



What Does the Pysanka Tell Us?*

When you hold a pysanka – a small miracle, crafted by the hands of a simple peasant from a remote Ukrainian village – in your hands, it is difficult to imagine that several thousand years ago, an ancestor held a similar egg in his hands, decorating it with symbols of the sun... or a dynamic cross or a refined spiral... or rain suddenly pouring down in tiny lines... or seeds sown in the form of tiny dots... or an ancient god peering into one's soul with "oxen eyes"...

For most of us, however, these symbols are as incomprehensible as Chinese ideograms. We trust that this book will introduce you to a broad and unique aspect of Ukrainian culture, and, perhaps, will lead you to become impassioned admirers of the national art of writing pysanky – one which was nearly eliminated by the Soviet regime. We believe that the pysanka has earned the right to a thorough scientific analysis, and with this publication, we hope to increase the number of pysanka designs in our national treasury. We also hope to assist in the growth of this living artisan craft.

In assembling this book, our goal was not only to describe the method of writing pysanky. We also intended to present a specific and complete study of the phenomenon of the pysanka, which we hope the artist grasps as he or she lifts a pysachok (a pysanka writing instrument).

The origin of the pysanka remains a mystery: archaeology has shown no evidence of painted eggs on Ukrainian territory during the period of Kievan Rus. Meanwhile, in neighboring Poland, decorated eggshells and one complete pysanka were found during excavations of graves from the 10th to 13th centuries (Opole, Wrocław, Nowogród); cultic eggs were also found in Scythian burial mounds dating from 300 B.C. in Eastern Crimea. In general, painted eggs have been found in graves throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. The oldest discoveries are attributed to Egyptian and Nubian burial sites, where all of the discovered eggs were ostrich eggs. Meanwhile, those found in Europe were either goose or chicken eggs. The placing of eggs in graves was characteristic of almost all Mediterranean cultures.

Without a doubt, the roots of the pysanka date back to pre-Christian times, when agricultural societies occupied Southeastern Europe, which is Ukraine today. The pysanka belongs to this culture and bears witness to its symbolic code. Our ancestors' creation extends from an agricultural tradition, which "calls forth the strength of essential pictures-metaphors such as the earth tree, goddess-mother, solar symbols, etc., thus confirming the metaphors of a national artistry and the significance of its paintings and subjects, which are often veiled by externally humble, amusing, everyday scenes" (20, 16). Similarly, we know that the first undisputed mythopoetic texts were created during the Neolithic Age, written in a language of pictorial marks, which remain a valuable source of information



Photo: Y. Kriger (Krakow)
Beginning of the 20th century

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for the reconstruction of ancient beliefs (page 17, 485). Thus, the decorative pysanka remains a mere fragment of the complete culture of the “age of mythopoetic thinking” in the Eurasian region.

Mythologies of many cultures boast the image of a cosmic egg from which emerges the universe or from which is born the god-creator. In Hindu mythology, the primordial lord of creatures, Prajapati, emerged from an egg, as did Brahma. The ancient Slavs believed that everything began with the egg; it was the prototype of the cosmos. They believed that the world was not unlike a large egg: the shell symbolized the heavens, the membrane represented clouds, the egg whites symbolized water, and the egg yolk represented the earth (see 22, 397).

The motif of a dissected egg is common in ceramic pottery of the Trypillian culture. The egg depicted in diagram 5,34 is dissected in several ways: along its diameter by the symbol of a serpent, or by the symbol of a pine branch, which represents the notion of the division of two worlds. In ancient beliefs, the cosmic egg, from which everything emerged, was born from and divided by a serpent - god of the earth, of the underworld, and of fire. Thus, an egg, the symbol of the serpent, the male deity of the earth, who was considered, along with the original goddess-mother, to be the creator of everything alive on earth (5,33) - was one of the main elements of a pagan spring holiday dedicated to the spirit of rebirth.

