

# UKRAINIAN EASTER TRADITIONS INFORMATION PACKAGE



*Pysanky above by Alex Werstiuk*

Prepared for the Alberta Council for the Ukrainian Arts  
Edmonton 2013

## Forward

In response to the many calls our office receives requesting information about Ukrainian Easter traditions and making Ukrainian Easter eggs or *pysanky*, the Alberta Council for the Ukrainian Arts (ACUA) has prepared this information package.<sup>1</sup> This package is not intended to provide in depth information about Easter traditions or *pysanka* techniques and symbolism, but rather it is intended to provide you with some basic information and guide you to other sources.

Included are some simple instructions for the making (writing)<sup>2</sup> of one *pysanka*; a list of places where you can purchase books, equipment and supplies to write *pysanky* and other resources on this topic. Some additional designs are provided for you to try on your own. A short discussion of the items found in a traditional Ukrainian Easter basket and their significance, as well as a brief mention of some Easter celebrations are outlined in this booklet as additional information. Finally, we have provided some English language sources of information about Easter and *pysanky*.

It is our hope that this information package will help put you in touch with the information and supplies you need to help you experience and appreciate the way Ukrainians in Alberta celebrate Easter.



These *pysanky* by Alex Werstiuk

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge and thank Brian Cherwyk for preparing the first edition of this information package in 1994, Pamela Shapka for compiling information on how to write *pysanky* and preparing a second handout and Irene Jendzjowsky for updating the booklets and adding to them in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This word comes from the verb *pysaty*, which means “to write”. The design is “written” on the egg with a fine stylus called a *kistka*.



## PYSANKY

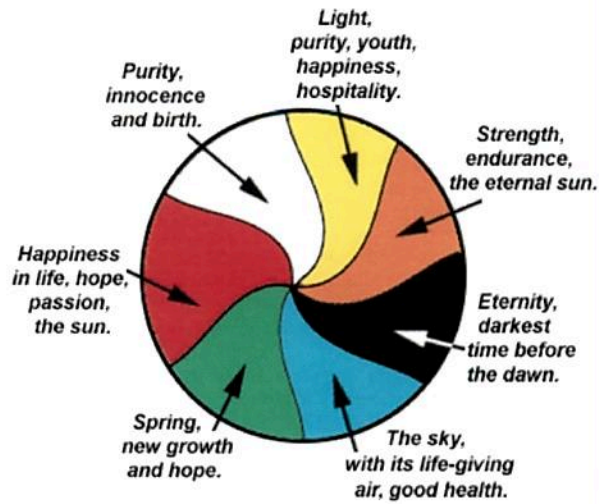
In Ukrainian, decorated eggs are called *pysanky*. This comes from the verb *pysaty* which means “to write”, indicating that *pysanky* represent a written message. The design is written on the egg with a fine stylus called a *kistka*, which is dipped in beeswax. To achieve various colours, the egg is dipped in a series of dye baths.

*Pysanky* were originally produced and exchanged as symbols of new hope new life, health and prosperity. They were planted in a special corner of farmers’ fields in order to ensure a bountiful harvest. It was believed that a decorated egg could prevent evil, bring good crops or help a young maiden win the man of her dreams.

Although many of the designs found on *pysanky* date back to pre-Christian cultures, several have been re-interpreted to include expressly Christian messages. The patterns are divided into three main categories: geometric, plant and animal symbols. Of the geometric motifs, the most common are the circle - representing the sun, the swastika (based on the form of the Greek cross, with the ends of the arms extended at right angles, all in the same rotary direction) – a symbol of happiness, blessings, good fortune and good will; three armed swastika – the magical number three, such as birth, life and death or man, woman and child; and the star or rose – purity, life the giver of light, the center of all knowledge, beauty, elegance and perfection.

Individual colours themselves have their own significance:

- yellow – light, purity;
- orange,- endurance, strength , worthy ambition;
- red – action, fire charity, spiritual awakening;
- blue – good health;
- purple – majesty;
- dark green – hope;
- light green – spring, new life;
- brown – mother earth;
- white – purity, innocence;
- black – eternity, constancy, but also death, fear and ignorance.



