

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

MORE ON EASTER TRADITIONS

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When Christianity came to Ukraine, the Church merged the pre-Christian spring holiday with Easter – the Resurrection of Christ. Many of the ancient spring rituals became a segment of the Easter celebrations. To the physical purification of home and household of old was added the Christian purification of the soul through prayer, confession, and fasting. The offering of a specially baked bread became the most important Easter bread, the *paska*. It was placed in our Easter basket and taken to Church to be blessed. The age-old guardian of man and home – the *pysanka* – became the symbol of life, rebirth, and resurrection. The ancient spring songs and dances, the *hahilky* and *vesnianky* once performed in the special groves, became part of the joyful celebration of Easter, the Resurrection of Christ, and was performed on Easter Sunday on the village or Church green so

Many of the traditions that we adhere to as part of religious holidays, namely Christmas and Easter, have ancient origins and come from pre-Christian times in Ukraine. The settled, agrarian mode of life of the ancient people of Ukraine dictated by the repetitive cycle of nature characterized by life, death, and rebirth, played an important role in the formation of the people's beliefs and religious outlook. For an agrarian society, spring was actually the most important season of the year, because it heralded the rebirth of nature, which after a long, cold winter was eagerly awaited, greeted, and celebrated with specific rituals. Ancient

man was in awe of nature's powers and at the same time aware of his helplessness in combating the unexpected, irregular, and destructive forces of nature. In order to somehow preserve the regular cyclical movements in nature, to appease these powers when need arises, and to harness them for his benefit, man created rituals consisting of spring purifications, offerings and preparation of special breads to the sun, creation of items, e.g., the *pysanka*, incantations, songs, and dances glorifying nature and its gifts to mankind.



as to enact the words of Psalm 47,1: "All you peoples, clap your hands; shout to God with joyful cries."



These ancient songs are an important part of Ukrainian oral tradition. What are they all about? Primarily these songs, dances, and dramatic scenes were performed by young maidens and were once believed to serve the function of enticing spring to come down to earth, welcoming it, enchanting all of reawakened nature to bring about prosperity, happiness and good fortune, and to chase away winter. The songs addressed various other subjects. For example, some of the songs with



words and gestures imitated the planting and the growing of crops so as to result in a bountiful harvest. Others praised the talented young maidens performing their duties at home and in the field. Some sing about the gatekeeper of the heavens and to ask him to open the gates and let

spring come down to earth, to let ancestral spirits come down to visit and help their brethren this spring season, etc. There are many songs which continuously glorify spring and the gifts one expects that spring will give us. One of the most ancient songs is all about simulating the movement of the sun - *Kryvyi Tanets* (Winding Dance). Ancient man understood the power of the sun and its role in bringing about the rebirth of nature

in the spring. This song and winding dance was performed for hours on end, believing that their imitation of the movement



of the sun, with its rising and setting was performed by a long line of girls and matrons going up and down in a circular or winding manner around three trees or three stakes which symbolized the three cyclical stages of life (birth, life, and death). The words of this song are as follows:

Our winding dance goes round and round,
No one can tell where the end is bound.

Can't see the end, nor a straight line,
No one can tell who's the last in line.
Up the high hill, and down the vale,
Into the rose bush and *kalyna* we trail.

In our Museum and Library we have numerous postcards which depict the performance of spring dances on Easter Sunday. Most of these illustrations were done by prominent Ukrainian artists.



These ancient pre-Christian spring ritual dances have been and still are performed on Easter Sunday and are treated as an expression of gladness and joyfulness in celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. They are part of our cultural heritage and tradition. Tradition is the passing down of certain cultural elements and values from generation to generation for cen-

turies within a specific society. Beliefs and customs maintained by a particular society is what imparts its identity, keeps it united, and safeguards it from extinction. Ukrainians are the best example of a downtrodden nation which has survived and overcome many annihilating and destructive historical periods, owing to strict adherence to its traditions and religious beliefs. Let us continue to safeguard our cultural heritage!

Explore and Experience Our Past