

# A brief history of pysanky

*Pysankarstvo* – the art of writing designs on eggs with wax and dye – is common to much of the Slavic region of Europe, but is most commonly associated with the people of Ukraine, where the art has been practiced since the pre-Christian era. “*Pysanky*” is the plural form; a single egg is a *pysanka*. The term derives from the word “*pysaty*,” or “to write,” which is the literal process by which eggs are decorated.

In pre-Christian times, pysanky were made as a rite of spring and renewal. A tradition among Ukraine’s Hutzul people holds that a monster of great evil is bound in the mountains, with heavy iron chains, but has minions who can travel the world and report back to him on what they see. In a year when many pysanky are written, the monster is bound more tightly, and good will prevail. When fewer pysanky are written, the monster’s bonds are loosed, and he can wreak havoc. They also served as a symbol of the coming of spring.

Once Christianity came into play, pysanky were created during Lent. The pre-Christian symbols used took on additional meanings. One post-Christian tradition has it that the first pysanky were eggs given to Mary at the foot of the cross. Her tears fell on the eggs, coloring them. These are just a couple of the many legends surrounding pysanky.

Pysanky were created by the women of the household, working at night, after the children had been put to bed, and with the men not in the house, lest their presence bring bad luck. Designs and dye recipes were passed down secretly from mother to daughter, who sat together, prayed over their work, and wrote on the best eggs they could save. A family might produce several dozen over the course of Lent, which would then be taken to the church on Easter Sunday to be blessed by the priest, after which they would be distributed among family and friends, including the priest, and any young men in whom the young women were interested – and a few saved to be put in the graves of any loved ones who happened to die over the course of the year.

Over time, distinctive styles of pysanka have developed. The Trypillian, for example, derives from prehistoric pottery designs, full of swirls and stylized animals. These pysanky are produced in white, black, and red or brick. If the Trypillian people, a prehistoric Ukrainian tribe, ever decorated eggs, none remain. The Lemko region specializes in a style called drop-pull, in which liquefied wax is dropped onto an eggshell with a solid-tipped *kistka* (the head of a pin stuck through a pencil eraser will do), and pulled quickly into shapes.

## Then and now

In period, eggs for pysanky had to be fertile to be considered effective. They would never be blown, but would be rotated periodically to prevent a buildup of gases as the insides dried out. A buildup could lead to a smelly explosion.

Emptying eggs is a nod to the modern preference not to be gassed out of one’s home in case one explodes, but is not actually necessary. If one intends to varnish a pysanka, though, it must be blown out, either before or after the writing process.

Another nod to modern preference is the use of aniline dyes. These make available a broader, brighter spectrum of colors, and can work much more quickly than the traditional, largely plant-based, dyes. Aniline dyes will also keep indefinitely.

## Some common styles of pysanky

The **Krapanka** is one of the oldest styles of pysanky. It consists of dots applied in wax, and then covered over with color, repeating the process until as many colors as desired have been used. The dots may be applied at random (as here) or in orderly patterns. One legend states that a woman standing at the foot of the Cross gave Mary a basket of eggs as a show of love and support, and Mary's tears colored the egg – the first krapanka. The dots can also symbolize the stars.



The **Endless Meander** or **Gypsy Roads** is an all-over pattern consisting of a wandering line that travels endlessly between two opposing fields of color. These lines can be swirled or jagged. The traditional colors are red and black. Evil spirits landing on the egg will get trapped in the pattern, never able to bother the residents of the house again.

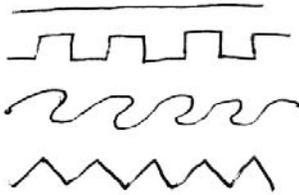
**40 Triangles** is a bit of a misnomer, in that the design actually has 48 triangles. With more divisions, you can get 96 triangles, 192, 384, 768 ... as many as your steady hand and the size of the egg allow. Use the divisions any way your imagination devises.



The traditional **Tree of Life** features a large tree, usually flanked by horses or deer, on a vertically divided egg. The motif may be repeated on the other side, or a different design may be used.

