

Paper Pysanka: Symbolic Representation of Life



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Pysanky are elaborately decorated Ukrainian Easter Eggs. Eggs are very deeply rooted in spring traditions. The egg is symbolic of the sun that warms the Earth. This activity plan would therefore be best executed during lent or early spring. The symbols that adorn these small pieces of art are applied using hot wax on raw eggs and permanent dyes. During this lesson, the participants will be shown samples of *pysanky* and will talk about the symbolism that covers the *pysanka*. The participants will look for symbolism that fits their own individual life stories, e.g., wheat for the farmer.

Two-dimensional paper eggs will be utilized. Symbols will be applied by stamping the paper eggs with acrylic paint. How *pysanky* are shared or used in the Ukrainian tradition will be discussed and the participants will be encouraged to share their completed eggs.

TIME:

Three sessions of forty-five minutes to one hour each. The first session will cover the history of *pysanky*. The second session will be dedicated to the participants' creation of their own personal eggs or group egg. The third session will entail the sharing of the eggs and a discussion of their symbolism.

MATERIALS:

- Black or white 12" x 12" card stock for the paper egg shapes
- Black poster paper for the large group egg (23" x 30")
- Rubber stamps
- Acrylic paints
- Aluminum foil or paper plates
- Markers
- Samples of *pysanky*
- The DVD *Pysanka: The Ukrainian Easter Egg* by Slavko Nowytski
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

Loneliness, boredom, and helplessness are all addressed by bringing individuals together to examine this rich and enduring art form. Discussion of the symbols and the reflection upon and sharing of their meanings will help to encourage group interaction. The participants will be asked to think about what their personal egg would look like. What symbols would be included and why? This is an activity that can be enjoyed by observing as well as by participating and will help to combat boredom. Some participants may wish to work on their own eggs. Others may want to take part by contributing to part of a group egg. Still other participants may just want to observe and listen—although they may change their minds when they see others enjoying themselves. Pairing up participants benefits those that have a need to help others, as well as those that need assistance. Reaching out to others by creating an egg for someone else . . . a friend, great-grandchild, spouse . . . that is personal to the recipient is a new way to communicate with family members and friends outside of the residence and to also interact with them. Using a very intricate and difficult artistic tradition, *pysanky*, as inspiration for paper *pysanky* addresses the sense of helplessness in many ways. Rather than being made with wax and dye on an egg, the artworks are made with adaptive tools on a large medium, paper, with bright colors. This allows people with motor skill and sight issues to more likely participate successfully.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

Dr. Azevedo discusses the life of Anna Mary Moses, a woman from rural America who, in her 70s, was forced to give up intricate needlework due to debilitating arthritis in her hands. Using this experience as an opportunity to adapt and pursue another interest, she started painting bucolic farm life. She became one of the most famous of American artists, “Grandma Moses,” painting prolifically until her death at 101 years old.

Azevedo writes, “Some specially developed programmes [sic] for aged rheumatic patients were inspired by Grandma Moses’ example. It is widely believed that such programmes [sic], besides helping improve the self-esteem of the elderly people, also foster the communication skills, providing a beneficial therapeutic effect. However, it is important that the team conducting such therapies take special care because the focus should not be around a useful or specific item based on artistic production market rules; instead the goal should be oriented to the production process itself. To work with folk art in an environment that does not demand a complete mastering of artistic techniques may produce a beneficial effect in rheumatic and depressed elderly people.”

*--Azevedo, V.F. “Working with Folk Arts May Produce Benefits to Rheumatic Patients: The Case of Grandma Moses.”
Rheumatology 47, no. 8 (2008): 1250.*

Cover photo: Paper pysanka inspired by a real pysanka, both made by Bonnie Tressler.

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Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

1. Introduce the activity to the participants. They will have a chance to look at some eggs that have been decorated in the Ukrainian way, which are called *pysanky* (plural for Easter eggs) or *pysanka* (singular for Easter egg).
2. The activity director, if a *pysanka* artist, now should share his or her background. It is recommended that the DVD *Pysanka: The Ukrainian Easter Egg*, by Slavko Nowytski, should afterwards be shown. If the activity director is not an artist, he or she instead could begin with the DVD. The DVD is fourteen minutes long and delves into the history of *pysanky*. The technique of using hot wax and dyes also is demonstrated. The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* should be introduced at this point, and pages 75, 106-107, and 154 should be marked for closer examination. The book could be passed around the room or a volunteer could take it for a closer look to all the participants.
3. *Pysanky* samples can be passed around or taken to each individual for a closer look.



Pysanka created by Bonnie Tressler.

4. Discuss the symbolism used on the eggs. A list of symbols often used on Ukrainian Easter eggs can be found readily online. The activity director also could use the list of symbols included below. Copies of the list of symbols should be made and distributed to the entire group. An overhead projector also could be used to show the symbols. The participants' names should be included at the top of their lists.

Wheat - life's work, farming

Flowers - beauty and children

Spiders - good fortune, healing powers

Sun - the source of all life

Stars - success

Birds - spring, good harvest, keep evil out

Hearts - love

Fruits and vegetables - good life

Animals - prosperity and wealth

Ladders - the pathway to heaven

Forty Triangles - facets of life, forty days of lent

Circles - protection, eternity

Trees - represent people

Garlands - a desire for freedom

Crosses - the four corners of Earth, resurrection

Grapes - good harvest, a growing church

Bees - hard work and pleasantness

Snakes - protect all who live in the house

Fish - hero/Christ

Water - wealth

Nets - knowledge, motherhood, fishers of men

5. As the activity director goes through the list of symbols, encourage participants to put a check next to each symbol that applies to them or that they would like to use on their own individual eggs. Have the participants think about their lives and how they see themselves and how others see them. How could that perception best be symbolized?

6. In conclusion to the first session, the activity director should collect all the symbol sheets (be sure the participants' names are on them). Tell the participants when the next session is scheduled and where it will be located. Tell them there will be paper egg shapes at the next session for them to create an egg or two.

Note: Before the next session, the activity director should look at the list of symbols and make rubber stamps or rakes (similar to a yard rake in shape and used to drag paint across the paper in parallel lines [may have two or more points of contact]) for each of the symbols. Stamps and rakes are easily cut from fun foam and glued to 1" dowels cut to about 4" lengths for easy gripping.



Creative tools also can be purchased in craft stores and adapted for use by people with limited mobility to create paper psyanky using paint. (Image courtesy of Bonnie Tressler.)

SESSION 2 (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

1. Each participant will have the opportunity to create a paper *pysanka*. The symbols will be applied with stamps and paint on paper eggs. A large group egg will also be made available for those participants who don't wish to make their own eggs.
2. The artist or activity director will demonstrate using a large, 24-inch, egg cut-out how the symbols will be applied to the eggs. Symbols will be applied to the eggs using premade stamps or rakes and acrylic paints. The stamps and rakes will be dipped into the paint and then applied to the eggs. A piece of waste paper for testing the stamp should be at each participant's place.
3. The pre-cut paper eggs should now be handed out. The names of the participants should be written on the back of the paper eggs before starting out. The supplies should be set out for groups of two or three participants. The participants must have enough space to lay their 12-inch eggs flat in front of them and have the paints, stamps, and rakes within easy reach. Using the list of symbols that the participants completed at the first session, the activity director can customize which group will need which symbols.
4. Aluminum foil or paper plates should be used as paint pallets. A dollop of acrylic paint can be squeezed onto the pallet and the stamp can then be dipped into the paint. Test the stamp on waste paper. If satisfied, the participant should then apply the stamp to the egg. Volunteers will be needed to assist with this process. Be sure to have plenty of paper towels on hand for quick clean up.
5. After the paint has dried (acrylic paint dries quickly), markers may be used to add more details to the eggs if so desired.



Actual pysanka and the paper representation it inspired, made by Bonnie Tressler.



Paper pysanka made with paper punches by a resident in an elder care facility in Jamestown, ND. (Image courtesy of Bonnie Tressler.)

SESSION 3 (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

1. The participants can now share their eggs with one another. This should be done first in small groups and then with the entire group. The activity director should make the group sharing into a discussion by asking questions and fielding responses. For example, “How many of you included wheat on your eggs? Myra, what does the wheat mean to you? Anyone else include wheat because it reminded them of the bread their mother used to bake?”

2. *Pysanky* are often blessed. Depending on the facility, now would be a good time to have the group’s eggs blessed. The activity director could also introduce the idea of the Ukrainian Easter basket, which typically consisted of embroidered cloth that is freshly ironed and placed in the bottom of the basket, followed by sausages and loaves of bread and fresh-baked rolls, as well as ground horseradish (a sample of the basket would be even better than a description). Ask for examples of family Easter basket traditions from amongst the participants.

3. In wrapping up, it is recommended that the participants display their eggs as a group or in their rooms or apartments.

AUTHOR • BONNIE TRESSLER:

Bonnie is a teaching artist who lives in Jamestown, North Dakota. Bonnie spent the first twenty-five years of her life in northeast Minneapolis. The neighborhood was a rich blend of Eastern European immigrants. Her family made sauerkraut, visited Kramarczuk’s for fresh poppy seed and homemade sausages, and visited the local Ukrainian gift shop for *pysanky* lessons and supplies. She created her first *pysanka* at age eight. Bonnie continues to create eggs for family members and friends.

(Artwork by Bonnie Tressler. All photos, unless otherwise indicated, courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

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