

Creating Ukrainian Easter Eggs (Pysanky)

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For the Northeast Henna Gathering 2010

March 26-29 2010



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I Introduction

Pysanky, the decorated Easter Eggs of Eastern Europe, as a Ukrainian tradition date back to before the Baptism of Ukraine in 988 CE. Chicken eggs were decorated in the spring as a symbol of new life returning with the new season, and were Christianized with crosses, net motifs, and new myths and legends to become a huge part of Ukrainian Easter tradition. Many families will create an Easter basket with representatives of the foods to be eaten Easter morning, sprigs of vinca and ivy, and pysanky and embroidered cloths for beauty. These baskets are then solemnly taken to an area near the local church on Holy Saturday, where they are blessed by the priests with holy water and incense, thereby blessing the family's Easter feast, usually eaten after a dawn Easter Mass. Many Ukrainians consider this the happiest part of the Easter traditions, with families vying to create the prettiest basket, to show off new pysanky and cloths created just for this event, and with everyone turning out in their finest new clothes, sometimes by the thousands. Eggs are kept as heirlooms in many families (I have about 60, many older than my father) and are bought and sold for sometimes hundreds of dollars. Duck, goose, and even ostrich eggs are also sometimes used, especially for pieces meant for display only, and not the traditional Easter basket to be blessed.

Modern pysanky are less the focus of the religious traditions, and more an expression of an unusual art form. Many amazing pysanky artists aren't even remotely Ukrainian, and enjoy and advance the art just as much as their Ukrainian counterparts. Other Slavic cultures also have near-identical traditions, and each country has an identifiable traditional decorative style. Hungarians will often use a drop-and-pull batik method in two colors, Romanians sometimes prefer colored wax left on the shell, and the Baltic states generally choose blues and whites as their primary colors. Wooden and ceramic "pysanky" are also often created, although obviously with different methods.

The Ukrainian word “pysanky” is derived from the verb “pysaty,” which means “to write.” The pysanka (singular) is thus something “written upon,” but has come to mean the decorated eggs exclusively.

Most Ukrainians in the Diaspora learn the art of pysanky at a fairly early age, since it's such an integral part of the culture, but many do not choose to pursue it as an artistic medium, considering it “old-fashioned” or “backward,” much as some people in traditional henna cultures consider mehndi to be backward.

A few notes on pronunciation: pysanka, pysanky – PISS-on-kah, PISS-on-kih. Kistka, kistky - KEEST-kah, KEEST-kih.

This document will walk you through the process of creating wax-resist pysanky the traditional way, some tips for non-traditional methods that are very useful, and a shopping list at the end. If you've never made pysanky before, don't be intimidated - anyone can learn how. If you've tried the process, take the time to read these instructions - there may be a tidbit you hadn't seen before which may make your attempts much smoother. Also, please read the whole document through first before shopping or starting the process – some important points may come later on.

II Basic Supplies

You will need a few basic items:

1. Eggs, obviously! White chicken eggs are the most easily found and used, but they're actually not ideal. Store-bought chicken eggs tend to have weak, pimply shells, and I recommend trying to find medium eggs at the largest. Free-range chickens really do produce better eggs, or at least sturdier eggshells. Brown eggs are wonderful fun, they mute the colors a bit and provide a wonderfully earthy feel to the eggs. Artists have used everything from finch to ostrich eggs - just make sure your shells are intact, have no latent cracks you can see, and seem sturdy. This will save heartache later.

A note on blowing the eggs: some blow (empty) the egg before dyeing, some after, some never do. My preference is to empty the shells after the work is finished. Blowing the shell before can create problems with the dye baths - if the shell is sealed, it will float and you run the risk of uneven dye uptake. If the shell is not sealed, the inside of the egg floods, which can ruin both the egg and the dye. Never blowing the egg runs the risk of rather smelly surprise explosions as temperature or air pressure changes. You end up with finely decorated time bombs for about two years before the danger passes. Blowing the eggs after the work allows for good dye bath coverage, and prevents stinky messes, but you do run the risk of losing your piece at the very end of the process.