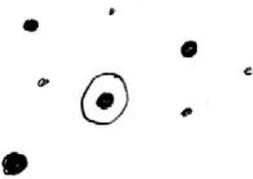
# Symbols

*These examples are by no means exhaustive!*



## **Line/Meander:**

A line completely surrounding an egg, or a motif on one side of an egg, indicates eternity. Specific shapes of line have additional meanings of their own. When used to surround another motif, the meander adds its meaning to that of the motif.



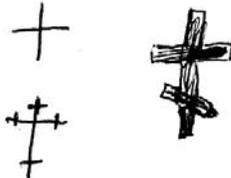
## **Dots:**

Dots indicate stars, or Mary's tears. A dot enclosed in a circle shows the center of the universe – a symbology it shares with the egg itself. One of the simplest pysanky is the krapanka, consisting simply of colored dots.



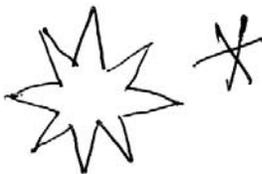
## **Tripods:**

Tripods are trinity symbols, and can mean anything that can be expressed as a trinity – Father/Son/Spirit, Maiden/Mother/Crone, Birth/Death/Resurrection, man/Woman/Child, etc.



## **Crosses:**

The four elements (earth, air, fire, water), the four sides of the earth, Christianity. A very common pysanka element, often seen with all four arms the same length.



## **Star:**

A sun symbol. Purity, life, light, beauty.

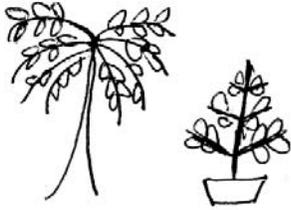


## **Curls:**

Curls indicate protection/defense. They can be used singly, or connected into meanders.

# Symbols

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**Tree of Life:**  
The tree of life.



**Wolves' Teeth:**  
Loyalty and wisdom



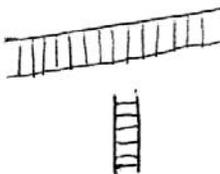
**Eye of God/Hand of God:**  
God's care for mankind



**Hearts:**  
Either as an element in a floral design (as a leaf), or separately. Hearts are love symbols, most commonly written onto eggs intended to be given by a young woman to the young man she loves.



**Spiral:**  
Life, death, immortality



**Ladders:**  
The search for happiness, or prayers rising to heaven.

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## **Sieve:**

Discernment/separation of good from evil



## **Flowers:**

The feminine, wisdom, elegance, beauty. Mallows, sunflowers and poppies are popular themes, each with their own special meanings (i.e. roses for love, poppies for beauty/joy)



## **Acorns/Oak Leaves:**

Strength, energy, persistence. Often quite stylized.



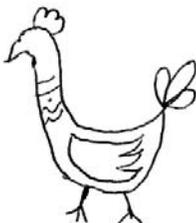
## **Deer:**

The masculine, prosperity, joy, leadership. Also a sun symbol, from pre-Christian times.



## **Ram:**

Leadership, dignity

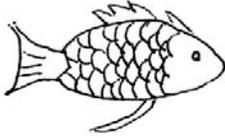


## **Birds:**

Spring, fertility, good wishes. A hen is specifically a female fertility symbol; a roosters symbolize good fortune. Birds are shown at rest, to keep the good wish symbolized from "flying away." Depictions of parts of birds share the meaning of the whole.

