

Ukrainian tradition of decorating eggs

SIGNIFICANT TREASURES

This is one in a monthly series prepared in conjunction with the Canadian Federation of Friends of Museums. Each column will highlight a "significant treasure" on display at a Canadian museum as chosen by the curator or director.

A traditional *pysanka*, a decorated Easter egg, has been chosen as a "significant treasure" of the Ukrainian Museum of Canada in Saskatoon.

The museum showcases the culture and lifestyle of the thousands of Ukrainians who immigrated to Canada in the 1890s and early 1900s, as well as later arrivals in the 1920s, late 1940s and 1950s. The emphasis is on the first wave, mainly farmers, who settled in the Prairies between 1891 and 1914.

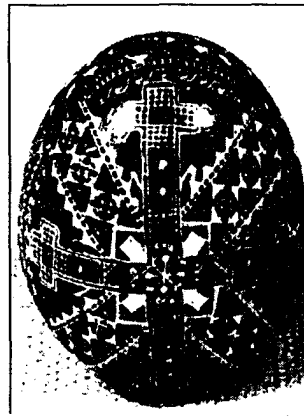
Rose Marie Fedorak, the museum's curator/education director, selected the *pysanka* pictured here as a "significant treasure" because it is a typical form of folk art and continues to play an important role in the Ukrainian celebration of Easter. The word *pysanka* (the plural is *pysanky*) is derived from

the Ukrainian verb "to write" because the design is "written" in wax on the shell of a raw egg using a pen-like instrument.

The egg depicted is one of about 1,500 in the museum collection. Its design includes Christian crosses and an encircling ribbon representing eternity. The artisan and date of origin are not known.

Designs are created by a wax-resist technique similar to the batik process for colouring fabric. First the white part of the design is drawn in wax, then the egg is dipped into a yellow dye bath. The procedure is repeated through a series of colours, each one darker than the one before. Melting the wax exposes the colour underneath.

Once the dying is completed, the contents of the egg can be blown out or removed with a syringe. Often, to avoid breakage, they are left in and allowed to dry up naturally. This can be dangerous with goose eggs, says Fedorak. She recalls her mother experiencing "violent egg explosions at 2 in the morning."



(Photo courtesy of Ukrainian Museum of Canada)

Most *pysanky* are based on traditional designs with artists adding their own interpretations. Some go back more than 1,000 years when a decorated egg, a symbol of new life, was part of the spring celebration. With the adoption of Christianity, the egg became part of Easter celebrations representing new life through Christ.

Common *pysanky* symbols include flowers and birds (spring),

pine branches (strength and endurance) and wheat (good harvest or bounty from God). Fedorak says one of her favourite eggs at the museum features Berehenia, a pre-Christian goddess.

Traditionally, women "wrote" *pysanky* during Lent, accompanying their endeavours by prayer and meditation. Today the whole family may get involved. Eggs are included in food baskets brought to church for blessing on Easter Sunday.

The Ukrainian Museum of Canada was founded in 1936 and has been at its present location since 1980. Its pioneer gallery tells the story of the immigration, settlement, family, community and religious life of Ukrainian pioneers in Canada. There is also an area for temporary exhibits. There are *pysanky* on sale in the gift shop. The museum has branches in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto.

The museum is open year round Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 1-5 p.m. The admission is \$2 adults, \$1 seniors, 50 cents school-age children. The address is 910 Spadina Cres. E., Saskatoon, Sask. S7K 3H5, phone (306) 244-3800.