



## Easter Eggs

I think if required on pain of death to name instantly the most perfect thing in the universe, I should risk my fate on a bird's egg.

T.W. Higginson, 19th century author, quoted by Schafer

Eggs are the most obvious symbol of birth at Easter time. Dyed, then hunted and displayed in baskets. Eaten as part of the Spring Equinox meal, where they were especially welcome as they were forbidden during Lent, or transformed into candy. And used to play a variety of games, like egg-rolling and egg-shackling.

Eggs were used as symbols of life and resurrection in ancient China, Greece, Egypt and Persia, at the great Spring festivals. The early Christians adopted them as a symbol of Christ's resurrection and people brought eggs to church to be blessed and distributed to friends, family and relatives.

Pope Pius V approved this blessing to be used for the eggs:

Bless, O Lord, we beseech Thee, this Thy creature of eggs, that it may become a wholesome sustenance to Thy faithful servants, eaten in thankfulness to Thee, on account of the Resurrection of Our Lord.

Elizabeth Luard describes a custom she observed while celebrating Easter in the village of Ludomirova in Slovakia, with a family of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Before the Easter feast began, the grandmother, the oldest woman at the table, used a small sharp knife to slice the top off a raw egg. She then lifted the little egg cup to her lips and took a sip of the golden liquid within. She then passed the egg to the youngest child, and after that it went around the table so all had a sip.

At the turn of the century, Polish girls would send decorated eggs, sometimes as many as a hundred, to a favored suitor, wrapped in a fine handkerchief on which his initials were embroidered. If the girl didn't have the skill to decorate the eggs herself she hired a local expert.

## Krashanka/Red Eggs for Astarte

The egg, like the seed, a potent symbol of new life is associated with burial customs, according to Pauline Campanelli in *Ancient Ways*, echoing the association between death and rebirth found in the spring stories about Persephone emerging from the Underworld or Christ's resurrection.

Campanelli says that decorated ostrich eggs were found in neolithic graves in pre-dynastic Egypt. The Druids dyed eggs scarlet in honor of the sun using furse (gorse) blossoms or possibly madder root. But the oldest traditions of dying eggs come from Eastern Europe, from Rumania, Czechoslovakia and the Ukraine, where the Goddess was often worshipped as a bird goddess. In Hungary, designs were scratched on eggs that had been dyed red, designs with names like the White Horse, Goat's Claw, the Snake and the Horseshoe. Also in Hungary, a 1300 year old burial of a woman was discovered in which the woman was holding an inscribed egg in each hand.

There are two kinds of magical eggs found in the Ukraine. Krashanka are hard-boiled and dyed red. They are ritually eaten at sunrise on Easter Sunday. The red shells are thrown into the rivers to carry them to the spirits. Shells are also thrown into the garden and in the nests of the chickens. In Eastern European countries, scarlet eggs were symbols of resurrection and were placed on or buried in the graves of the family dead.

A Romanian tale says that eggs are dyed red to represent the blood of Christ. But the Chinese used to exchange scarlet eggs at their Spring Festival in 900 BCE, so it is more likely the red color is the symbol of life.

# Pysanky/Ukrainian Eggs



A "call spring" egg

*Pysanky* feature elaborate designs made with beeswax resist and are always raw. These eggs are magic talismans. The designs on the sides are messages (*pysanky* comes from a root word meaning "to write") invoking fertility, long life, luck, protection and hope. Eggs with wheat and fruit designs might be buried in the fields to encourage the crops. Eggs with blue and green meander designs were kept in homes and carried around a fire to contain it.

Anne Kmit, the Luciow sisters and Luba Perchyshyn who wrote *Ukrainian Easter Eggs* explain how the eggs were made and distributed in the Ukraine. They were always made by groups of women working together under ritual conditions. The women prepared themselves spiritually the day before. They worked at night, when the children were in bed, gathered around a table set with bowls of fertile eggs and pots of dye. No men or outsiders were allowed to enter. The women asked for specific blessings for each egg they made and sang traditional songs as they worked. This process took many nights and ended on Holy Thursday.