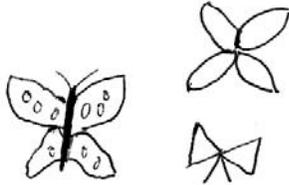
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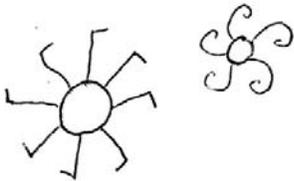
**Fish:**

Symbol of health. Christianity, abundance, baptism



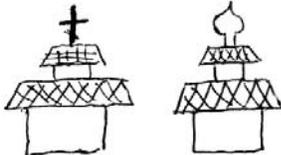
**Butterflies:**

Childhood, eternal happiness



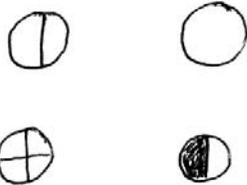
**Spiders:**

Artistic talent, patience



**Church:**

A common design in western Ukraine. Roofs are generally depicted with the sieve pattern. The only completely Christian symbol; all others predate Christianity — yes, even the crosses!



**Circle:**

Completeness, the universe. Divided in half, polarities such as night/day, winter/summer. Quartered, can mean the four quarters of the universe.

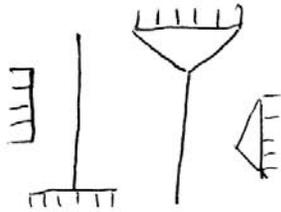


**Willow branch:**

Replaces the palm for Palm Sunday, in Ukrainian tradition. An older legend maintains that a willow holds the sun in the sky.

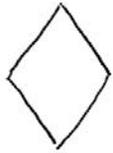
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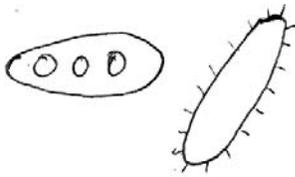
**Comb or rake:**

Putting things in order, with additional harvest-related meaning for the rake.



**Diamonds:**

Knowledge



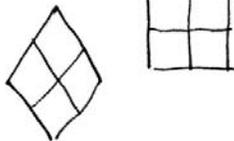
**Cucumber:**

A symbol of the preservation of life, because of the water it retains.



**Grapevine:**

Good fellowship, loyalty, continuity, love. Love of God for mankind.



**Windows:**

Window into heavens, female fertility



**Bear's paws:**

Strength, endurance, courage, wisdom. Protective; associated with the master of the home

# Symbols

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## **Basket:**

Knowledge, motherhood, giver of gifts

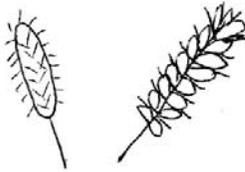


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## **Wheat:**

Good health, harvest



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## **Poppy:**

A common Ukrainian motif; joy, beauty

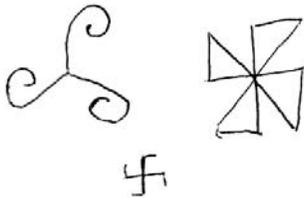


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## **Swastika/Windmill:**

Happiness, blessings, goodwill, good fortune. Not uncommon to have the ends curl.



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## **Waves:**

Good crops, wealth, prosperity



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## **Pine tree:**

Endurance, strength, eternal life



# Symbols

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Color has its own significance in the creation of pysanky, both individually and in combinations. To quote pysanka artist and instructor Luba Petruska:

WHITE — Signified purity, birth, light, rejoicing, virginity.

YELLOW — The symbol of light and purity. It signified, youth, love, the harvest and perpetuation of the family. It is the color consecrated to the light deities, and the sun, stars, and moon. It the Christian symbol of reward and recognition.

GOLD — Spirituality, wisdom

ORANGE — The symbol of endurance, strength, and ambition. The color of a flame represented passion tempered by the yellow of wisdom. It is also the symbol of the everlasting sun.

PINK — Success, contentment

GREEN — The color of fertility, health, and hopefulness; of spring, breaking bondage, freshness, and wealth. In the Christian era it represents bountifulness, hope, and the victory of life over death. Green is the color of Christmas, Easter, and the Epiphany.

RED — The magical color of folklore signifying action, charity, and spiritual awakening. It also represented the sun and the joy of life and love. Pysanky with red fields or motifs are often given to children. In the Christian era it represents the divine love and passion of Christ, hope, passion, blood, fire, and the ministry of the church.

BLUE — Represented blue skies or the air, and good health, truth, and fidelity.

PURPLE — Represented fasting, faith, trust, and patience.

BROWN — Represented Mother Earth and her bountiful gifts; earth, harvest, generosity.

BLACK — Represented constancy or eternity, the center of the Earth, the darkest time before dawn. Black also signified death, fear, and ignorance.

## COMBINATIONS of COLORS

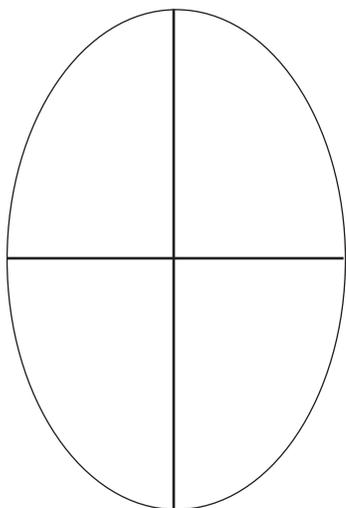
Black and white: mourning, respect for the souls of the dead.

Black and red: ignorance arising from passions.

Red and White: respect, protection from evil powers.

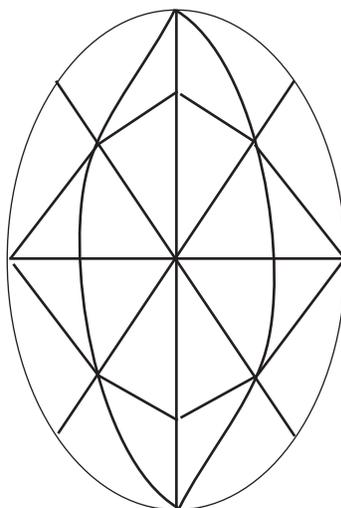
Four or more colors: family happiness, peace and love

# Dividing the egg



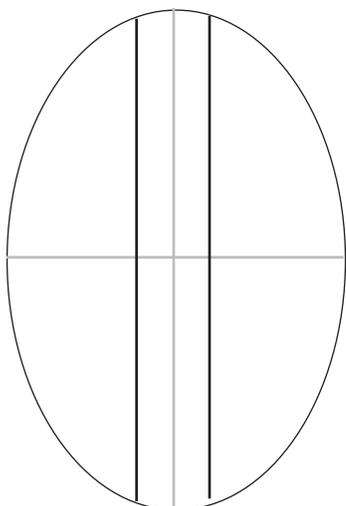
## Basic or "Gateway" Division

Draw an equator around the egg, and then meridians at 90 degrees from each other. This division is the basis for all of the other ones.



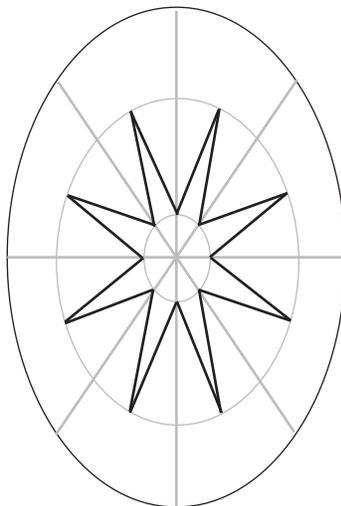
## Triangle Division

Draw an extra set of meridians, so the egg has eight vertical sectors. Diagonal lines cut each sector into six sections. Intersections provide focal points for elements. There are 48 triangles here; double the meridians to get 96, etc.



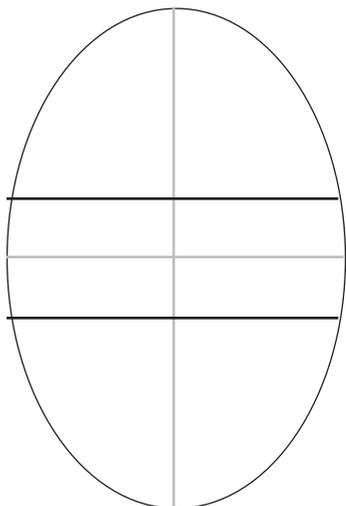
## Vertical Division

To either side of one meridian, draw a vertical line. This will define a band and two wide faces.