Wash the eggs with weak dish soap and water to remove any oils or waxes on the surface that may impede dye uptake. Importantly, let the eggs reach room temperature before you decorate them - cold eggs tend to sweat, and the condensation can keep the wax from adhering to the shell.

2. Kistky. The most basic tool is a metal funnel attached to a stick. Beeswax is scooped into the funnel, heat it, and draw the liquid wax onto the eggshell. There are several forms of kistky, from traditional rolled-copper on a wooden stick, to modern Delrin, to the lovely electric kistky the pros use. A range of tip sizes is available, from 3x fine to 3x heavy. Most serious beginners should be comfortable working with a set of three - fine, medium and heavy.

3. Wax. The only choice here is 100% beeswax. It's not expensive, it smells wonderful, and it adheres to the shell like nothing else, but still melts off easily. Electric kistka users will want pre-blackened wax, but it's still only beeswax with fine charcoal added. Candle workers can darken their wax themselves, as we'll show in a few moments.

4. Dyes. The usual choice is aniline dyes with vinegar as a mordant. These are very inexpensive (usually \$1 a color) and can be stored for years!

I don't think I've ever seen a brand name on the dye packets, but they always look just like little white envelopes and can be bought online or in craft and hobby stores right before Easter. Some have had excellent luck with the home egg-dyeing kits for hard-boiled eggs, although the effects tend to be less saturated and less lightfast. Traditionally, organic dyes like onion skins, tea, bloodroot, etc. were used, so your choice of dyes is as wide as you want to make it!

When making the aniline dyes, take the time to sterilize the area as much as you can. The cleaner your dye batch is, the longer you can store it without losing potency. All of the colors **EXCEPT ORANGE** use a small amount of vinegar to literally etch the eggshell and deposit color. Orange is used as a rinse, it lacks vinegar and can remove some darker colors like various blues that are applied over yellow to create green. **DON'T ADD VINEGAR TO YOUR ORANGE DYE!** Orange does stain weakly as a color because of the lack of vinegar, but the rinse is important.

It's generally easiest to prepare and store the aniline dyes in Mason canning jars – they seal excellently, have a wide-enough mouth to admit goose eggs, and are see-through. When mixing the dyes, I recommend labeling both the jar and its lid with a Sharpie marker – there are 4 reds and 3 blues, and they're rather hard to differentiate after the fact. The dye packets provide instructions, but this is my preferred method – leave the kids out of this portion, we'll be dealing with boiling water, glass, and indelible dyes.

I carefully wash and dry the jars, label them and their lids with the intended dye color, and set them in a sink filled halfway with hot water. Since aniline dyes are permanent, I'd prefer any disasters took place in the sink rather than on the kitchen table. The hot water bath helps prevent the glass from breaking when the boiling water is poured in. The dyes call for adding boiling water, I like to let mine boil for at least ten minutes to kill any flora in it, to keep the resulting dye sterile. I add the dye packet to the jar, then the water, the recommended amount of plain white vinegar, and immediately seal the jar. Allow the dyes to cool before use, and swirl or shake gently before each session.

Unfortunately, aniline dyes are inedible and can soak right through the pores in eggshell. **DO NOT EAT THE EGG** after blowing out the insides! You will note sometimes the innards are dyed fabulous pastel colors. Discarding the innards may seem wasteful to you, if so, blow the egg and use the innards before dyeing, and manage the floating egg in the dye carefully.

5. Candles and holders. (if non-electric kistky are used) You will want a heat source for heating the wax, and later for removing it, if you don't want to use your oven. A basic taper candle works best for this, since you'll want the flame rather exposed for the dewaxing process. You will go through quite a few of these larger candles, so use up the tag-ends or half-burned ones you have around the house. The candle wax is irrelevant, so don't spend exorbitantly here. Birthday cake candles are much too small to be of use. The point here is not aesthetics, but only as a heat source you can stick a kistka or egg into.

