

Egg Artists Recreate Ukranian Easter Tradition



The dye, colored black so it is easier to see, is applied to the egg with a medium- or fine-point "kiska."

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — A springtime custom long practiced in faraway Ukraine has reached America.

"Pysanky" eggs have become a popular showpiece and craft endeavor for many people who enjoy the art.

"One of the oldest symbols of new life, rebirth, and love," according to brochure information, the eggs, traditionally created in the springtime, were decorated to celebrated nature's renewal with the coming of warm weather.

The word "Pysaty," meaning "to write," is accomplished by literally writing on the egg with a wax-applying instrument to create the colorful, meaningful designs.

Flowers, for example, symbolize love, charity, and good will. Evergreen trees symbolize eternal youth and health. Wheat symbolizes good health and a bountiful harvest.

Animal symbols also show up on eggs, as deer, sheep, horse, and lion symbolize weather, pros-

perity, strength, and speed. Fish symbolize Christianity. Geometric symbols rakes, ladders, windmills, triangles, and stars are also combined to create the intricate picture.

Although the designs may look like they've been stenciled on the egg, the patterns are drawn on freehand.

Beryl Swisher, Lancaster, has filled her Easter season with crafting designs on eggshell can-

vases. After learning the art from a fellow church member, she now teaches a five-week course conducted at her church before Easter.

To create a Pysanky egg, Swisher carefully notes the pattern on a pattern, then faithfully reproduces it on her egg with a pencil, dividing the egg into eighths.

The rest of the design, however, is accomplished simply with the wax-yielding tool called the "kiska."

By heating the metal end of the small instrument, Swisher melts the beeswax (candle wax cannot be substituted) which creates the lines of the pattern. She puts the black wax, which is most easily seen on the white egg shell, in the top of the kiska.

The small amount of wax dries very quickly, speeding the process. With a pattern she has completed several times, for example, Swisher can decorate an egg in less than an hour.

Mistakes can be scraped off with a small scalpel-like instrument. "These are little things you learn on your own," she said.

"I look at one design to the next to see what is missing," she said. "I make sure there is enough room to put the next design in."

"If you make a mistake, don't worry about it because most people won't know you made a mistake. Just keep on going," she said.

After the wax lines are drawn over the areas which are meant to be yellow, she places the egg in the pink dye. Again she looks at the pattern on the egg which dictates which lines, or filled-in designs, should be pink and applies the wax.

Following this the egg is put into the blue dye.

Since the blue dye is the last

glass case on Easter Sunday at the church.

Fortunately for Pysanky creators, buying the materials needed to begin the art are approximately \$10. Two kiskas, one fine and one medium, and five dyes, black, bright red, yellow, orange, and blue, are the necessities. From there, "you can make just about any colors you want to."

With more than 10 years of experience, she has passed on the art to not only fellow church and community members but also her grandchildren. Teaching the technique, however, is not the only thing she has given.

"I must have given away 20-30 because they get in my way — I

don't know where to go with them after a while." The eggs she has kept have taken up residence on small iron stands, in a basket, or displayed in small wooden pots.

Swisher, who grew up on a small dairy and chicken farm in Espyville, Crawford County, buys only eggs from a nearby farm.

She said that the shell is harder since it has not been processed with the wash at a plant. Next she washes the eggs with white vinegar to give them a bright white glow for the outlines.

Dyes are available only during the Easter season, however once

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The wax dries quickly, so the egg can move on to the next step, a 2-3 minute bath in each dye.

color for this particular pattern, she dries the egg with a paper towel, then places it in the flame of an alcohol burner.

"I teach my class to use a candle," she said, although the egg will take on black carbon smudges if it gets in the candle's flame. Once the egg's wax is melted off in a few seconds, she wipes the wax off with a paper towel.

"That's when you see what you've accomplished."

A varnish gives a glistening coat and protects the egg from damage, since water can change the dye. In addition, when the contents of the egg are blown out, a varnish coat will protect the outside of the egg from the wet yolk and white.

While the eggs look intricate and complicated, creating this art form is within reach of most.

"Once you learn the basics, you'll feel a lot more confident" in going ahead with more intricate designs.

Swisher gets her inspiration for new patterns from books or from attendees of the class that she has taught at her church, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, for three years.

"I don't necessarily. The ladies just like to get together to do these eggs." Swisher sets up the area and copies designs for the evening's session. Participants bring their own dyes and tools. They create eggs once a week for five weeks before Easter, then display the eggs in a



Pysanky eggs are created with wax and dyes.



Swisher uses a variety of items to display her eggs.



One of the last steps is melting the wax off of the egg, which is followed by wiping the egg with a paper towel. "That's when you see what you've accomplished," said Swisher.

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