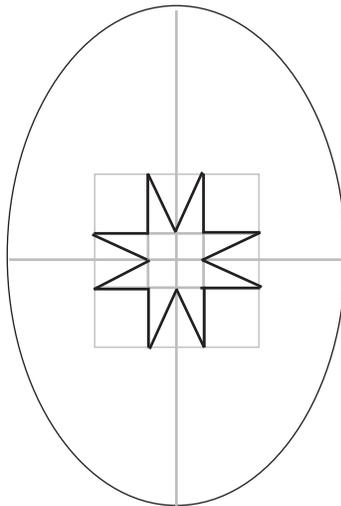
## Star Division 1

Draw diagonals through the meeting point of equator and meridian. Lightly sketch a circle or oval at one of the places where lines meet, and another farther out. Use the ovals as connection points. Layer points for complex stars.



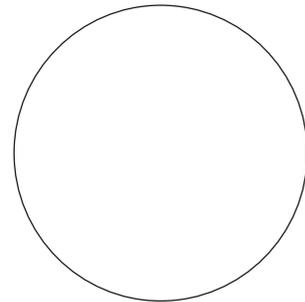
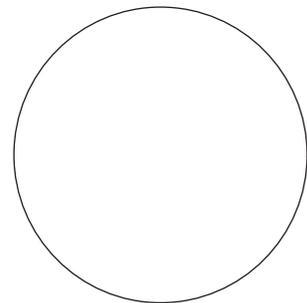
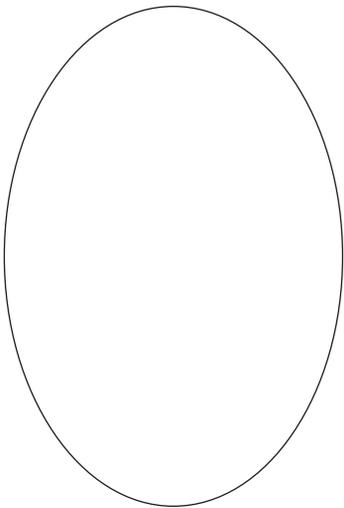
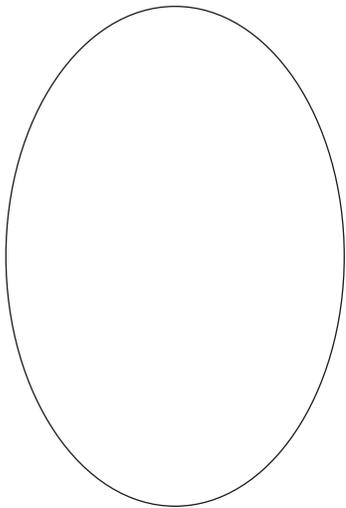
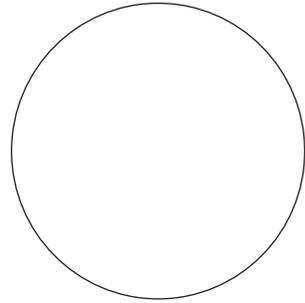
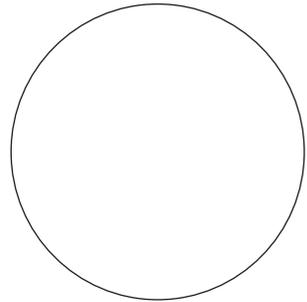
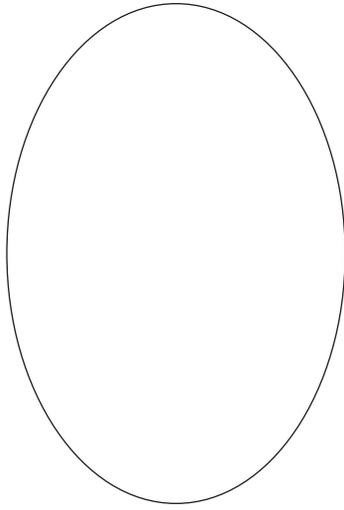
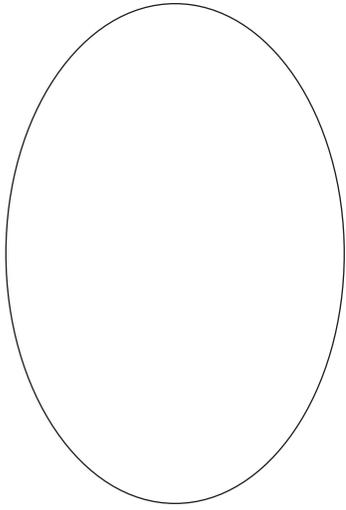
## Barrel Division

