an egg decorated with the design of a chicken, a very fertile creature and hopefully, her family would grow.

Another example of belief in the power of the egg concerned protection from fire. Houses were constructed mainly of wood and often water was obtainable only from wells and far away streams. Fire was an extremely serious prospect then and families could lose every thing they owned. The people believed that if a blaze did start, an egg carried around the area of the blaze would keep it from spreading any further. Sometimes egg shells were thrown into the fire in the belief that they could quench the flames.

A bowl of decorated eggs was often kept in the home in the belief that they would keep the family healthy. The peasants felt that eggs could control the weather and provide food in times of famine as well. Evil spirits were powerless to do their mischief when people used these treasured eggs to help them. Great love and pride went into their decoration and distribution.

Ukrainian women prepared two different kinds of eggs, much as they still do today. The *krashanka* are the boiled edible eggs dyed in one brilliant color, the root word *kraska* means (color). The *pysanky* are the raw multi-colored eggs which are intended as ornaments to be kept indefinitely. The root word *pysaty* means (to write).

For coloring the egg, the decorators prepared colors themselves. Yellow was made from the bark of the wild apple, the onion skin, buckwheat husks, campion, and also from the flower of lilac or dog's fennel. Red was made from the cochineal (carmine), deer horn, the brazoliia (sandalwood or aniline). Green was usually obtained from a concoction of sunflower seeds and berries of the wild elder;

the dark red from black holly-hock, bush-anemones, as well as from leaves of the birch and from moss. For the dark yellow color, alder buds were used along with hazel and chestnut leaves or walnut, apple, and oak bark. Black was prepared from the husks of sunflower seeds by the addition of sulphate of iron, *kupervas*, the bark of the alder, young leaves of the black maple, and sometimes two or three dark periwinkles.

The eggs were prepared and decorated mainly for spring festivals which honored the sun, for it was the sun which warmed the soil so that wheat and other foods could grow. The sun renewed life everywhere and brought light to the dark forests and steppes. The sun was freely represented in the earliest designs.

Christian Beliefs

With the introduction of Christianity to Ukraine in 988 A.D., the "sun" became the "Son" and the ancient customs were absorbed into the Christian celebration of Christ's resurrection. On Easter the triangle designs on the eggs which had represented air, fire, and water now became the symbols for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The old supernatural powers in the decorated eggs were gradually attributed to almighty God. The new meanings blended so harmoniously with the old that even today the mixture of pagan and Christian symbolism can be seen in the designs.

The *krashanka* figured prominently in the old Ukrainian stories about the *Blazhenni*. In Galicia, these (spirits) were called the *Rakhame* and the *Rochman* in Bukowina. They were the (kindly ones), 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 worthy 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 that 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.

Longing for the little dead children became confused with primitive ideas of sun renewal, for the Blazhenni lived in darkness and never saw the daylight. After winter, when the sun's rays were still weak, rituals were common to invoke it to renew its full strength and power. This curious link between red eggs and the souls of little children who died young runs throughout the legends.

Another legend concerning death dealt with the hard cooked krashanka. After the burial of a loved one, a simple colored egg was placed in the loose soil over the grave and left until the next day. If the family returned and found the

egg unblemished and intact, they knew the soul had been accepted and was safe in heaven. If there were marks on the egg, or if an animal had taken it during the night, then certainly the departed one needed assistance from his family, including many prayers.

After the introduction of Christianity to Ukraine, the symbol of the fish became popular on the decorated eggs. The Greek alphabet spells out the word "fish" from "Jesus Christ Son of God Savior (ICHTHYS)". It was the sign of recognition among early Christians. The fish symbol was used in egg decoration by the Ukrainian peasants who kept decorated eggs in their homes and barns.

There are several beautiful legends associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Hutzuls of the western Ukraine tell the story that Mary filled her apron with eggs, and when she appeared before Pontius Pilate to plead for her Son, she dropped to her knees and the eggs rolled out over the surface of the world until they were distributed among all nations.

The spots which the Hutzuls like to include in their motifs represent the tears of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who gave eggs to the soldiers at the cross. As she begged them to be less cruel, she wept, and the drops fell on the shells, spotting them with brilliant dots of color.

In still another tale, Mary is said to have filled a basket with eggs which she carried to the soldiers sitting at the foot of the cross. There she left it. After a time, the blood of our Lord flowed down, as in early art it flows over Adam's skull, in token of man's redemption, staining the eggs with their characteristic color. The mystic price of blood money has been paid.

Mary Magdalene, another beloved woman from the Bible, took a basket full of eggs to the sepulchre intending to eat them while she worked anointing the body of Christ. But

no sooner had she arrived, than the eggs were all miraculously changed, their shells stained with brilliant hues. A similar story is told about Simon of Cyrene, transformed by folk imagination into an egg merchant, who was paid for his good deed in helping to carry the cross to Calvary by having all his wares beautifully colored forever after.

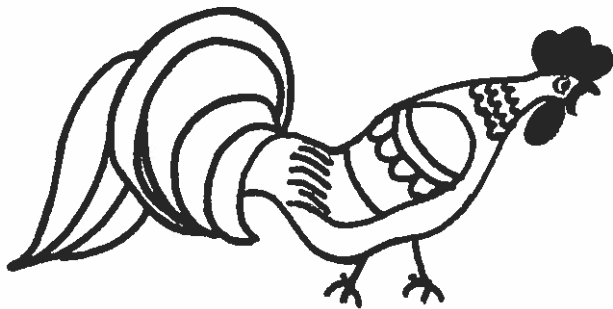
Another Hutzul tale has the answer to the problems of the world! According to this tale it is believed that the fate of the world depends upon the pysanka; that as long as the pysanka tradition remains, and eggs continue to be decorated, the world will exist. Should the custom cease, evil will, encompass and destroy the world, because an ancient, vicious creature lies heavily chained against a huge cliff and each year advocates of the creature encircle the earth to keep a record of the number of pysanky decorated. When there are few decorated eggs the creatures chains loosen and evil begins to flow throughout the world. However, should these advocates find the custom of decorating eggs practised extensively, the chains of the monster tighten, allowing love to conquer evil.

Ukrainian krashanky were supposed to remove sickness by transference. In serious illness an egg, blessed on Easter eve, was hung around the neck upon a string and the disease was passed into it. A krashanka could also be used to stop blood poisoning; the patient needed only to be touched by the egg.

The farmers' traditions were indeed interesting, for the Ukrainian people were mostly farmers and depended on nature for all of their riches. For example, farmers had a custom of rolling an egg in green oats and then burying it in the field. This would insure a bountiful crop. If a farmer kept bees, he would place an egg beneath the hive. An egg was used to bring forth a bountiful harvest since it was believed

that an egg kept the land and the crops protected from harm. Another belief was that the crops were protected by placing an egg decorated with a wheat design at the beginning of the first furrow when ploughing began and placing another at the end of the last furrow. Thereby, the opening and the closing of the season was marked and blessed.

The designs which were used generally had significant meanings both to the creator of the egg and to the person who received it. If a man wished to have children and his wife had already received an egg with the symbol of a chicken then it was thought that it was his fault if she did not conceive. To help a man conceive children he was given an egg with a pattern of roosters. To assist an older man, whose vigor was waning, an egg was given decorated with oak leaves; both roosters and oak leaves being common symbols of virility.





Our father, Theodore Luciw was born in western Ukraine in the village of Buchach. He came to the United States before World War II and served in the U. S. Army. He received his M.A. degree in Education from the University of Minnesota and lived in Minneapolis with his wife Johanna and four children, Ann, Loretta, Theodore Jr. and Anthony until his death in 1969. He enjoyed writing about his boyhood memories. The following selection was titled "Easter Red Letter Day of Year in Ukraine" from the *Tacoma (Washington) Sunday Ledger-News Tribune*, April 22, 1962.