One or two eggs were given to the priest. Eggs were placed on the graves of family members. Eggs were given to all the children and godchildren. Unmarried girls exchanged eggs with the eligible young men in the community. A few eggs were placed in coffins to be ready in case someone died. Several were kept in the home to protect from fire and storms. Two or three were placed in the trough or the stables so the animals would have many young. One egg was placed under each beehive and one was saved for each grazing animal to be taken out to the fields with the shepherds in the spring. An egg with wheat symbols was placed at the start of the first furrow plowed and another at the end of the last. A bride would take an egg to her marriage ceremony in her skirt and on returning home, drop it saying, "Let me bear the child as easily as the egg falls." If that didn't work, the husband might receive an egg with a rooster on it or an oak leaf.



Sun egg

Every aspect of making the egg was important from the colors chosen to the designs. The most ancient and widely used symbol was the sun. Certain eggs, covered with symbols of water, flowers, growing plants and little wings, were used to "call spring." Other eggs, called "noise insect eggs" depicted birds singing, crickets and the chirping noise of the forest to invoke the sounds of spring. Here's a list of some symbols. You will find many more in the books by Anne Kmit and her co-authors.

Star	Success
Birds	Spring, good harvest & pushing away evil
Hearts	Love
Fruits, vegetables, wheat	Good harvest
Flowers	Beauty and children
Spiders	Healing powers and good luck
Animals, especially deer	Prosperity and wealth
Ladders (given to older people)	Moving to a new level of existence
40 triangles (a traditional pattern)	Wishes for the many facets of family life
Circle	Protection

Thirteen years ago I finally purchased the appropriate tool for making Ukrainian eggs, a *kitska* (I got mine in the art department of my local university bookstore). Ever since then, making Ukrainian eggs has become a favorite annual activity for me and my women friends. Each woman brings some eggs (either raw or hard-boiled). Meanwhile I set up several tables with kitskas, blocks of beeswax, a candle for each woman and some way of holding the egg steady (paper towels are the simplest—we also use the little plastic tables that come with your delivered pizza). The same stores that sell kitskas and special beeswax (dyed a darker color so it's easier to see) also sell lathes on which you can turn your eggs so you can achieve perfectly even lines. We've never used one of these. The same stores also sell electric kitskas but I've scorned these as too modern. I like the simple ancient process.



However, I do buy the packets of Ukrainian dyes—most of which are highly toxic—because they produce brilliant colors—turquoise, black and maroon, among others—you can't find in ordinary Easter egg dyes. These are made with boiling water so mix them ahead of time so they can cool. I also use the regular Easter egg dyes you buy in kits at the store, particularly because I like the little wire dippers that come in these kits, handy for putting eggs in and out of the jars (I use wide-mouthed canning jars). We also use spoons for this task. I leave my dyes out, often for two or three weeks, so I can continue working on eggs. I love the way they look: the gleaming jars and the brilliant colors.

Spring sound egg



To make the design, you put a little bit of beeswax in the funnel of the kitska, then melt it over a candle flame and draw on the eggshell with the molten beeswax. Begin with a white egg and put wax on all the areas you want to stay white, then dye the egg yellow, and cover all the areas with wax which you want to remain yellow, and so forth through orange, red and a dark color (brown, black or purple). When the egg is done, place it in a low-temperature oven for a few minutes to melt the wax, which is then rubbed off to reveal the intricate designs and glowing colors of your egg. I love the delicacy of the designs, the smell of the wax and the flickering light of the candle, which combine to create a trance-like state.

If you don't have a kitska, you can decorate eggs using a pin. Simply dip it into melted wax and drag it across the surface of the egg. It will leave a little comet-like trail. When done in concentric circles, you will have created sunbursts.

The eggs, even though they are not cooked, can be kept for many years if they are stored so the air can move around them freely. I store mine in egg cartons in the basement but I have had an occasional egg go bad. Last year, I put varnish on all the eggs, hoping this would help preserve them. It's a messy process (since there's no way to hold an egg without getting varnish all over your own fingers) but it seems to have helped and it certainly brought out their colors. You can also blow the inside out of the eggs after they've been painted.

## Resources

Campanelli, Pauline, *Ancient Ways*, Llewellyn 1991

Kmit, Anne, Loretta L & Johanna Luciow & Luba Perchyshyn, *Ukrainian Easter Eggs and How We Make Them*, Ukrainian Gift Shop, 2422 Central Av NE, Minneapolis MN 55418, 1979

Luard, Elizabeth, *Sacred Food*, Chicago Review Press

Schafer, Violet, *Eggcraft: A Compendium of Folklore, Fancies and Food*, San Francisco: Yerba Buena Press 1973

Illustrations:

The designs for Ukrainian eggs come from *Ukrainian Easter Eggs*

Links: