







Egg Art

American Folklife Center/The Library of Congress/Washington, D.C.

Traditionally the egg, both plain and decorated, has been an object with strong mystical and symbolic force throughout the world. It has been associated with the myth of creation, with the concept of birth, and with the hope for abundance. Eggs have been sacrificed to sanctify the construction of dwellings, public buildings, and bridges in many lands. They are traditionally given at the birth of a son in China, and they have been used for fortune telling in the British Isles. In many Western cultures the egg has become an integral part of the complementary celebrations of the Easter season and of the renewal of life in spring.

It is in Eastern Europe, however, where Christian associations with the egg were grafted onto strong, pagan beliefs which connected the egg with sun worship, worship of the renewal of life in spring, and with rituals to maintain or restore health, that the rich traditions surrounding eggs have remained strongest. Giving gifts of dyed and decorated eggs during the Easter season is one of the most popular social and church traditions in Eastern European communities of Catholic faith. Both here and abroad, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish, Hungarian, and Czechoslovakian women often begin decorating dozens of eggs at the start of Lent, to have enough to present to family

members, friends and relatives, and to use in their church services on Easter Sunday. Orthodox Greeks conclude their Easter service with the exchange of crimson-dyed eggs that have been blessed by the priest. More secular traditions practiced in the spring by communities of European ancestry include egg tapping, egg gathering or hunting, egg rolling, and egg tossing contests.

The aesthetics of egg decoration vary depending on the community that produces them. Decorating styles range from applying a single dye, to attaching a variety of decorative objects to the shell or nestling them inside, to producing colorful, intricately patterned designs through alternating applications of dye and wax. But the pleasure derived from decorating, giving, receiving, and finding eggs is the same in every group.

Egg Decorating Techniques

Single dye—The egg is dipped into the dye, either synthetic or natural, and colored a solid hue. *Synthetic dyes* should be used hot, with vinegar added to the water, except in the case of orange dye; please note that some

synthetic dyes are poisonous, and eggs colored with them should not be eaten.

Natural dyes may be made from

1/3 c. brown-onion skins and 2 c. water (dark yellow)

1/2 c. red-onion skins and 2 c. water (pale blue)

new mint and tender ivy leaves, 2 c. water, 1 tbsp. vinegar, and 2 pinches alum (green)

1 tsp. powdered tumeric, 2 c. water, 1 tbsp. vinegar, and 2 pinches alum (orange yellow)

purple petunia blossoms, 2 c. water, 1 tsp. vinegar, and 1 pinch alum (purple)

or petals and chopped flower heads from red zinnias, 2 c. water, and 1 tbsp. vinegar (red).

Simmer the ingredients for approximately 15 minutes, until color is strong, and then strain. Add egg and simmer until it becomes the desired hue. Eggs can be dyed dark blue in the juice of canned blueberries, used straight from the can.

Scratch technique—the decorative pattern is achieved by scratching a pattern on the surface of a dyed egg, using a pin or another sharp instrument.

Appliqué technique—materials are attached to the surface of the colored or uncolored egg which range from

paper cutouts to raised patterns made from attaching strips of dough, sea shells, beads, sugar decorations, or cloth.

Batik or wax resist technique—the method used in the wax resist process is to cover areas that you wish to remain a given color with melted beeswax, and then dip the egg into another synthetic color; the area protected by the wax, even a thin coat, will not take the subsequent dye, and an intricately patterned, multi-hued egg can be achieved with repeated wax applications and dippings.

