

Ukrainian Easter Eggs

Taken from *Eggs Beautiful? How to Make Ukrainian Easter Eggs* © 1975
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The custom of decorating eggs goes back well over 2000 years ago, before the time of Christ. The peasant folk who created them believed that the egg embodied great power. They decorated the eggs in the spring to celebrate the warming of the sun and the joy and vigor it brought to life.

Legends

Since the legends concerning the eggs were passed on verbally from one generation to another, many of them have been forgotten or lost over the years. Fortunately, some of the legends concerning pagan and Christian beliefs have survived. They are charming in their simple beliefs in nature and a higher power.

Pagan Beliefs

In ancient times, it was thought that the earth was created when silent universe suddenly burst forth into human activity and life. The egg, which seems dormant and quiet and then brings forth life and was a perfect symbol of this theory of creation. Spring was the logical season for celebration since the cold, dark winter was past, the sun warmed the soil again and things sprang to life. Spring festivities were held in which eggs played an important role. Eggs were dyed in two or three colors in the same wax resist process that is used today.

The eggs were believed to have great powers. For example: An egg decorated with a chicken design presented to a barren woman could help her have children. Eggs were also believed to protect a home from fire. If a blaze did start, an egg carried around the area of the blaze would keep it from spreading any further. Sometimes eggshells 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. The *krashanka* are the boiled edible eggs dyed in one brilliant color and the *pysanky* are the raw multi-colored eggs which are intended as ornaments to be kept indefinitely. 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 by having the patient simply touch the egg.

Since most Ukrainians were farmers, there are many farming traditions associated with the egg. Rolling an egg in green oats and then burying it in the field would insure a bountiful crop. An egg placed beneath a beehive would bring forth an abundant yield of honey. Eggs kept the land and the crops protected from harm. Crops could be protected by placing an egg decorated with a wheat design placed at the beginning of the first furrow when plowing began and another at the end of the last furrow.

Christian Beliefs

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

After the introduction of Christianity to Ukraine, the symbol of the fish became popular on the decorated eggs. The spots in the designs represent the tears of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Meanings of Symbols on Pysanky Eggs

Pysanky designs are usually intended to suggest a thing rather than to picture it exactly. The choice of designs had meaning not only to the one who received the egg, but also for the person who gave the egg. The designs fall into three general categories: Plant, animal and geometrical.

Plant Symbols

Flowers predominate in plant designs. Since the native artists drew on nature’s beauty, they used the richly colored

flowers to enhance their designs.

Flowers	=	Love, charity and good will.
Sunflowers	=	Warmth of the sun's rays.
Roses	=	Love and caring.
Wheat	=	Good health and wishes for a bountiful harvest.
Oak Leaves	=	Virility
Evergreens	=	Eternal youth and health

Animal symbols

Storks, chicks, hens roosters at rest.)	=	Fulfillment of wishes and fertility (The bird is not depicted flying and is shown at rest.)
Deer, horses, and rams	=	Good health, wealth and prosperity
Lion	=	Strength (not very common)
Fish	=	Christianity.
Butterflies and other insects		

Geometric Symbols

Wolves teeth	=	Protection
Rams horns	=	Strength
Hens & ducks feet	=	Safe Journey
Rakes, windmills & ladders	=	Good husbandry and prosperity
Crown of thorns	=	that worn by Christ on the cross
Dots or Drops	=	Fallen tears of Mary as she wept for Jesus on the cross.
Triangles	=	Forms of the trinity air-fire-water heaven-earth-hell father-mother-child sun-thunder-bonfire Father-Son-Holy Spirit.
Crisscross design	=	“fishers of men.”
Sun & Stars	=	Life itself; growth and good fortune.
Crosses	=	Christ's victory over death.
Churches	=	Faith
Ribbons	=	Everlasting life.
Wavy ribbon	=	Water.

An important geometric element is the endless line (Bezkonechnyk) that goes entirely around the egg and meets. This symbolized eternal life.

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