6. Miscellany. you will want paper towels, q-tips, large spoons, a cup of rinse water, and pencils. For blowing, you'll want either a dremel tool and syringe, or a needle and strong cheeks. The complete shopping list will be at the end. You'll also want a comfortable, egg-safe spot to work, and a period of calm time to enjoy the process. Trying to make pysanky on a stool in the kitchen with the kids playing soccer next to your elbow might not be wise.

Kids *can* make pysanky too! Parents know when their children respect the dangers of fire enough and can handle an egg carefully. I love to teach kids to make their own pysanky, and some of the most amazing pieces come out of little brains and fingers! Making pysanky can be a great artistic way for the whole family to interact, that goes beyond the basic egg-dyeing so popular in the West.

So now you've gathered your tools, what next?

III The Resist Process

Select your egg. Keep at least one eye and a finger on it at all times, and try not to squeeze. This is, after all, a raw egg, and fragile.

There are several logical ways to divide your eggshell; do so with your pencil to create the spaces you'll work in. Draw lightly, only sketching, and **DO NOT ERASE**. The pencil marks will buff off the shell during dewaxing, if you draw lightly enough, and the rubber eraser creates a sealed spot where the dyes cannot penetrate. This is meant only as a guide, not a complete outline of the design – you can always draw a complete pattern on paper to refer to, if you like. Don't create intricate tiny patterns right on the ends of the egg, since that's where your holes will be drilled if you're blowing it. Plan your colors in advance, as some colors don't work well in sequence – yellow tends to, well, yellow blues and pinks, and pink and red together might not have enough contrast to really pop. A list of dye orders and suggested combinations is included in **Appendix 2** – please study it!

Once you've sketched out your pattern and you have an idea of the colors you'd like, it's time to begin with the actual wax-resist or batik process. Do your planning now – **ONCE YOU WAX, YOU CAN'T GO BACK!** Even scraping a line or a blob off will leave an invisible coating on the shell that will fight the dyes and leave a funny blotch. If you misplace a line or get a blob, work it into the pattern since you're kind of stuck with it.

The basic method is simple – heat the kistka to melt the wax, and draw on the egg with the melted wax.

So much for the easy part. The hard part is doing it consistently and neatly! I usually heat the funnel of my kistka only for a few seconds at a time, just enough to be able to scoop beeswax without

breaking my wrist. Then I'll heat the filled kistka a little longer to melt the wax completely. You do NOT want to overfill the funnel – when the wax melts, it will run down the outside of your kistka and create a droplet of melted wax just waiting to be a blob on your egg. With practice, you will be able to see incipient blobs and wipe them off on the wax block before they grace your pattern. If the wax doesn't flow neatly or creates jagged lines, try heating the kistka a little more in the flame. Overheating is fairly obvious, you'll see wisps of smoke/vapor coming from the funnel, and the wax becomes much thinner and spreads out much more easily. Just pause a moment and let it cool, you haven't hurt either the tool or the wax. Overheat much more and you get a flaming kistka, which is generally not terribly productive. If your wax will not flow despite heating it nearly to flames, your tip may be clogged – insert a piece of very fine wire (often available from kistka vendors) through the tip to clear it, and try again.

One thing that may not seem obvious is the need for a little charcoal in the wax. Melted beeswax is rather transparent and hard to see, unless you mix in a little color. Every time you put your kistka into the flame, it will gather some charcoal. Just sink the hot kistka into your wax block now and then and rub the charcoal off to color the block. The next time you reload the kistka, you'll scoop nicely darkened wax.

Electric kistka users get to skip all this – the kistka is plugged in, heats itself without an open flame, stays at a consistent temperature, and creates silky-smooth lines that can be much finer than the traditional kistky. The only difference is using pre-blackened wax, since you won't have a candle flame as a source of charcoal. Electric kistky can be used to create fabulously intricate eggs without the rough edges traditional kistky can sometimes add.