Some color combinations had specific meanings, too:

- Black and white - Mourning, respect for the souls of the dead.
- Black and red - Ignorance arising from passions.
- Red and White - Respect, protection from evil powers.
- Four or more colors - Family happiness, peace and love.



Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pysanka#Color\\_symbolism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pysanka#Color_symbolism)

<sup>3</sup> The colour wheel and the information about the symbolism of colour in *pysanky* are taken from Eggs Beautiful. How to make Ukrainian Easter Eggs by Johanna Luciow, Ann Kmit, and Loretta Luciow, seventh printing in 2001 and Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pysanka#Color\\_symbolism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pysanka#Color_symbolism)

## HELPFUL TIPS TO WRITING YOUR PYSANKY<sup>4</sup>

You will have to have a few things ready before you can start writing your *pysanka*:

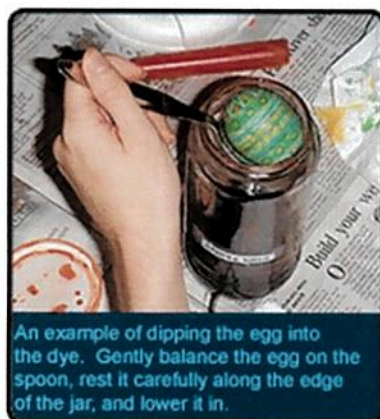
- Make your dyes in advance and allow them to cool to room temperature before using. Follow the directions on each individual package of dye. Keep dyes covered when not in use to avoid evaporation.
- Select raw, fresh, clean, smooth white eggs. If washing is necessary, wash gently (do not rub) in a solution of 4 cups warm water to 1 tablespoon white vinegar. (Never use soap or detergent). Put the eggs out on clean cloth to air dry or gently wipe with clean cloth or tissue.
- Don't use boiled eggs. Boiling damages the shell and can cause water spots on the finished egg.
- Protect your table with newspaper, tissue, or plastic and place your hot *kistka* on a small dish when not in use. Be careful not to knock over your candle. Be careful not to burn your *kistka*.
- Clean hands are necessary. Do not use any hand creams or lotions while writing your *pysanka*.
- Keep a tissue under the egg on the table while working.
- When writing *pysanky*, eggs should be at room temperature. Cold eggs will sweat and cause spotting.
- Never erase pencil marks – this will cause scratches on the egg and the dye will not take over the scratches.

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<sup>4</sup> The helpful hints nformation on pages 5 and 6 have been copied from "How to Decorate Beautiful Ukrainian Easter Eggs 'Pysanky'" by Luba Perchyshyn .



- When removing wax from the egg, never hold the egg over the tip of the flame as it will turn black with carbon and discolor the design.
- It is important to have wax thoroughly removed from the egg before varnishing.
- *Pysanky* can keep indefinitely. If left full, the insides eventually dry out, leaving only the shell. The process can take years. Keep *pysanky* out of direct sunlight so colors will not fade.
- Don't allow them to freeze or become overheated. Do not store in air tight places. They need air circulating around them.



The images copied from the information produced by Pamela Shapka titled:  
*Pysanky is the ancient Eastern European art of egg decorating*

## EXAMPLE OF SYMBOLS AND DESIGNS

1. *Ladders - prosperity, or prayer, and rising to Heaven.*



2. *Pine Needles - health, stamina, eternal youth.*



3. *Crosses - Christ, or the Four Corners of the World; Crosses have several meanings and come in many different shapes. They always represent some aspect of Christian faith. Most commonly, the cross represents Christ's suffering and has become the symbol of Christianity.*



4. *Wheat - wishes for good health and a good harvest.*



5. *The Sun and Stars - symbolizes life, warmth, love of God and the eternal existence of God; life; fortune, growth.*



