

NATION NOW

Intricately decorated eggs a gesture of love at Easter

Svetlana Shkolnikova The (Bergen County, N.J.) Record

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It takes patience to find the perfect egg.

A flawless one must have no cracks or fractures, and it must be opaque, blocking any light that is held up to it.

Only then can it serve as an ideal canvas for a pysanka – a Ukrainian Easter egg intricately decorated in a folk-art style that predates Easter and Christianity itself.

Natalie Warchola, a Clifton, N.J.-based pysankar, inspected four cartons before finding a model egg to show an introductory pysanka class at her studio earlier this month.

"This is the result of a natural diet," she said, cradling a light blue chicken egg in her palm and pressing a small flashlight against it. "No light shines through this egg. This is a perfect egg."

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Over the next few hours, the perfect egg sat in a wooden bin while Warchola taught her students how to create elaborate designs on imperfect but "acceptable" room-temperature, vinegar-washed eggs.

The process, called writing a pysanka, requires a steady hand as a design is lightly penciled on an egg shell and then drawn over with a kistka, a stylus that dispenses hot beeswax once heated over a flame.

“You have to write a smooth, deliberate line,” Warchola said. “Slow but kind of fast at the same time.”

To achieve a multicolored effect, the eggs are periodically bathed in dye, from lightest colors to darkest, and covered with beeswax to seal in the color underneath — a technique called batik.

The final design, revealed after the wax is melted off with a candle — or in Warchola’s case, a toaster oven — often tells a story or conveys a message.

“Our pysanky are like a Hallmark card,” she said. “It’s a good wish and it’s a hope for the future.”

In her mother’s village in the Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast region of Ukraine, pysanky were often presented as personalized gifts that alluded to the recipient’s occupation, hobbies or stage of life.

Warchola’s uncle, a beekeeper, often received pysanky adorned with bee and honeycomb motifs. Newlyweds would be given pysanky with images of chicks as good luck charms for fertility. Many pysanky had endless lines to signify eternal best wishes.

“My mother would tell me that when you make the pysanka, you keep the person to whom you’re about to give it to in mind so there’s nothing but love going into these gifts,” Warchola said. “The symbols run very deep in our ancestry, and they change from village to village.”

Perhaps the most enduring, and universal, symbol of all is the sun, stylized as a broken cross, an eight-point rosette or a star, rendered in vibrant yellows, oranges and reds.

The sun’s importance can be traced to pagan times, when Ukrainians worshiped a sun god and saw eggs as magical extensions of his power to warm the earth and nurture life, according to Lubow Wolynetz, a folk-art curator and librarian at the Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, Conn., and the Ukrainian Museum in New York City.

“They wanted to somehow harness the power of the sun for their benefit,” she said, “so they looked for something similar and decided to cover it with specific signs and designs that would bring more power to this little talisman.”

Pysanky were traditionally written by women and young girls at the onset of spring, Wolynetz said, to celebrate the rebirth of nature after the death of winter, and to encourage the sun to bring a plentiful harvest.

With the advent of Christianity, eggs came to symbolize the rebirth of man and the resurrection of Jesus. Decorating them became an Easter ritual that continues to this day.

“We still write Easter eggs for tradition,” Wolynetz said. “We don’t believe in magic anymore but tradition requires us to do it. Today, we look at the pysanka not so much as a good luck charm or amulet, but as a piece of art.”

An enduring tradition

Every year around Easter, Motrja Fedorko of Rutherford, N.J., teaches the art of pysanka at the St. Mary Protectress Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Clifton both to raise money for the church and to share the tradition with non-Ukrainians.

“I think there’s something to be said about the craftsmanship,” she said. “There’s artistry involved, there’s tradition involved and I think it’s therapeutic, too. Between the smell and the touch, it’s a multisensory experience.”

Terri Spettell, also of Rutherford, has been attending Fedorko’s workshop with her children since its inception seven years ago, and now they make a point of beginning their Easter celebration with a pysanka-writing session.

“It’s a nice, mellow addition to the holidays,” Spettell said at a class this month. “It’s very calming and meditative to sit and do this, to spend two hours working on one singular thing.”

Fedorko said interest in her annual workshop has grown steadily over the years, from about a dozen attendees to more than double that this year. She credits much of that to word of mouth.

Demand for Warchola’s classes, meanwhile, has been so robust in recent years that it pays the rent for her floral design studio. She said Pinterest and other photo-sharing websites have introduced pysanky to an international audience and given new life to a tradition that is thousands of years old.

“It was an obscure little folk art when I grew up but now it’s raised to a higher level of degree of art, and the non-Ukrainian pysankary are mastering this talent in incredible ways that I’ve never seen before,” she said.

While the art of decorating eggs with the batik method is not limited to Ukraine and has existed in many Eastern European countries for generations, it is now practiced around the

globe. One of the world's most famous pysanky artists, So Jeo LeBlon, hails from Nova Scotia and commands up to \$400 for her creations.

For Warchola, pysanky remains as simple, serene and personally rewarding as when she first picked up a kistka more than 50 years ago.

“It’s just a beautiful pastime,” she said.

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