Applying the wax: the supplies needed for applying the wax in the Ukrainian manner are a *kistka* (a small metal funnel wired to a short stick), a candle, and cubes of beeswax. Shavings of beeswax are placed in the funnel which is held over the candle until the wax will easily emerge from the point; the melted wax is then applied to the egg in thin lines or filled patterns, as desired. Electric *kistky*, which allow for the insertion of more wax, constant heat, and more even wax flow, are also available. For the Lithuanian dot-dash patterns a pencil eraser stuck with a bead-headed straight pin is used. The beeswax should be melted in a jar lid or another device which can be mounted above a candle flame or other heat source; electric wax melters are available as well. Holding the egg as close to the melted wax as

possible, the pin head is rhythmically dipped into the wax and the design created using a drop and pull stroke. For more contemporary designs, experiment by applying the wax with brushes, Q-tips, and other tools that allow for even, controlled application.

Applying the colors: the colors are traditionally applied starting with the lighter tones, such as white, yellow, orange, and red, and then continuing through the darker shades, such as green, blue, purple, and black. For variety, however, a darker shade can be rubbed off with vinegar and a paper towel or soft cloth, so that the resulting pattern has dark tones, but the background is light.

Removing the wax: once all of the wax applications have been made, hold the egg near a candle flame, being careful to avoid holding it so close that carbon stains the design, until a portion of the wax melts; then wipe the wax off with a paper towel or soft cloth revealing the colorful pattern underneath.

Sealing the design: to protect and enrich the look of the design, cover it with a thin coat of a urethane finish. This is done most effectively by placing a few drops of the finish in the palm of your hand, and then quickly rubbing it over the egg. Turpentine, fingernail polish remover, or pot soap will remove the finish from your hands.



Light dye



Heating kistka



Applying wax design



Darker dye



Melting wax



Removing wax

Blowing out the egg: eggs may be hard boiled before dying, or should be blown out afterwards. To blow out the egg, make a small hole in each end, insert a long needle, and stir up the yolk and white; following that, blow into one hole and the raw egg will be forced out the other end.



A Few Suppliers

Local—

Kalyna
115 King St.
Alexandria, Va. 22314

Frame Mart Gallery
3307 Connecticut Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008

National—

Surma
11 E. 7th St.
New York, N.Y. 10003

Ukrainian Gift Shop
2422 Central Ave., N.E.
Minneapolis, Minn. 55418

Bibliography

- Browne, Juanita. "Easter Eggs Dyed and Decorated the Natural Way." *Organic Gardening and Farming* 24:108-111. S605.5.07, v. 24
- Coskey, Evelyn. *Easter Eggs for Everyone*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973. TT896.7.C67
- . "Leafy Eggs for Easter." *Sunset* 156:88-89. F851.S95, v. 156
- Lord, Priscilla S., and Daniel J. Foley. *The Easter Egg*. Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1963. GT4935.L6
- Luciow, Johanna, Ann Kmit, and Loretta Luciow. *Eggs Beautiful: How to Make Ukrainian Easter Eggs*. Minneapolis: Ukrainian Gift Shop, 197-. TT896.7.L8
- Newall, Venetia. *An Egg at Easter: A Folklore Study*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971. GR735.N4
- Newsome, Arden J. *Egg Decorating, Plain & Fancy*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1973. TT896.7.N49

Riotte, Louise. *Egg Decorating*. New York: Drake, 1973.

TT896.7.R56

Shoemaker, Alfred L. *Eastertide in Pennsylvania, A Folk Cultural Study*. Kutztown, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Folklife Society, 1960.

GT4935.S5

Zoglin, Rosalind A. "The Embellished Egg." *Craft Horizons* 15:16-21.

NK1.C73, v. 15



Illustrations

Inside front: Egg decorated with Lithuanian dot-dash pattern by Elena Bradunas of Washington, D.C.

Page ii: Egg decorated with traditional Ukrainian design also used to embellish pottery.

Page 7: Ukrainian egg decorating technique demonstrated by Natalie Michaluk of Woonsocket, R.I.

Page 8: Egg decorated with scratched design by Barbara Brubaker Bomberger of Manheim, Pennsylvania.

Page 10: Egg decorated in contemporary style.

Photos on page 7 by Geraldine Johnson. Remaining photos by Carl Fleischhauer.

