

Pisanki



Decorating eggs has been a tradition in Poland for about 1,000 years. A pisanka (from the word pisac, "to write") is an egg that has designs drawn in beeswax on it with a pisak. The egg is then dipped in a dye, dried, and the process is repeated until the designs are finished. The wax is removed and the pisanka is ready to be presented to godparents, godchildren, friends, relatives or sweethearts.

Designs and techniques vary with the regions in Poland. Kraszanki are hard-boiled, dyed a single color (red onion skins are the most popular) and eaten. Skrobanki are hard-boiled, dyed, and then a design is scratched onto the eggshell. Batykwane are raw eggs decorated with beeswax and dyes. Wyklejanki are hollow eggs onto which colored yams with bullrush pith are glued. Nalepianki are hollow eggs decorated with colored paper (miniature wycinanki) or straw. Malowanki are also hollow, or wooden, eggs with painted designs.

Natural dyes are prepared from vegetables and other plants. Onion skins are the most common dye, producing shades of brown, bronze and gold. Red cabbage makes a delicate blue dye, while beets yield a pink shade. Tea and coffee are strong brown dyes. Spinach and grass give a gentle green, while berries can produce pinks.

Colors have symbolism: White signifies purity and innocence, yellow - wisdom, red - love and bravery, pink - success, green - spring-rebirth-wealth, blue - good health, purple - faith and trust, brown - happiness and a good harvest, black was for remembrance (as in remembering the dead).

The designs chosen for the pisanka had as much symbolism as the colors. Thus, a "story egg" would be created for the recipient, much as today's greeting card, wishing the person good health and a long life, or a fertility egg given to a new bride suggesting she have many children.

While the pisanki were being decorated, a tradition passed on through female relatives, many legends and stories also were. In a Polish morality play, eggs were given to Satan to cheer him up in hell. In Pomorze, a tale is told of a demon who kept a flock of chickens and fed them magical food to ensure a good supply of eggs. Some monks unknowingly ate the food, and they also began to lay eggs. In Malopolska the last egg of an old hen was given to a childless woman to pass on the fertility. While many superstitions were based on the old pagan beliefs, Christianity changed some legends into ones with religious significance.

One tale tells of Mary painting hard-boiled eggs red, yellow and green to entertain the Baby Jesus. It is said because of this story, Polish women have always made pisanki. Another legend says that the Blessed Virgin prepared colored eggs and took them in a basket to Pilate to plead for her son's life. When Pilate refused, Mary began to weep. Her tears fell on the eggs, making beautiful patterns of dots. Dots are still used on pisanki to represent Mary's tears. Eggs decorated with a pin-head dipped in wax are called "tear drop" eggs because the strokes resemble tear drops.