6. *Deer, Horses, and/or Rams - wealth and prosperity.*



7. *Fish - a common symbol for Christ, Christians and Christianity*



8. *Curls - defense or protection.*



9. *Roses - 8 pointed star – a symbol of Christ; love, caring.*



10. *Triangles -denote the Holy Trinity. A triangle with a circle in the center denotes the eye of God; trinities, e.g.: air, fire, & water; the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit; heaven, earth, & hell.*





11. *The Saw - fire, life-giving heat (also known as Wolves' teeth, symbolizing loyalty and wisdom).*



12. *Birds - fulfillment of wishes, and fertility. The bird is always shown at rest, never flying;*



13. *Nets - Christ's reference to becoming "fishers of people"; can represent Jesus fishing for men. Usually it means separating good from evil.*



14. *Ribbons - Never ending lines or meanders - represent eternal -everlasting life, and water.*



15. *Flowers – femininity, wisdom, elegance and beauty; leaves and flowers – life and growth.*



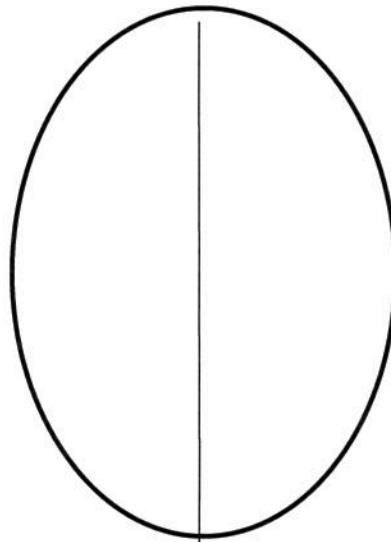
## A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO WRITING A PYSANKA

To write a *pysanka* you start with the lightest color, usually white. Everything that you want to remain white, you cover with wax, using the *kistka*. Wax is applied by heating the *kistka* over a candle flame and then dipping the heated tip into beeswax. When applying wax, rotate the egg to achieve straight lines.

If you wish, you may make these initial lines first with a pencil, and then with wax. Do not erase any pencil lines, as dyes will not adhere to the erased areas. To assist in drawing straight lines, an elastic band could be placed around the egg.

### Step 1:

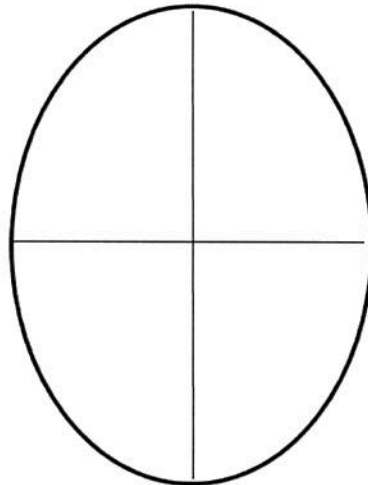
Starting from the top, make a continuous line vertically around the egg, dividing it into two halves. Draw another line at right angles to the first, dividing the egg into four vertical sections.



Step 1

Step 2:

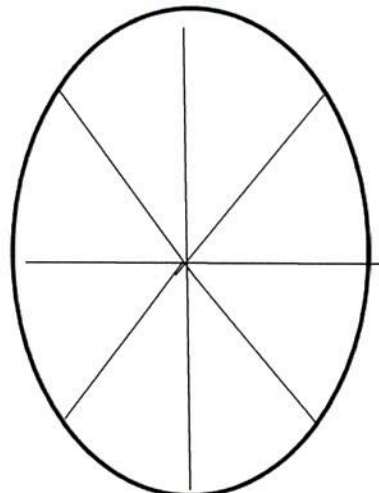
Draw a line horizontally around the middle of the egg. The egg is now divided into eight parts.



Step 2

Step 3:

Beginning at the centre, draw diagonal lines away from the centre. This divides the egg into 16 sections, 8 for each side. If you have been using a pencil you may now apply wax along these lines. When the egg is completed these lines will appear white.

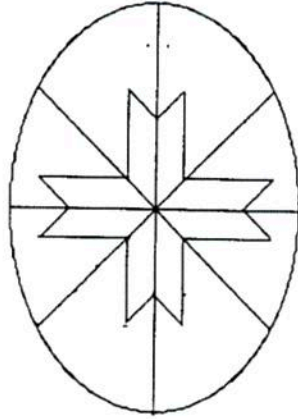


Step 3



**Step 4:**

Apply two lines of wax in each section to create the star design.

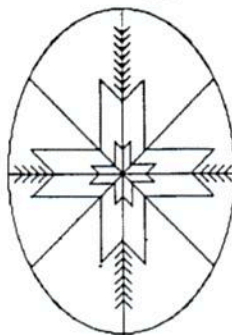


Step 4

Once you have applied all of these lines, you may dip the egg into the yellow dye. Remove the egg once it has reached the desired colour, and pat dry with a cloth or paper towel. Wherever there is wax, the yellow dye will not be able to penetrate. This preserves the white part of the design under the wax.

**Step 5:**

On the yellow egg, apply the lines as shown in figure 5. The small star shape which appears inside the larger star should be covered entirely with wax. The egg is now dipped into the red dye.



Step 5

Step 6:

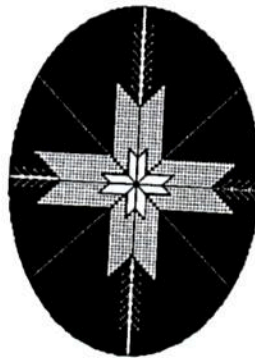
Remove the egg from the red dye and pat dry. Now fill in the remainder of the large star with wax. Although the covering does not have to be thick, be careful to leave no spots unwaxed.



Step 6

Step 7:

The egg is now placed into the black dye. Remove, pat dry and allow it to sit, drying for 10-15 minutes.



Step 7

When totally dry, the wax may be removed. This may be done by holding the egg near the side of the candle flame until the wax begins to shine, and then wiping the softened wax with a clean cloth or paper tissue. Work with small areas of the egg until all the wax has been removed. An alternative method for removing the wax is to place the eggs on a cookie sheet and place in an oven at 200 -250 degrees, until the eggs become shiny, indicating the wax has melted. Remove from oven and wipe gently to remove the wax.

Other options:

A completed *pysanka* may be carefully stored for several years, as the contents of the egg will dry out naturally. However, some *pysanka* makers choose to remove the contents of the egg. Two small holes are made at either end of the egg, and the membranes inside broken with a long needle. Then the contents are carefully blown out or extracted with a syringe. If the egg is hollowed prior to decorating, the holes must be sealed with wax to insure that the egg does not fill up with dye. The egg may also be emptied after the decorating is complete.

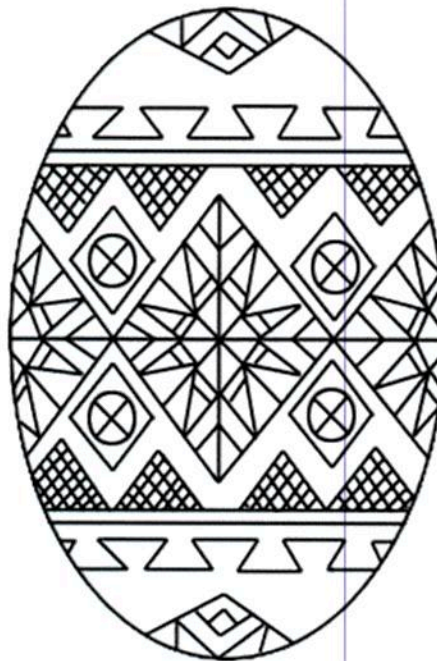
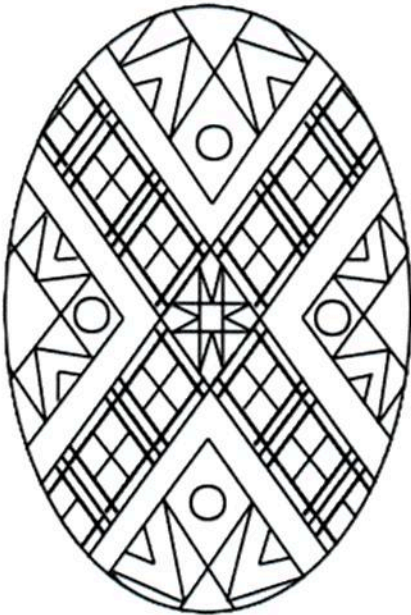
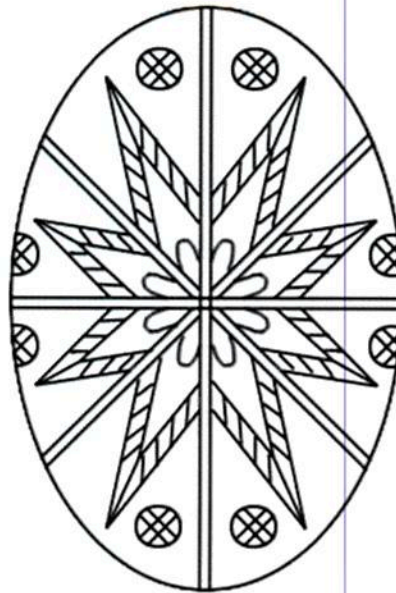
To give the completed *pysanka* a high gloss appearance, each egg may be coated with varnish. A drying rack can be made by driving nails completely through a one inch thick board in a grid pattern at approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch intervals. The eggs should be set to dry between the points of the nails.



*Pysanky* by Alex Werstiuk

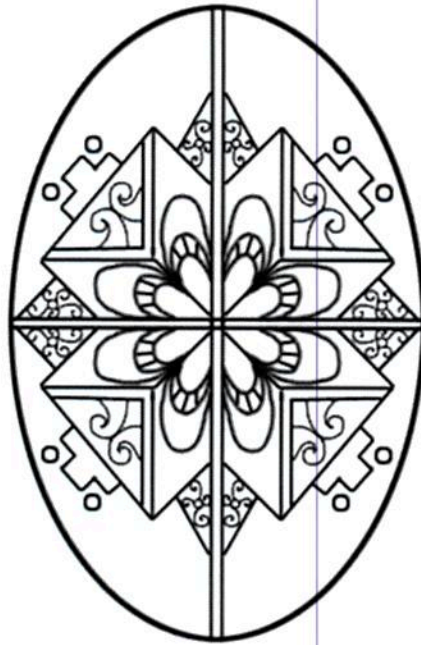
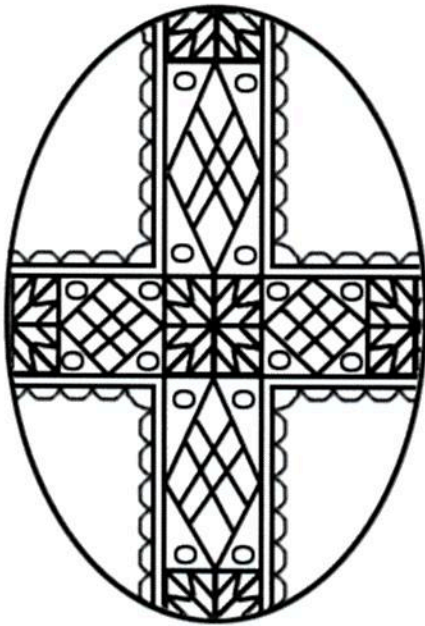


**Other designs<sup>5</sup>:**



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<sup>5</sup> The additional "drawn" designs on pages 15 and 16 are copied from the website <http://www.learnpysanky.com/>.



These two coloured images of pysanky above are of pysanky made by Alex Werstiuk.



These four pysanky above are of traditional regional designs that were copied from <http://www.pysanky.info/Downloads/Traditional.html>



WHITE



YELLOW



GREEN



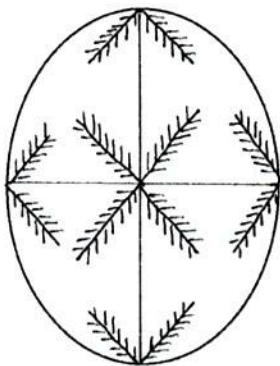
ORANGE



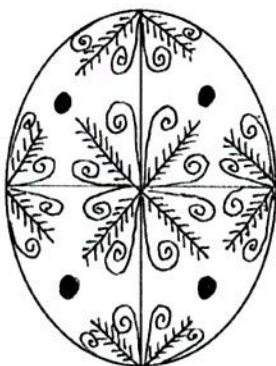
RED → BLACK

<sup>6</sup> This design copied from [http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads\\_files/Star%20Egg.pdf](http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads_files/Star%20Egg.pdf)

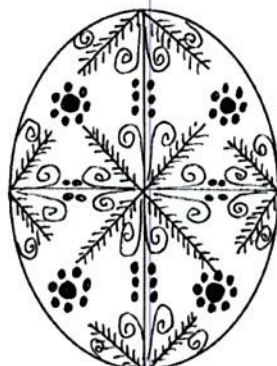




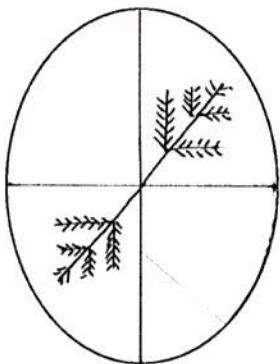
WHITE



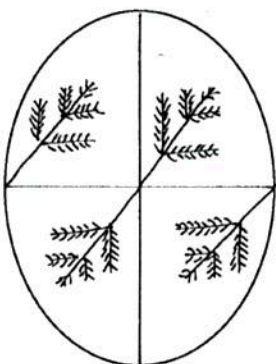
YELLOW



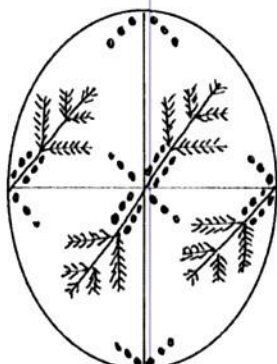
ORANGE → RED



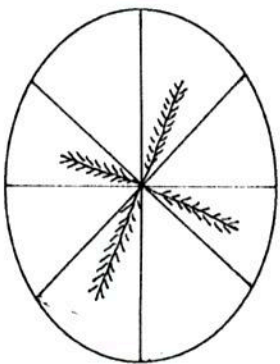
WHITE



YELLOW



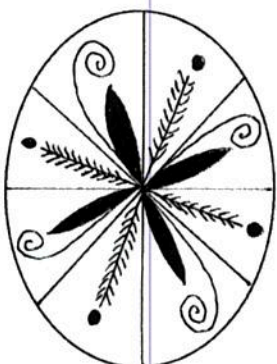
ORANGE → RED



WHITE

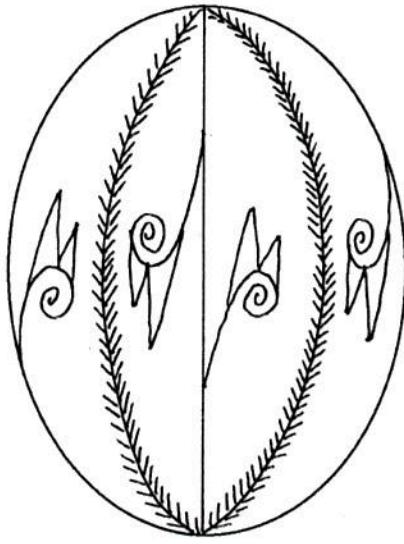


YELLOW

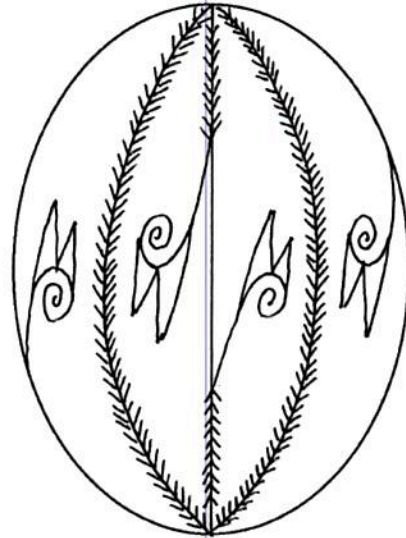


RED → BLACK

<sup>7</sup>This design is copied from [http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads\\_files/Simple%20Eggs.pdf](http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads_files/Simple%20Eggs.pdf)



WHITE



YELLOW



GREEN



RED → PURPLE

<sup>8</sup> This design is copied from [http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads\\_files/Spiral.pdf](http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/Downloads_files/Spiral.pdf)

## PYSANKA EGG-WRITING SUPPLIES available at ACUA

Go to [acuarts.ca](http://acuarts.ca) and visit our Online Store

- Sheet and Cake Beeswax
  - Wooden and Delrin Kistkas (wax stylus for writing)
  - Egg Dyes (various colours)
  - Egg Blowers
  - Beeswax Candles made in Alberta
  - Egg Stands
  - Design Books
- and more!





## Easter Food

Although there are regional variations, generally the items of food taken to church to be blessed, and which later make up the Holy Easter breakfast are:

- *Paska* or Easter Bread, decorated with crosses, twists, rosettes or cones;
- *Babka*, rich yellow bread, often with raisins;
- Hard boiled eggs;
- Cottage cheese;
- Salt,
- Butter;
- Horseradish;
- Vinegar (sometimes mixed with horseradish);
- Beets (often combined with horseradish);
- Ham;
- *Kovbasa* or sausage;
- *Kyshka* or buckwheat sausage;
- Some regions include: *studynet* (jellied meat); *nachynka* (similar to poultry dressing); boiled pork liver; *pashtet* or liver pate;
