

## EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

## Scholarly Sources About Pysanka

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Preparations for the Easter Holidays often motivates us to not only to review traditions associated with the holiday but also to reenact some of the basic and once widely performed rituals. One of a most important of Easter traditions is the extremely popular and far-reaching creating of the pysanky. (Ukrainian Easter eggs). The widespread tradition and dedication to art of the creation of the Ukrainian pysanky in Ukraine and in the Diaspora helped Ukrainians to achieve an acknowledgment of our national presence worldwide. It was especially important in the years when Ukraine was not well known and often mistakenly identified and often purposely confused as Russian owing to soviet propaganda. Pysanka not only represented historical memory of ancient traditions but also became one of the most recognized and most popular symbols of Ukrainian art throughout the world.

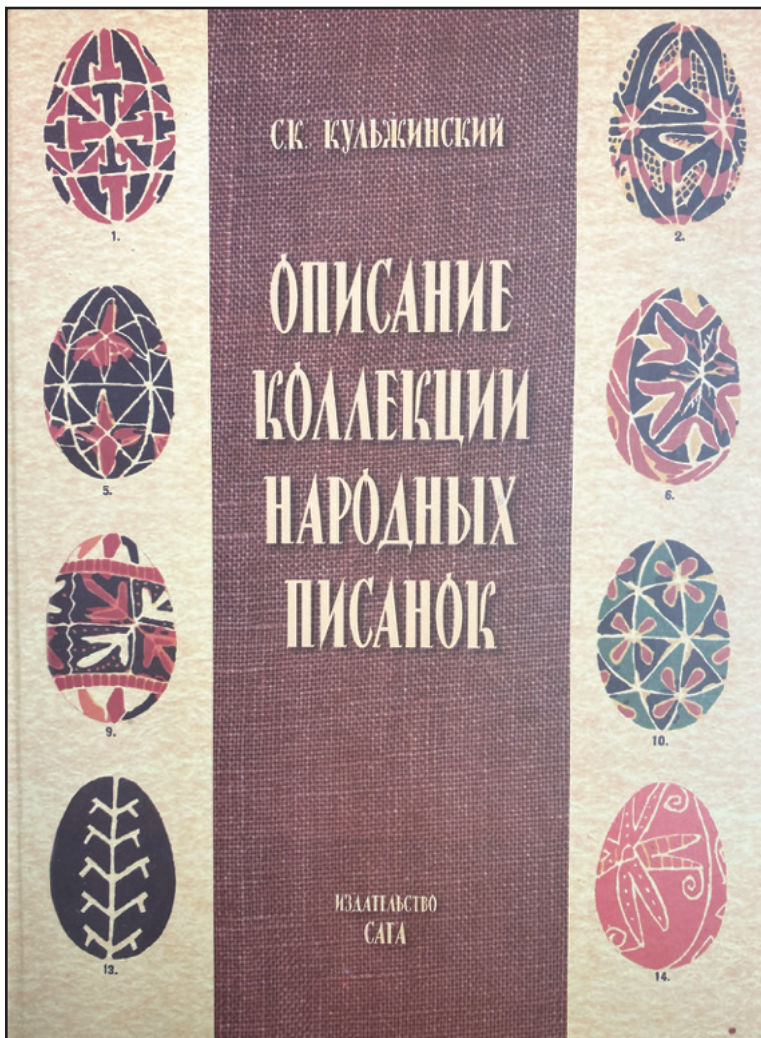
Pysanka creation in Ukraine was practiced for centuries but with a great many interruptions and even occasional decline. The greatest harm to this tradition was caused by the Soviet regime which either repressed these traditions or destroyed them if they could not be forced to fit into their Soviet ideology. This caused the pysanka tradition to almost die out in Ukraine. During these destructive years, Ukrainian immigrants in the Diaspora tried to preserve, popularize and disseminate knowledge about Ukrainian traditions and

Ukrainian cultural heritage. An interesting occurrence took place when Ukraine achieved her independence in 1991. A Ukrainian from America, a notable Pysanka scholar and pysanka writer, Tanya Osadca, came to Ukraine and organized pysanka exhibitions in 23 cities. From Kyiv to Odesa, From Lviv to Poltava. In each city the exhibit was greeted with great enthusiasm and sincere gratitude to Ukrainians of the Diaspora for having preserved this art form and for reintroducing it to the Ukrainian people in Ukraine. In the visitors comments of these exhibits we read "Thank you for bringing to Ukraine a part of Ukraine"... "Thank you for preserving the art of the pysanka which has spread its roots worldwide thanks to people like you"... Tanya Osadca's pysanky collection, which she bequeathed to our museum is on permanent exhibit.

We proudly display our pysanky, their beauty, their artistic qualities, and every Easter continue the enactment of this ancient ritual. But we would not have the wealth of information about our pysanka had it was not for 19th century Ukrainian scholars who, often under difficult circumstances, traveled throughout the country collecting samples of pysanky, gathering information on the traditions associated with them as practiced in different areas and writing and publishing analytical studies about this unique art. We owe all of them and immense gratitude for their



A page from Ukrainian Ornaments (*Ukrayinski vzory*) by Olena Pchilka, published in 1876. (Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford)



A recent reprinted copy of *Opysanie kolektsii narodnykh pysanok* by Serhii Kuzhynskiy, 1867-1943 – ethnographer, museum curator, pysanka researcher. (Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford)

work upon which our knowledge today is largely based upon. It is their work that gave us the possibility to bring about the rebirth of this art and preserve it for posterity.

One of the first publications that included a page of pysanky depictions from Volyn is the work of Olena Pchilka, 1849-1930, – ethnographer, mother of Lesia Ukrainka – Ukrainian Ornaments, published in 1876. Many studies were also produced by Mykola Sumtsov, 1854-1922 – a prolific scholar, ethnographer, writer, community leader. He devoted much of his scholarship to the ornamental aspects of Ukrainian folk art, especially the art of the pysanka. In one of his writings he says: "...it is necessary to let the people develop their abundant artistic gifts which can be seen in the perfect drawing, in the selection of colors, and in the purity and the nobility of ornamentation"... Many of Sumtsov's articles were published in the magazine *Kyivska Starovyna*. He encouraged young scholars to collect and to further document information about folk art. It pained him that much was already lost because Ukrainians, due to unfavorable political and social circumstances, began collecting ethnographic material much later than other countries and additionally did not learn

how to or care for or to actively preserve our cultural heritage. His seminal work on pysanka was published in *Kyivska Starovyna* in 1901 in which he meticulously analyzed pysanka motifs and ornamental design. Another scholar – Pelahiia Lytvynova-Bartosh, 1833-1904, also an ethnographer and community activist, collected information about Chernihiv pysanky. Volodymyr Shukhevych, 1849-1915, ethnographer, pedagogue, civic leader, publicist in the years 1899 - 1908 published his five volume work on the Hutsuls *Hutsulshchyna*. In it he included information and colored depictions of Hutsul pysanky. But the most prolific collection of pysanky with detailed descriptions and depictions (close to 2000) is the work of Serhii Kuzhynskiy, 1867-1943 – ethnographer, museum curator, pysanka researcher

*Opysanie kolektsii narodnykh pysanok* published in 1899. This catalog was based on a pysanka collection housed in the private museum in the city of Lubny, belonging to Kateryna Skarzhynska, 1853-1924. She was a wealthy landowner, an ethnographer and a collector of Ukrainian antiquities. Serhii Kuzhynskiy was curator of this museum. He noted interesting thoughts about pysanky: "...Only pysanky can tell us things that people's

memory is silent about. Ornamental designs and their wide geographic distribution is the key to an ancient riddle which every spring place before us illiterate women and village artists by painting hundreds upon thousands multi colored pysanky with motifs filled with profound but forgotten meaning... Many years were needed for all pysanka types to emerge by surfacing from one to another and intersecting with each other, and many years were needed for numerous patterns to wither from memory and become extinct without a trace or leaving just a hint of their once robust existence. Like human beings, these forms continued to develop and die away, like humans they disperse and sometimes lose connection with each other"...

We mention just a few of these significant scholars who researched the art of the pysanka. There were many more. Without these basic works about the pysanka, which the 19th century scholars left for us, our understanding of the traditional and artistic aspects of the pysanka would be quite meager. This is just one more example of how important it is to collect and to preserve archival material, historical memory and to cherish all aspects of our cultural heritage. ❖