Above and below the equator, draw horizontal lines. Make this horizontal band as wide or as narrow as you like, or ring the egg with multiple bands.



## Star Division 2

In a square at the intersection, draw horizontal and vertical bands, dividing the square into 9. Use the guides to set your points.



# How to write a pysanka

## What You'll Need:

- Eggshells, either pre-empted or left intact
- Newspaper or other cover for workspace
- Dyes, and a protected place to put them
- At least one kistka (manual kistka come in up to four sizes)
- Beeswax
- Candle and flame source (matches/lighter)
- Paper towels, for wiping and to place under egg
- Slotted spoon or other egg-dunking device
- Pencil for sketching design (do not erase)
- Towel, t-shirt or rag to elevate wrist comfortably

## Preparation:

- Purchase eggs. If you must use grocery-store eggs, candle them against the case lights to check that you are getting the sturdiest eggs possible, with the fewest weak spots. Eggs bought directly from farmers' markets will generally be stronger and have fewer flaws.
- If necessary, clean eggs, with a mild soap and a minimum of scrubbing.
- Let dry.
- If you wish to blow out eggs before writing them, do it now. Rinse them out and let them drain, then cover the hole with wax. If not blowing them out before writing, allow them to warm up.
- You MAY choose to rinse eggs in a mild vinegar solution, just until bubbles appear.
- Let dry, or pat dry, whether you use the vinegar or not.
- Lay out your work area:
  - Lay down newspaper.
  - Fold a paper towel or two to make a work surface; you may want to support this on a cloth
  - Fold a cloth towel or t-shirt at a comfortable height as a rest for your working hand.
  - Put eggs, wax, kistky, pencil and candle (in a secure holder) where you can reach them, along with a flame source for the candle. Light candle now, or when ready to use it. You may also want a "sacrificial" egg for testing lines and wax flow. Alternately, you can test flow against your fingernail, or the newspaper, or even the candleholder. Kistka rests are available, or you can set the hot kistka against the candle holder.
  - Set up dyeing area, preferably where you won't nudge it (Dyes, paper towels, slotted spoon, rinsing bowl)

## Method:

- Start with clean hands, so as not to smudge the egg.
- Lightly make baseline divisions on egg with a hard pencil. Lightly mark out basics of design on egg with a hard pencil. Don't write every line, just enough to guide you as you go. Pencil lines will be harder to see as the egg gets darker, anyway.
- Avoid erasing mistakes – they'll be covered over. If you MUST, place the egg in a vinegar solution and rub with your finger; the lines will come off!
- Lay the egg on the work surface. A paper towel folded into a square provides a clean place to put the egg; watch as you progress so you can move the egg or change the paper, to prevent getting the egg dirty.
- Heat the kistka for several seconds in the blue part of the candle flame (heat just the opening of the cone for a traditional kistka, but the whole head, if you like, of a delrin one). Drag it across the wax to scoop some into the cone. The kistka should be hot enough that it glides

through like a knife through butter. Reheat for a few seconds (a 3-count or 4-count should do) to melt the wax (heat the point of the cone on a traditional kistka). If the wax catches fire, blow it out.

