

UKRAINIANS EXCEL IN EASTER-EGG ART



Mary Skwark, of Winnipeg, shows some Easter eggs decorated in traditional Ukrainian style.



*An ancient custom
has been brought
over to Canada
by a Slavic people*

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EASTER eggs weren't always just a million-dollar candy business. When the Christian observance of Easter was adapted to pagan spring festivals, the egg symbolized a promise of eternal life through Christ's Resurrection.

The ancient Egyptians, Persians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Gauls, Goths and Norse all colored eggs during their annual celebrations of the coming of spring and the renewal of the earth's fertility.

In England during the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) it was the custom to stain eggs and to distribute them at Easter to the members of the Royal household. In France and Germany many popular Easter games involved eggs.

The Slavic peoples reached a high peak in the Easter-egg art during the early days of Christianity, and the Ukrainians attained unrivalled perfection. Today in Canada no Lenten activities, not even the Easter Parade, bring so much color as the painting of the Ukrainian "Pysanky" or Easter eggs.

Intricate designs and brilliant color combinations are produced by a unique process of waxing, dyeing, hand-tinting, heating and lacquering to achieve the final miniature mosaic. Time has not reduced the design to a simpler form. Each new generation strives for greater beauty and intricacy.

The designs are predominantly geometric, with traditional regional significance (Continued on Page 4)

Centuries of craftsmanship have gone into the production of these ornamented eggs. It is a highly-skilled art, and its secrets have been passed down the ages since pre-Christian times.



Mrs. P. Yuzyk, of Winnipeg, shows daughters Vangie (l) and Vickie how to apply color to eggs.



Mrs. Yuzyk heats the egg to remove all the wax that has been used in successive stages of dyeing.



The egg is varnished after waxing and dyeing has been completed. This is last step in preparation.



Myron Hlynka (l) and Dennis Hlynka (r) exchange Easter eggs with friend, Lesia Stebnicky.

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springing from the villages and provinces of the old Ukraine. Besides many abstract motifs, the artists, who today are mostly women, introduced floral and animal patterns.

The white fresh egg is left unwashed so that colors will catch. The Easter egg "pen," with which the wax patterns are applied, consists of a stick to which a tiny metal cone is attached. This cone is filled with melted beeswax which is allowed to trickle through a hole in the base to trace a pattern on the egg.

The parts now covered with wax will remain white when the egg is plunged into the first dye. After the first dye the egg is again waxed where the color of the last dye is desired, and put through the next dye. Dyes range from light to dark shades and are used in that order.

There are many secret formulas for these dyes, and many families have guarded the secret among themselves from generation to generation. When the varicolored process is complete the heavily-waxed egg belies its final beauty. This is revealed when the egg is heated and the wax melted away. A secret lacquer is then used to preserve the design and the egg. A five- or six-hour period spent on one egg is not uncommon.

The egg will not spoil during the period when it is being waxed — unless it cracks. The lacquer protects it after the process is complete, and in time the yolk and white inside dry out and become hard. Some artists practise needle-like egg-tip punctures to blow out the contents before waxing, but the majority prefer to leave it as is, to achieve a perfectly smooth surface.

The eggs are not eaten. Some with simpler design involving only one or two colors and a few minutes of waxing are used as the centrepieces of Easter food baskets that are later taken to the churches on Easter Saturday to be blessed by the priest. Along with these, of course, are included the ornate eggs which will later be given to friends or added to the artist's personal collection.

Early Sunday morning after the sunrise services, the eggs of simple design are broken and eaten before any other food is touched, but these are not eggs which took five hours to color. The head of the household divides the eggs among the family and proposes a toast that symbolizes unity in the home and expresses hope for a happy year.

Food baskets are also packed with a milk-white "Paska" (Easter bread), sweet hams decorated with cloves, sausages, cheese, carved butter figurines, horseradish and roast pork.

Easter Monday the eggs are exchanged with friends as tokens of goodwill. The gift eggs are then used in the games that accompany "Vesnianky," Easter songs and dances.

Although there are only a handful of Ukrainian egg artists in Canada who preserve authenticity and regional flavoring in their designs, the ancient craft enjoys a tremendous amateur following, especially in Winnipeg, where there are more than 30,000 Ukrainians.

The majority of the eggs are kept as ornaments, and in many cases as museum pieces in Ukrainian art collections. Every Ukrainian home in Canada has at least a small display of eggs that are brought out at Eastertide.