The notion that the egg is an attribute of the serpent is evidenced by the most common and most symbolic color of Easter eggs: red. Red ochre was sprinkled over the bodies of the deceased to prepare them for eternity, and eggs were considered “red” even when they were decorated with another color. Therefore, it is no surprise that magical powers were attributed to the eggs. These eggs influenced the fertility of crops, the offspring of cattle, and the birth of children, and were believed to possess powers of healing, beautifying, and preventing fires and thunderstorms – all characteristics of the Serpent-Thunder god.

During the Bronze Age, with the change in male and female roles in society wherein the sky now belonged to the male god, and the earth to the female goddess, the egg was attributed to the sun bird – the rooster. In Ukrainian tales, however, the chicken dominates over the egg, rather than the rooster. The rooster, meanwhile, represented the sun and rebirth, as is noted in the following brain-teaser: “The living gives birth to the dead. The dead gives birth to the living.” (Which came first – the chicken or the egg?)

Certain scholars believe that mere faith in the status of the egg as a symbol of rebirth justified its use in burial rituals. According to the theory of A. Hollan, the egg represented the passage of the deceased into the realm of the serpent. Archaeologists studying the early Bronze Age discovered a considerable amount of cultic eggs, but not pysanky, during archaeological digs of ancient graves in what is now Ukraine. During the late Bronze Age, people created stone or clay eggs for similar burial purposes.

During the era of Kievan Rus, pysanky were made from ceramic eggs as well as from birds' eggs. In the 1880s, the archaeologist Uvarov discovered ceramic eggs while excavating the Kryvushanskyj grave. Vikentij Khvojka made a similar discovery in 1908, during an excavation in Poltava province. As recently as a few years ago, a clay pysanka was found near the excavation site of ancient Halych in the village of Krylos in Western Ukraine (see p. 41).

The oldest pysanka on record dates to the 9th century A.D. In total, archaeologists have found approximately 70 such pysanky. These eggs were prevalent in Kievan Rus and had both a characteristic painting style and a specific technique. They generally portrayed



GAZDA (master)
FROM THE VICINITIES
OF ZBARAZH
Photo: Y. Kriger (Krakow)
Beginning of the 20th century

interwoven yellow and green stripes (symbolizing an evergreen plant which creeps along the ground) on a brown, green, or, least frequently, yellow background. These pysanky were made in large cities such as Kyiv or Chernihiv, where bricks and cement tiles were manufactured (1, 64).

The pysanka is an absolutely unique creation of the national genius. "There is no other subject in all national art which condenses in itself such figurative and symbolic matter. The pysanka was given as a gift to signify reconciliation, or to symbolize one's wish for good health, beauty, strength, or for a good harvest. It was also used to prevent natural calamities" (10,10) such as thunderstorms and fires. The pysanka was seen as a factor in curing various illnesses, and it was used to combat curses and fear. It was rolled over grass and buried underground in fields, to ensure that the wheat would be full and that the oats would ripen (23, 27). The pysanka was also placed under beehives, to ensure that bees would perpetually swarm within the hive.

"When paired with a practical purpose within a given ritual, every aspect of national art plays a significant role in social relations in that it personifies the joining of symbolic and practical themes. In a traditional folklore environment, symbolism is essential to an object, and an object is essential to symbolism. Vivid symbolism predetermines the functional destiny of an object in the semiotic system of holidays and rituals. By including specific objects in a given ritual, we allow them to function as "symbols" – a ritual representation with specific meanings. Without the symbolism, the object reverts back to its original practical state. The pysanka has earned an elite semiotic status: while its utilitarian use is minimal, its symbolic representation of rebirth is immense" (10,10).

The symbolic meaning of a pysanka is comprised of two main components: 1) the meaning of the egg itself, which contains the embryo of the rooster or the sun-bird; 2) the meaning of the symbols drawn on the egg. Because of this, pysanky were never boiled or used for food, and since they were marked with magical symbols linked to ancient beliefs, no one ever played with them. The understanding of their cultic meaning carried through to the 20th century. Accordingly, the ritualistic status of the pysanka was much higher than that of the krashanka.

(Note: there were two forms of painted eggs in Ukraine – krashanky and pysanky.

KRASHANKY – boiled eggs, dyed a single color: yellow, red, green, blue, purple, black. They were eaten during the Easter season, and were used in Easter games.