- You can test wax flow on the sacrificial egg, if you like. If you see that a blob of wax has formed, touch the kistka to the sacrificial egg or the newspaper. Blots transferred to the surface of the egg are permanent; all you can do is work them into the design.
- Prop your working arm on a folded towel, rag or other object to support your wrist in a position that will let you work comfortably.
- Holding the kistka as you would a hairbrush, touch the tip to the egg, at one of the intersections on your design. Moving away from yourself, pull the kistka along the line. Rotate the egg as needed to expose unwritten areas, but keep the egg on the surface. You'll have much better control.
- As needed, scoop more wax. Cover all areas you want to have stay your current color. You may use a heavier kistka to fill in larger areas. When possible, start and stop at intersections.
- When you have covered all areas with the first color, take your egg to your dyeing station, and dip it in the next color (usually, the "first" color will be white, so the first dip is actually the second color in the design). If the egg has been emptied, you'll have to hold it under. Move it a couple of times, to prevent lighter-colored areas from forming where it touches the container. You can pull it out as soon as it achieves the desired shade, as briefly as a few seconds, or up to several minutes.
- Blot the egg dry. Don't rub; you might loosen the wax.
- Return to your workstation, reload the kistka, and start writing the areas that will stay that color. Work from lighter to darker, noting that light-to-dark does NOT follow the "ROYGBIV" order.
- If you are using only a small amount of green or blue, you can dot the color on with a Q-tip, a paintbrush, or even a small stick. Cover the areas you want with wax, and proceed to the next color. The deeper color will "overwrite" the edges of color you've left uncovered. If the design uses a lot of the blue or the green, by all means, use the full immersion method.
- Repeat the dyeing step, and continue repeating until you have all the colors that you want.
- Dip the egg in a final color (usually purple, brick or black). Leave the egg longer in the last color to ensure good coverage – even eggs that take the lighter colors unevenly will usually do well when dipped in the black.
- Hold your waxed and dyed egg to the SIDE of the candleflame, until a patch of wax melts and becomes shiny. Wipe the melted wax off your egg with a paper towel. Move to another spot, find a clean spot on your paper towel, and repeat until you have uncovered the egg completely. Holding the egg above the candle will cause the candle to deposit soot on the egg.
- You may choose to varnish your egg, but it's not necessary – just remember to be careful! And if you do not empty your egg, whether before or after, DO NOT varnish it.
- If you choose to empty your egg after writing it, you can dump extra wax over the area where you will make the hole, which will protect the surface of the egg from the contents of the egg, before you remove the wax. Empty the egg, and un wax as described above. Alternately, if you plan to varnish the egg, do at least one coat before making the hole, again to protect the surface from the contents.
- If you empty the egg AFTER writing it, and you have used aniline dyes, discard the contents. The dyes are poisonous.
- If you empty the egg BEFORE writing it, and you don't want to use the contents immediately, scramble them up, add a pinch of salt, and freeze them in whatever batches seem good to you. Many recipes call for two or three eggs, so that's a reasonable batch.

# Resources and further reading

## Supplies

There are any number of places to get supplies for your pysanky. Tools and dyes for this class were purchased from the Ukrainian Gift Shop in Minneapolis, Minn. ([www.ukrainiangiftshop.com](http://www.ukrainiangiftshop.com)).

An online search for supplies will turn up many more sites. Communities with a strong Ukrainian presence are likely to offer sources, as well. Sometimes kistky can be found in craft stores, too.

Eggs for this class were purchased from Bracken Ridge Ranch, at [http://www.brackenridgeranch.com/crafted\\_eggs\\_10.html](http://www.brackenridgeranch.com/crafted_eggs_10.html)

## Further reading

“Pysanky in the 21st Century” by Helen Badulak, 2004

“Eggs Beautiful: How to Make Ukrainian Easter Eggs” by Johanna Luciw, et al. 1975

“Pysanky and Their Symbols” by Tanya Osadsa, 1980

“Pysanka: Icon of the Universe” by Mary Tkachuk, 1977

“Rusyn Easter Eggs from Eastern Slovakia” by Pavlo Markovyc, 1987