So, heat your kistka, fill it with wax, and start drawing those lines you want to keep white! Keeping the tip perpendicular to the surface will usually allow the wax to flow freely, and unlike henna or ink, **NO PRESSURE** is needed. The wax will flow on its own, if it does not, heat the kistka a little further or unclog. The wax-covered parts of the shell will resist any dyes and stay white, thus the moniker wax-resist. Take your time and create your white pattern. When finished, select your first dye color and gently lay your egg in it!

The aniline dyes work fast, 5-10 minutes is usually more than enough. **DO NOT LEAVE YOUR EGG IN EACH DYE BATH FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR.** There is vinegar in most of the dyes, and water in all. The vinegar can etch the shell right off the egg over time, leaving you a floppy sac of yolk floating in your dye, and the orange water-only dye can actually burst the eggshell through osmosis. These nifty tricks generally involve leaving your egg in overnight, but leaving it in 20-30 minutes too long several times will weaken the shell as the vinegar (an acid, after all!) attacks it. 5-10 minutes per color should be adequate time to get excellent saturation, although orange and purple MAY take a little longer. Just stay nearby and check on your egg – if you're pleased with the color you see, take it out! A big soup spoon is usually the easiest tool to find – to move your egg in or out of its bath, it's generally easiest to put the egg on the spoon, pick up the dye jar and tilt it to the side a bit – then you can lay the egg in sideways rather than trying to drop it vertically off the spoon without breaking it. When removing the egg, tilt the jar partway again and pull the egg out and tuck it into a paper towel.

When your freshly dyed egg comes out of the bath, pat it dry, but **DON'T RUB!** That eggshell has just been under assault by acid, and it may actually lose parts of itself if you scrub - those parts generally being the bright, rich color you want. Once the shell is dried, and especially after it's dewaxed and sealed, it's much less twitchy, but the still-damp stage is rather fragile. It's an egg, and you just weakened it, so play nice!

The dyes are quite permanent and will dye your fingers, your shirt, your kids and your enamel sink. They'll also dye eggs, oddly enough. **Keep your work area clean and tidy**, and use fresh paper towels when you need to, lest you get a big purple blotch from a discarded wet paper towel on your unwaxed yellow egg. Your fingers can also transfer dyes to the shell in permanent, colorful fingerprints – a little care can go a very long way here. Wash your hands regularly if you're doing multiple eggs at different color values, and before you eat, drink, or smoke.

Once your egg is dried (wax doesn't adhere so well to wet shell!) heat your kistka and cover the lines and patterns you wish to keep this color. Select your next darkest dye color, and repeat!

Your last color should be the darkest value (unless you're using a bleaching process as in **Appendix 1**.) You won't need to cover any areas of this color with wax. Wash your hands if they're covered in dye, and get a clean paper towel! Now you're ready for the denouement!

IV Dewaxing

The “miracle minute.” The point of all this hard work, the blind spots and the dyed, cramped, and possibly burned fingers. It's why you bought that roll of paper towels that seems to have vanished completely, and why you thought this was ever a good idea. This is where you get to see what you did!

Traditional dewaxing involves sticking the egg in the candle flame. Yes, you read right. The trick is to keep the egg low in the side of the flame. Candle flames generate charcoal at the top, above the wick. Sticking your egg in the top of the flame will gather all that charcoal, (just like your kistka did) only charcoal is rather hard to get out of eggshell. **Stay low and to the side**, and you can avoid “smoking” your egg. Stick the waxed egg in the flame and watch closely – the wax will go glossy in just a few seconds, then it will flatten out, and then it will sag downward. Pull it out of the flame at this point and wipe the wax off with a soft paper towel or rag, and see what's underneath! Do this in small sections, generally no larger than the side of your thumb, until you've gotten all the wax off. Try to avoid leaving the egg in the flame too long, as cooked egg is rather hard to get out of its shell. Unfortunately, the best teacher here is experience, I can't offer any further neat tricks. Be patient and don't get greedy – keep your sections small and you'll be all right. **If you do smoke your egg, don't panic**. Grab your block of beeswax and rub some over the smoked area, or melt a little bit onto it. Reheat the spot and buff very gently as you remove the wax, you should get most of the charcoal off.

If you've had enough of being traditional, you can dewax your eggs in the oven. I prefer this method when I'm dewaxing a dozen or so eggs, since trying to clean and not smoke all those patterns gets a little tedious. You'll need to create an egg board first: You'll want a piece of wooden board maybe 12x24 inches, and a passel of nails. The types and sizes here are not very important as long as it will safely fit in your oven and hold eggs – except that **you may want to avoid plywood** – we'll be sticking the project in a warm oven and plywood has several layers of volatile glues in it, which might not be overly healthy to inhale after heating. Drive nails through the board in sets of three, in triangles an inch or 1.5 inches wide. These will create tripods your eggs will sit on, above the surface of the board. Set your empty board in the oven, place your completed waxed eggs on their little tripods, and turn the heat up to at most 175-200 degrees. Low and slow is much better than quick-cooked pysanky. The point here is to melt the wax ever so gently, not to cook the eggs. Leave the door open a little if you like, and keep watch. When the wax runs and drips free, snag each egg and wipe it clean – no smoked spots, no cooked corners!

Buffing the egg very gently during the dewaxing process should remove most of the pencil marks you made at the beginning if you kept a light hand. If you have a stubborn spot, melt some beeswax back onto the problem area and buff again. You should be able to get out the most stubborn spot gently without taking off dyed shell if you're careful and persistent. If not, tell your admiring friends you actually planned it that way, they probably won't argue.

V Blowing and Finishing

Ahh, the stage with all the bad jokes. Yes, you too can teach your grandmother to blow eggs!

This is the one part where I will NOT recommend the “traditional” method. The traditional method sucks. You get a large, long needle, and just stab it through the top and bottom of the shell, (without breaking it) try to pierce the yolk, (without breaking it) stick it your lips, lean over a cup and blow until you stroke out. (without breaking it!) About a third of the time your egg exploded, and at least once a season you'd give yourself bruises under your eyes. There are enough inexpensive tools available to perform this little task without either broken eggshells or rehab stays that I don't even bother teaching the nuances of the old way. If you want to try, good luck, the rest of you, come with me!

My preferred method is dremel and syringe. Find an inexpensive dremel/rotary tool and an appropriate sized burr bit. (I like a 3/32 leaf burr) Burr bits look a little like serrated spear tips. A hardware store can certainly help you pick one out. The investment is minimal and the irritation saved is huge, just be sure that your bit will create a hole wider than your syringe, since you sort of need to stick the syringe through said hole.

I buy my syringes at the grocery store – the injectors used to marinate the insides of roasts or what-have-you were all but designed for blowing eggs. You can get a bundled syringe and marinade for under \$5, and hey, you get marinade.

After egg has been dewaxed, wax it again. (Poor Daniel-san had no idea what he was getting into.) Using your block of beeswax, cover the ends of the egg with a spot of wax $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch wide. This doesn't have to be pretty or neat, it's merely to protect the shell from any drippy strings of egg white. Albumin removes dye, so the gorgeous pattern you just created is vulnerable to fading if the insides get onto the shell. Get a cup at this point, or hang over the sink, this part needs to be done over something to catch the eggy mess. Once you've waxed the shell ends, turn your dremel on high and place it vertically against the top end of the egg. **DO NOT PUSH!!!!!!** I cannot emphasize this enough! The tool's weight alone will drive it through the shell, you're only there to guide it! Once you break the eggshell at any point, it becomes exponentially weaker and the least pressure can pop it. Just keep the bit in one spot until it cuts through on its own, and don't allow it to enter the egg deeply. Carefully remove the tool, flip the egg over, and drill another hole in the other end. Set your dremel aside.