- Also included are *pysanky*, *krashanky* (monochromatic, coloured eggs), a candle, and an embroidered cloth.

Each item of food that is taken to be blessed at the Church on Easter Sunday carries symbolic meaning:

- *Paska* – Christ, the “living bread”;
- *Babka* - the Blessed Mother;
- Cheese – purity and goodness;
- Beets – the stain of sin;
- Horseradish – suffering;
- Vinegar – gall given to Christ at the crucifixion;
- Salt – God’s grace;
- Meat – a joyful celebration;
- *Pysanky* – resurrection;
- Butter – burial ointment;
- Candle – Light of the World;
- Cover – Christ’s burial shroud.

Other explanations of symbolism describe the egg as a symbol for new life.

At this time of year:

- the egg shell also symbolizes the tomb from which Christ arose.
- The Easter Bread or *paska* represents Christ the life giver;
- Salt – the bounties of the earth;
- Cheese and butter – the grace of God;
- Horseradish – the bitterness of sin;
- Beets – the blood of Christ.

Most of the food items for the Easter basket can be found at any grocery store. In Edmonton and east-central Alberta there are many Ukrainian operated meat stores which specialize in preparing Ukrainian style sausages. *Paska*, *babka*, *pysanky*, and fresh or prepared *khrin* (horseradish) can be found at various church teas at bake sales prior to Easter, or at markets and farmer's markets.

#### Easter Celebration

Easter is the central celebration in the Christian Church. A majority of Ukrainians in Alberta belong to the Byzantine Catholic or Orthodox faiths, and share many similar religious rituals. The Eastern season includes many special church services which depict and commemorate the Passion of Christ, His burial in the tomb, and His resurrection. Church buildings are decorated not only with flowers and festive cloths, but also with special parts of the church depicting Christ's burial tomb. Connected to pre-Christian ritual is the tradition of bringing baskets of food to be blessed on Easter Sunday morning (although in a number of individual parishes in Alberta this service is also performed on Saturday due to the large number of people attending, and a shortage of priests). At some churches following the Sunday Easter Service, children play special Easter games.

Throughout Alberta there are many Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox churches. The Calgary and Edmonton telephone directories list several, while the publication *Historical Driving Tour: Ukrainian Churches in East-Central Alberta* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, 1988) could suggest some churches in the Ukrainian bloc settlement of rural Alberta. A visit to these churches during the Easter season can provide a concentrated view of both Ukrainian spiritual and folk culture in Alberta. Even for non-Ukrainians or the non-religious, the sound of Easter music, the sights of special embroidered cloths and church decorations, the smell of

incense and beeswax candles, and the tastes of the Easter food provide a remarkable and unforgettable experience.

#### Further Sources of Information

There is a wide range of information available regarding Ukrainian Easter traditions and especially discussing Ukrainian *pysanky*. As one might expect, many of these are written in Ukrainian, and therefore, are not easily accessible to those who are not familiar with the Ukrainian language. Many of these Ukrainian language sources provide more in depth, scholarly discussion of these traditions. Nonetheless, there are many good English language sources for those interested in an overview of Ukrainian rituals, discussion of symbolism or step-by-step instruction in the production of Ukrainian *pysanky*. There are several video tapes dealing with both *pysanka* making and Easter customs at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton:

Main Office

4-30 Pembina Hall

University of Alberta

Edmonton, AB T6G 2H8

(780) 492-2972; [cious@ualberta.ca](mailto:cius@ualberta.ca) ; [www.cius.ca](http://www.cius.ca)

There are also several websites that provide a wealth of information about *pysanky* and Ukrainian Easter traditions. These are just a few:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pysanka>

[www.learnpysanky.com](http://www.learnpysanky.com)

<http://www.ukrainiangiftshop.com/pages/art2.htm>

<http://www.artukraine.com/egg/ornamentation.htm>

<http://www.pysanky.info/Pysankarstvo/>



## References

The following English language books have been used in the preparation of this information package.

Kubijovic, V. and Struk, D. Encyclopedia of Ukraine. 5 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984-1993. Entries include: "Easter"; "Easter Egg or *pysanka*"; "Folk calendar"; "Foods"; "*Pomyanky*"; "*Provody*".

Kubijovic, V. Ukraine: A Concise Encyclopedia. 2 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-64. Entries include: "The Spiritual Culture of the People"; "Folk Art and Handicrafts"; Easter Eggs (*Pysanky*)".

Luciw, Johanna, Kit, Ann and Luciw, Loretta. Eggs Beautiful How to Make Ukrainian Easter Eggs. St. Anthony, Minnesota.: Ukrainian Gift Shop.

Panchuk, Yvonne. The Pysanka Message, Statements of Faith, Patterns of Praise: An Interpretation of Ukrainian Easter Egg Symbols. Regina: Printed by Commercial Printers Ltd.

Perchyshyn, Luba. How to Decorate Beautiful Ukrainian Easter Eggs "Pysanky". St. Anthony, MN.: Ukrainian Gift Shop.

Perchyshyn, Natalie. A Kid's Guide to Decorating Ukrainian Easter Eggs. St. Anthony, MN.: Ukrainian Gift Shop Inc. 2000.

## Additional references

Some Ukrainian cookbooks include both recipes for Easter food and discussion of Easter traditions.

Cooking Favourites of Roblin Manitoba. Roblin: U.C.W.L.C. Holy Redeemer Parish, 1990.

Stechishyn, Savella. Traditional Ukrainian Cookery. Winnipeg: Trident Press. 1957.

Ukrainian Daughters' Cookbook. Regina: Ukrainian Women's Association of Canada, Daughters of Ukraine Branch, 1985.

Ukrainian Traditional and Modern Cuisine. New Westminster, B.C. : Eparchial Executive, Ukrainian Catholic Women's League of Canada, 1984.