

Pysanky by Lucia de Moranza

It is thought that the colouring and writing of eggs to encourage and celebrate the coming of spring has been a tradition in the Slavic nations since ancient times, but there are few definitive clues as to exactly when the tradition began. There are examples of decorated ostrich eggs



Figure 1 Ceramic egg from 9th century

being found in Egyptian tombs (c. 3800BC), but the dry conditions of Egypt and the strength of ostrich eggs provide excellent conditions for preservation. Ceramic eggs have been found all through the Kyivan Rus period (9th to 13th centuries), following a thriving ceramic tile industry in that area. (Tkachuk p12) These eggs had a characteristic spiral style, fashioned from pink and red clays and then smoothed by hand. They generally were slightly smaller than chicken eggs. (www.pysanky.info: Ceramic) (Figure 1)

The realities inherent in the fragility of egg shells has left very few extant examples of pysanky in the archeological record prior to the 19th century. So few examples in fact, that there has been a prevailing theory that the wax-resist folk art upon actual eggs was a product of the 19th century, and the tradition and history was a story crafted to provide it credibility, immaterial of the long oral tradition

associated with it. Two finds have smashed that theory to eggie shards.

The first was a find in 2008 in Baturyn, Ukraine of a chicken egg pysanky. (Figure 2) While it was smashed to bits, it does appear that all the bits are there, indicating that it was probably whole to start. Baturyn was sacked and razed by the Russian army in 1708, making it a good bet that's when the egg got smashed. (http://www.pysanky.info/History/Baturyn_Pysanka.html)

The next big find came in 2013, in Lviv. An intact pysanky was found in the excavation of the 15th - 16th century rainwater collection system. (Figure 3) Thought to be a goose egg, it is in excellent condition for being 500 years old. I've made my own attempt at recreating this egg (if not the colour) below. (Interfax)



Figure 2 Baturyn pysanka fragments

The use of an egg as a symbol of rebirth and life and the coming of spring has been one that spans many cultures and a wide expanse of time. Coloured eggs, both single colour and multicoloured eggs have figured extensively in pre-christian rituals of fertility and protection. (Luciow p16) Krashanka, from the word kraska meaning colour, are a hard boiled egg dyed one



Figure 3 Lviv egg

single brilliant colour, usually red. Pysanka (pysanky pl.), from the word pysaty meaning to write, are raw eggs that are drawn on with wax using a kistka and then dyed in a batik style wax resist process. (Luciow p16, Tkachuk p14) The kistka is, at its base, a wooden stick with a small brass or copper cone tied with wire to one end.

The designs written upon the eggs have been passed down within families, within regions for hundreds of years. They all held, and hold symbolic meaning and tradition, which sometimes change from place to place, and from person to person. When Christianity came to the Ukraine in

988, many of the symbols were re-interpreted to ascribe a Christian slant to them. In the grand scheme of things, it is speculation and guess as to what they might mean, there are no 1000 year old books of translation to read what an egg is saying. (Nor are there 1000 year old eggs, beyond ceramic ones).

That being said, there are a great many symbols that turn up time and again, and to detail them all out would make this documentation into a hefty (and boring) tome. Geometric motifs are very common, as are agricultural motifs (rakes, ladders, wheat). Plants and animals (often very stylized) are also quite common.

It was at QPT last year that I was inspired by the eggs painted by Baroness Gema to pick up my kistka again and return to a craft I'd learned as a child but that I haven't touched in easily twenty years or more. Twenty years of rust does not knock off as quickly as one might hope. My previous experience had been entirely with commercial analine dye, and I wished to explore natural egg dyeing this time, as well as an attempt to recreate the Lviv egg.

The very basics of writing pysanky are quite simple. An instrument (generally a kistka, but sometimes a pin or a nail) is heated in a candle flame until hot. It is then pressed into a beeswax

puck or in the case of some kitskas, wax can be scooped into the funnel. This beeswax is used to draw lines and designs on the raw egg. As the tool cools, it needs to be reheated periodically to continue to have the wax flow. Some artists keep their wax melted in a small fondue pot, or work next to a pot on a stove or radiator, rather than working with solid wax. When starting a new puck of wax, it is very hard to see lines on the egg, as it is translucent, however over time soot from the candle flame covers the kitska and transfers to the wax making it inky black. As the wax cools on the egg, it forms a barrier to dye. Once all the lines that one wishes to keep white have been drawn, the egg is dyed. If it is to be more than a two colour egg, the order of dye is very specific from lightest to darkest for the best overdyeing. After coming out of the dyebath, it is dried off, and then any lines of that colour are drawn on in wax. This repeats until the darkest colour. After all the dye is finished, the egg is held in the flame of a candle to melt the wax and its wiped off with a soft cloth (or modernly, a paper towel.) to reveal all of the colours. If you are working on many eggs at once, often a board with nails to hold many eggs is placed in a gently warm oven to melt the wax, and each egg is polished in turn.

I have had my kistka for many years, it is the same one that I used as a child. My puck of beeswax was a gift from last QPT, although I suspect the gifter had no idea it was not going to be used for sewing! There is nothing special about the candle used to heat the kistka or egg at the end, but tapers have a better flame and generally a better height. You're sitting with your face practically in the candle, so scented candles get very strong very quickly.

I made up dyebaths of onion skin, strong camomile tea, liquid from boiled beets, tumeric and diluted india ink. The eggs are all raw white eggs from the grocery store, the dye baths were all cooled and the eggs soaked in them for anywhere from a few hours to overnight.



Egg No. 1

Egg No. 1: A basic star design, commonly a first layer of wax before more details are added in other colours. The lines were drawn on the white egg with the wax, and then it was dyed in onion skins overnight. I tried adding more details and then overdyeing it with India ink, and there was no change whatsoever.

Egg No. 2: An attempt to use natural dyes to do the multicoloured overdye designs that are very popular in modern eggs.

This egg showed me a few things. The natural dyes that I

happened to have at my disposal were all very similar in tone and made for very very subtle colour changes. I had not yet mixed up the tumeric at this point, and that would have been a good addition. I also determined that being a couple of decades out of practice did not do anything for my ability to freehand and eyeball even sections. Still, it's a good example of how the dyes



Egg No. 2

work together, or in this case, don't work together. The first lines were on the white egg. The next colour was camomile tea and those lines can be seen in the antennae looking designs coming out of the stars as well as the centres of the stars. It was then overdyed with beets and that was a crashing disappointment. The rakes, nets and filling in the stars are the sad greeny blah that I got from beets. Finally the whole thing went in an onion skin dyebath, because onion skin dyebaths will fix everything. At the very least, it makes it all nicely brown, which was the best one could hope for at this point in this poor egg's existence.

Egg No. 3: After the stunningly pathetic performance out of the beets, I was determined to get a good red. Determined enough, in fact, to cheat and break out the modern dye (Wilton's paste icing dye in Christmas Red). Working with the theory that eggs are a product of the area around the person writing them, I decided to do a heraldic egg with trilliums and rams. The rams are of a traditional Ukranian design and very stylized and the trilliums were sketched freehand.



Egg No. 3

Egg No. 4: I wanted to try my hand at an interpretation of the Lviv egg, finally. While the colour in the extant egg is very faded, it looks more like a dark colour to begin with, onion skin or madder, or indigo perhaps. I was, by this point, solidly sick of onion skin dye, and decided to use turmeric instead. Only one quadrant is well photographed, with a second that is harder to see and we



Egg No. 4

can't see the back side of the extant egg at all. I decided to simply repeat the design from the first half on the second half, seeing no reason not to. The wavy design is thought to evoke the thought of water, but it makes me think of Nessie the Loch Ness Monster more than waves. This photo shows the egg with the wax still on it.

The inspiration and incentive to work on a craft I once enjoyed very much was welcome. I looked forward to doing these enough that they were the metaphorical carrot that saw me through a few tight deadlines. While I had some frustrations with dye stuffs, I have ideas and thoughts on more dyes to try (red cabbage being a common one for blue) and I have a suspicion that as I do dye baths for other purposes in the coming months and years, I am quite likely to toss an egg in to see what

happens. There are other techniques that I did not touch on here that I might wish to explore as well. One that interests me involves dyeing the egg first, and then scratching off the dye in patterns to expose the white egg beneath. There is also the technique that uses a pin or

sharpened bit of bone or wood to make patterns with pre-melted wax. Both of these sound interesting to explore in future.

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