Some advocate only drilling one hole and removing the insides through it. I prefer two holes, if only as a pressure-relief mechanism. If you use one hole and a blower tool, you run the risk of accidentally blocking the hole and *over*pressurizing the inside of the shell as you blow air in. The result is an ugly pop. If you use one hole and a syringe, you run the risk of *under*pressurizing the shell as you suck innards out and air can't get in. The result is again an ugly pop. Two holes allows air to flow in or out as you displace the insides, preventing pops.

Once you have your two holes, insert your syringe in one of them and carefully move it up and down a few times to be sure you've disrupted the yolk. Most blowing losses happen when a whole yolk is forced through a hole, so be sure you've broken it. Then, carefully pull back on the plunger and suck out the innards. You may need to empty the chamber and suck again, I usually set the syringe down at this point, wipe the shell clean and put the egg to my mouth over the cup, and GENTLY blow out the leftover matter. If you got the yolk broken up and most of the insides out, this part is quite simple and not nearly so risky as it once was. Discard the innards, **DO NOT EAT THEM**.

You now have a mostly empty, decorated eggshell that will drool egg whites through the neat little holes you just drilled. One option is to remove the ugly wax shield, and neatly wax over just the holes and let the remaining whites dry naturally. This is easy to do, if the egg will be in a protected location. The leftover egg whites don't create stink bombs, and after a few months the sealed egg will be completely dried and safe. The other option is to gently bake the egg in the oven. If you created an egg board for the dewaxing process, just put your emptied shell on the board, and again gently heat them at no more than 175-200 degrees. They'll heat faster since they're now less massive, but the process will take a little longer. The leftover whites will dry out and adhere to the inside of the shell where they'll cause no problems. Remove any leftover wax on the ends.

If you like, you can finish your emptied, dried eggs using polyurethane, acrylic, or any number of finishes as you like. **AVOID MODPODGE** – it tends to ruin the patterns as it will bleed the dyes.

VI Shopping List and Vendors

Aniline dyes, 17 colors available. You'll also need
mason jars
vinegar – plain white
boiling water

Kistky (Fine, medium, heavy)
electric offers cleaner and finer lines for a higher price

Kistka cleaning wire
clogs do happen

Beeswax
plain, or black for electric

Candles and candle holders
except for electric kistky users. Tapers work best, votives and tealights are too low

Pencils
to sketch on the egg before waxing begins

Qtips
for greens, blues or any color you want to apply only in spots

Paper towels
you will go through a LOT of paper towels

Spoons

for moving eggs in/out of the dye

Rinse water cup

to keep your spoons clean between uses

Dremel tool and syringe

or your preferred method of emptying the eggshell

Egg board

wood or cardboard and nails, used to dewax and dry the eggs in the oven.

The patience of a saint

you WILL drop eggs and get turquoise fingerprints on white shells. This is part and parcel of making pysanky. Be patient with yourself and don't work when you're overly frustrated!

I buy online from

www.allthingsukrainian.com

Pretty much everything you'll need, good prices. They're Ukrainian so I automatically love them!

www.polartcenter.com

Everything you'll *ever* need, plus electric kistky and traditional kistky in a dizzying array of styles. Good prices. Good folks despite not being Ukrainian themselves, I buy regularly!

www.bestpysanky.com

Decent selection, electric tips and tools available. I'm not familiar with their dyes.

www.hanuseys.com

The usual tools and dyes, good prices.

You'll want to get your dremel/rotary tool at a hardware store or big box mart, they're terribly handy to have around the house anyway. I got my cordless model at Wal-Mart for \$23. Bits are easily available and inexpensive.

If your city has a Ukrainian population, the local church, school, or gift store will likely have pysanka supplies year-round. Most Michael's and Hobby Lobby will carry supplies before Easter.