

## OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

## OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

## Ursprung und Geschichte (origin and history)

DAS OSTEREI "The Easter Egg Through the Centuries"

The Easter egg is one of the most enduring forms of folk art in Germany. There are written records of it from as long ago as the 13th century. The custom seems to stem partly from pagan spring rites, in which the egg was regarded as a symbol of fertility; and partly from the special characteristics of the Easter season. The consumption of eggs was, at times, forbidden during Lent; but nobody told the hens of this and they kept right on laying. Hence there were plenty of eggs around at Easter.

Early Easter eggs were solid in colour; made generally by boiling flowers, berries, roots or other plant parts in the same water with the eggs. Red eggs represented the Saviour's blood. Purple ones brought wisdom. Green ones were presented on Maunday Thursday, which the Germans still call Gründonnerstag.

Later eggs were more elaborate; painted perhaps with city crests or intricate patterns. Ferns and other delicate-leaved plants were affixed to the shell before the colouring, then removed to reveal a pattern. Baroque era eggs would be very elaborate things; decorated with pearls, lace and gilding. (Nobody peeled off this artwork to eat the eggs, of course. It was customary to make a pinprick in each end of the shell before colouring, and then to blow out the contents for use in cakes and the like.)

The special skills of the Nürnberg toy and candymakers were applied early to the Easter egg. It was made artificially of sugar, chocolate, wood or cardboard. Some of them could be opened to reveal small gifts within. A popular 19th century item was the "peepshow egg", with a lens in one end and a painted scene inside.

The first historical mention of colored eggs (although not of Easter eggs) goes back to the year 1230 A.D. We know for sure that in the 16th and 17th centuries colored eggs were given as Easter presents. In the Baroque period it became customary for young people who wanted to become engaged to give each other colored and decorated eggs. This remained a rural custom in some regions of central and eastern Europe for a long time.

Elaborate techniques were used in decorating the eggs. They were gilded, lined with paper, and adorned with inscriptions and ornaments. A popular method was to inscribe decorations and verses onto the white eggs using liquid wax. Afterwards the eggs were dyed and the spots covered with wax remained white and clearly visible. This complicated technique is applied to this day in a few villages near Marburg/Lahn (in Hessen) – although no longer for the romantic purpose described above but rather for people who want to have the eggs as decorations.

The origin of the "Easter egg" custom is not fully known. One reason for it is, of course, that around Easter time the rural household had plenty of eggs handy. The hens – particularly the less productive strains of past centuries – began to lay eggs again in the spring. Another explanation is that Easter marks the end of the time of fasting during which eggs and meat were forbidden. All this may have helped to create the custom.