



# Писанки

P Y S A N K Y

what do the  
Colors  
& Symbols  
really mean?

by

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## History

The word **pysanky** is pronounced **PIS-ahnk-yeh**. One egg is a **pysanka**. The word comes from the root word **pysaty**, meaning to write, because of the drawing or “writing” on the eggs. Pysanky are traditionally made for Easter, but are sold year-round to collectors, and some are now made as Christmas ornaments.

This art reaches back over three thousand years in Ukrainian tradition, and employs a batik-like technique. Blackened bee’s wax is applied with a tool much like a stylus called a **kistka** (two or more are called **kistky**) that holds the wax.

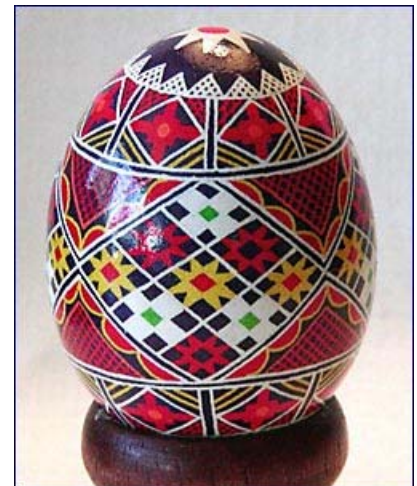


The **kistka** allows the melted wax to flow onto the egg in thin lines so that the drawing can be made to save a particular color. First, the artist starts saving the white lines and all white areas of the design on the natural shell by waxing them with the **kistka**. Then the egg is usually dipped into yellow dye next, and wax applied with the kistka to the areas where yellow is to be saved. The egg is then placed in another dye, wax applied to save that color, then dipped into the next color, etc. This procedure progresses until the background color is reached.

At this point the egg can be heated in the oven, if blown already, or held near a candle flame until the wax melts; then the wax is wiped off, revealing all the beautiful colors in the design. After the wax is removed the egg varnished and allowed to dry. Then a second coat of varnish is applied. If the egg has not been blown, the second coat is applied after the egg is blown.

Pysanky are never eaten. Since eggshells are porous, the poisonous aniline dyes that are now used are absorbed through the shell. Pysanky are made to give to loved ones, family and friends. They are placed among other symbolic foods in the family Easter basket, which is taken to church on Easter morning to be blessed by the priest.

Edible eggs include **Krasanky** (**kraska** means color) or **drapanky** (design etched or scratched), and the “drop-pull” eggs characteristic to western Ukraine. These utilize vegetable dyes. No wax is needed to make Krasanky or drapanky.



Traditionally, krasanky are dyed only solid red. At least one of these is always put in the Easter basket because they are the first food to be eaten to break the Lenten fast. A piece of the egg is meted out to each member of the family. Historically, a piece of krasanka was sent to a family member who was absent or had moved away to let them know that they were remembered.

The shells of krasanky must never be “thrown away”. Traditionally, pieces of the shells were buried in the garden to “feed the earth” to insure a good harvest, put in the nests of the chickens to produce good laying, tucked under the thatch or tile of a roof to ward off fire, or tossed in the stream to insure clean water and plentiful fish.



Ukraine is divided by several cultural sections, and different styles of pysanky are representative of each region. The most intricate geometrical patterns come from Hutsul (Western Carpathian Mountain area). The Bojko region, which is next door and a little northwest of Hutsul, has other distinctive designs, although you will see a few that are shared in both areas.

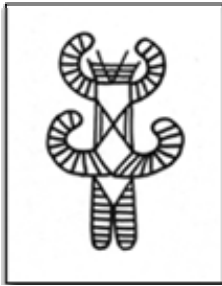
A very singular style is Trypillian. These patterns come from pottery done in Trypillia (40 km south of Kiev) 6,000 years ago, and have become quite popular since the archeological discovery of the Trypillian ruins by Vikentiy Xvoika around the 1890's. These people were a matriarchal society who first built the first square-cornered stone houses, introduced agriculture and animal husbandry to the area now known as Ukraine.

They are believed to have come from the east and were fine potters and coppersmiths. Their designs denote their worship of “mother earth”, being done in earth colors of red ochre, carbon black and the white or natural tan of the egg. No one knows what happened to these end-of-the-Stone Age, beginning-of-the-Iron Age people. Though thorough evidence of their houses with painted designs on the walls are in excellent condition, there are no burial sights. Work is still being done at the various digs in hope that new light can be shed on this ancient culture. The Ukrainians today are very proud of their ancient ancestors, and pysanky and pottery continue to be decorated in imitation of their artwork.

No matter whether pysanky are from Trypillia and Kiev in the north, Hutsul or Bojko in the west, Kharkiw in the east, Kuban in the south, or from central Ukraine, they are loaded with symbology that has fused pre-Christian symbols with Christian meaning.

## History

The combinations of designs are so numerous, some of them even telling a story, that it would take a large book to include them all. New designs and combinations are always evolving, but the oldest designs are still kept alive by artists today. These would include the grand goddess, princess, queen and old woman designs along with the forty triangles and the universe.



Grand Goddess



Princess



Queen

The **Hutsul** people of Ukraine believe that as long as the pysanky tradition is kept alive, and eggs are decorated yearly, the world will continue to exist. For, if the art ceases, evil will encompass the world and it will be destroyed. So, you can see how important it is that at least one member of a family carries on the tradition of making the beautiful pysanky which remind us constantly of friendship and love, and wish us the attainment of our best aspirations.

Though the batik technique of wax resist and dye has been and is done by Rumanians, Germans, Polish, Yugoslavians and other eastern European cultures, the Ukrainian pysanky are by far the most elaborate in detail and design. Even a new, modern design cries out in Ukrainian, "***Khrytos Voskres***" (Christ is risen), and cannot be confused with any other language or tradition.