

OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

The Easter egg, a symbol of new life, also has European roots. The practice of decorating boiled eggs began in Europe, where Easter eggs have long been painted with bright colors reminiscent of burgeoning spring flowers. Today the tradition of giving Easter eggs and other Easter gifts transcends religious, ethnic and cultural affiliations. Painting, hiding and finding hand-colored Easter eggs and (along with some German chocolate bunnies and candies) will bring smiles to children of all ages.

Legends

Lenten tradition



Orthodox priest blessing Easter baskets at Pascha (Easter) in Lviv, Ukraine

The Easter egg tradition may also have merged into the celebration of the end of the privations of Lent in the West. Historically, it was traditional to use up all of the household's eggs before Lent began. Eggs were originally forbidden during Lent as well as on other traditional fast days in Western Christianity (this tradition still continues among the Eastern Christian Churches). Likewise, in Eastern Christianity, both meat and dairy are prohibited during the Lenten fast, and eggs are seen as "dairy" (a foodstuff that could be taken from an animal without shedding its blood)^[citation needed]. This established the tradition of Pancake Day being celebrated on Shrove Tuesday. This day, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday when Lent begins, is also known as Mardi Gras, a French phrase which translates as "Fat Tuesday" to mark the last consumption of eggs and dairy before Lent begins.

In the Orthodox Church, Great Lent begins on Clean Monday, rather than Wednesday, so the household's dairy products would be used up in the preceding week, called Cheesefare Week. During Lent, since chickens would not stop producing eggs during this time, a larger than usual store might be available at the end of the fast if the eggs had not been allowed to hatch. The surplus, if any, had to be eaten quickly to prevent spoiling. Then, with the coming of Easter, Pascha the eating of eggs resumes.

One would have been forced to hard boil the eggs that the chickens produced so as not to waste food, and for this reason the Spanish dish hornazo (traditionally eaten on and around Easter) contains hard-boiled eggs as a primary ingredient. In Hungary, eggs are used sliced in potato casseroles around the Easter period.



Eggs from Bukovina, a region near the Ukraine

Pysanky

A pysanka is a Ukrainian Easter egg, decorated using a wax-resist (batik) method. The word comes from the verb *pysaty*, "to write", as the designs are not painted on, but written with beeswax. Pysanky are typically made to be given to family members and respected outsiders. To give a pysanka is to give a symbolic gift of life, which is why the egg must remain whole. Furthermore, each of the designs and colors on the pysanka is likely to have a deep, symbolic meaning. Traditionally, the designs are chosen to match the character of the person to whom the pysanka is to be given.

At one time, in a large family by Holy Thursday 60 or more eggs would have been completed by the women of the house. (The more daughters a family had, the more pysanky would be produced.) The eggs would then be taken to the church on Easter Sunday to be blessed, after which they were given away. Here is a partial list of how the pysanky would be used:

1. One or two would be given to the priest.
2. Three or four were taken to the cemetery and placed on graves of the family.
3. Ten or fifteen were given to children or godchildren.
4. Ten or twelve were exchanged by the unmarried girls with the eligible men in the community.
5. Several were saved to place in the coffin of loved ones who might die during the year.
6. Several were saved to keep in the home for protection from fire, lightning and storms.
7. Two or three were placed in the mangers of cows and horses to ensure safe calving and colting and a good milk supply for the young.
8. At least one egg was placed beneath the bee hive to insure a good harvest of honey.
9. One was saved for each grazing animal to be taken out to the fields with the shepherds in the spring.
10. Several pysanky were placed in the nests of hens to encourage the laying of eggs.

Everyone from the youngest to the oldest received a pysanka for Easter. Young people were given pysanky with bright designs; dark pysanky were given to older people.

A bowl full of pysanky was invariably kept in every home. It served not only as a colorful display, but also as protection from all dangers. Some of the eggs were emptied, and a bird's head made of wax or dough and wings and tail-feathers of folded paper were attached. These "doves" were suspended before icons in commemoration of the birth of Christ, when a dove came down from heaven and soared over the child Jesus.