PYSANKY – raw eggs, dyed three or four different colors, and decorated with symbolic drawings.)

The pysanka is tightly interwoven with ancient Ukrainian beliefs and with the ancient calendar, which was based on the cycle of the sun. Beginning in winter and ending when the days became longer, the calendar incorporated various holidays and their unique traditions: Kalyty, Koliady, Shchedrivky, Ordani, Kolodij, and finally – Velykden. It is on Velykden that pagan Ukrainians celebrated the victory of the sun over darkness, of life over death, and of spring over winter, by giving each other "krasni" (colored) eggs as symbols of the sun. When Ukraine accepted Christianity with its own calendar holidays, the pagan holidays were no longer celebrated. However, the original name of the pagan celebration of Velykden remained, in that its semantic meaning best described the metaphorical meaning of Christians' "most significant day" – the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or Easter.

Photo: Y. Kriger (Krakow)
Beginning of the 20th century

CERAMIC PLATE
Holovkovka,
Kirovograd region, 1950
Artist: P. Zinchenko

The noted pysanka researcher W. Shcherbytskyj suggests that the krashanka played a very important role in honoring the god of the sun in ancient Ukraine. He compares the importance of the Velykden krashanky in pagan times to the importance of the Eucharist in Christianity. He further proposes that since the pysanka served as a symbol of the resurrected god of the sun, pagans perceived its decorative symbols of the sun to be beneficial, if not magical – especially when the sun itself was at its brightest and strongest (29,7). One of the more important rituals of sun worship was the rolling of the eggs, metaphorically similar to the rolling of other symbols of the sun – flat bread and wedding wreaths - which represented the motion of the sun across the heavens (23,28).

It comes as no surprise that writers of Byzantine and Rus hymns deemed Christ to be a “just,” “wise,” “spiritual” sun, “a sun which does not set;” such metaphors underlined not only the difference between the Christian and the pagan god, but also showed that, in order for people to identify with a new religion, they needed to explain it in the old mythopoetic language. Our forefathers found themselves in a dilemma - they didn’t know to whom they should pray, so they made the sign of the cross and prayed to the sun.

However, the pysanka managed to become part of the Christian Easter ritual. The history of its origin in national beliefs has become so strongly tied to Christian motifs that its pagan notions have almost been erased. The phrases “Christ is Risen!” “Indeed He is Risen!” and “God is Resurrected” have replaced the understanding of the magical meaning of the pysanka’s ornament and color.

Although authentic samples of pre-Christian pysanky no longer exist, we have a vague notion of the original pysanky, since the art of creating the pysanka is and always has been very conservative. In ancient times, people believed that the symbolic drawings with which they decorated the pysanka had magical powers. The woman decorating the egg had no right to change its specific design – in the same way that one has no right to change the words of a prayer. This would have been an infringement of not only the principle, but also the religious creed on which the principle was based. Therefore, in any given geographical area, pysanky were decorated with exactly the same symbols for centuries. Although decorators of the pysanky often added their own elements to traditional designs or created new compositions by employing existing symbols, these elements did not destroy the general scheme of the pysanka. In recreating the finest examples of pysanky from year to year, elements of the original pysanky have remained in the memory of the nation to this day, and the art of the pysanka has evolved. However, in order to best envision an original pysanka, one needs to examine the egg’s ornamentation - the creation of a thousand-year-old tradition with centuries upon centuries of modification – and remove from it the deposits of various cultures, styles and elements of other art forms.

The pysanka belongs to a group of initial iconographic texts that give a concise description of ancient beliefs about the creation of the world, the function of time and space within the universe, and the notion of a god and his influence on people and their lives. In preserving ancient designs, we also preserve that which could not reach us in writing on paper, trees or stone, but which has come to us on a fragile eggshell, from which the inimitable wealth of our national culture unexpectedly emerged.

The process of writing a pysanka, a ritual that began on Holy Thursday, reaffirms the cultic meaning of pysanky. And it wasn’t only the egg that was important in the creation of a pysanka: water, wax, fire, dye... each of these had a symbolic ritual meaning. The water