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Pysanky – Ukrainian Easter Eggs

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

The traditional art of the Ukrainian *pysanka* which originated in antiquity and which has been cultivated in Ukraine for centuries has achieved global interest and popularity. This unique form of art is practiced both within and beyond the Ukrainian community.

This ancient Ukrainian custom which originated as an important element of the pre-Christian beliefs associated with the cult of the sun and rebirth eventually became a part of Easter traditions. Ukrainians kept *pysanky* in their homes, placed new ones each year in their Easter basket to be blessed, and gave them as gifts to family members and friends. The *Hutsuls* even had a tradition of making doves out of *pysanky*. From colored paper they would attach wings, a tail, and a beak and would then hang them in their homes near the icons to commemorate a belief that when Jesus was born, a dove was hovering above Him.

Ancient man in attempting to understand creation, developed myths in which the egg was perceived as the prime source of life, rebirth, the sun, and the universe. Similar myths were found in many cultures of the world. In ancient Ukrainian beliefs, when secret symbolic signs were written on the egg in a prescribed manner and in various colors, the egg would then acquire magical powers; it became a talisman, able to protect from evil, bring good fortune, ensure prosperity and fertility. The egg

thus became a *pysanka*.

According to an ancient Ukrainian legend, there was a belief that the fate of the world depended upon *pysanky*. As long as *pysanky* writing continued, the world would exist. Should the custom cease, evil in the guise of an ancient, vicious monster chained to a huge cliff, would encompass the world and destroy it. Each year the monster's servants would encircle the globe, checking if *pysanky* were still being written. When there were few, the monster's chains would loosen, and evil would flow throughout the world. When there were many, the monster's chains would hold taut, allowing love and friendship to subdue evil.

The custom of writing *pysanky* was brought to the United States by Ukrainian immigrants. Their visible adherence to this tradition stirred interest among Americans already in the early 1920s. It all began at a Ukrainian book store on 7th Street, the Surma Book and Music Co., whose proprietor, Myron Surmach, placed some *pysanky*, which he had received on consignment from a *Hutsul*, in his display window. Almost immediately all the *pysanky* were sold. The following year the same *Hutsul*, H.V. Skrobotiuk, prior to the Easter Holidays, rented space in front of the store's display window, sat there for hours and days demonstrating the art of the *pysanka*, and offering them for sale. Hundreds *pysanky* were sold for 35



Pysanka Doves, I. Zelyk, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.



Postcard, Olena Kulchytska, printed in Lviv, 1929, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.



Pysanky, Tanya Osanca, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.



Pysanky, Tanya Osanca, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.

cents each. From such simple beginnings, fascination and popularity of this craft widened. A demand for instructions, tools and dyes grew. Myron Surmach took it upon himself to produce all of the necessary materials. His children continued his work, especially, his daughter Yaroslava, a noted artist. She did extensive research on the *pysanka* and published much-needed information in English.

One of the earliest notices about the *pysanka* which appeared in the American Press, came as a result of pure coincidence. In March of 1948, H. Ross, the then editor of *The New Yorker*, came down to East 7th Street to do an interview at McSorley's Irish Pub, which is almost next door to the Surma Book and Music Co. He brought his wife along, forgetting that, in those days, women were not allowed in the Pub. So, his wife, seeing the quaint Surma store, said that she would wait for him there. What a surprise H. Ross had when he later entered the store to meet his wife! She was by then engrossed in all the charms and magic of the *pysanka*! Right then and there, he did an interview with Surma's owner and learned all about Ukrainian traditions, especially those dealing with the *pysanka*. The next issue of *The New Yorker* had a write-up about this visit. From then on, the doors to Surma never seemed to close, and the *pysanka* was in demand not only at Easter time but year-round.

Today we have many *pysanka* artisans in America. Much information has been printed and tools have been

refined. In Ukraine during the Soviet days *pysanka* traditions were not only frowned upon but in some areas strictly forbidden. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, *pysanka* artisans from the United States and Canada went to Ukraine, exhibited their *pysanka* collections, and thus helped to rediscover, revive and restore an ancient tradition that had almost been obliterated by the totalitarian Soviet regime.

Ukrainian *pysanka* is now known and admired throughout the world. And what is more – of all the cultural achievements of the Ukrainian people (many for which Ukrainians are not given credit, because these achievements have been usurped and designated as belonging to other nationalities) the *pysanka* has always been designated as Ukrainian, permanently and rightfully so.

In one Ukrainian Christian legend about the *pysanka* we read that: "... While pleading before Pilate for her son Jesus, she [Mary] fainted and fell to the floor. The *pysanky*, beautifully decorated eggs which she had brought for Pilate as a gift, rolled out of her basket down the floor and throughout the world..." Similarly, to a large degree through the efforts and work of the *pysanka* artisans of the Ukrainian Diaspora, our *pysanka* keeps rolling throughout the whole world. It has captivated and gained the interest, attention, and admiration of many. And who knows, perhaps to some degree it is instrumental in holding back evil and preserving goodness and friendship! ❖