

Washington's first "pysanka weekend" attracts specialists, collectors

by Olenka and Jurij Dobczansky

WASHINGTON – Sixty pysanka specialists, lobbyists and collectors from across North America gathered at the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine on March 8 for the first Pysanka Symposium in the United States. Five presenters shared their stories of creating, documenting, collecting and preserving the pysanka and its legacy. A very receptive audience joined in a lively exchange of ideas on the ancient art and living tradition of pysanka writing.

The Pysanka Symposium began with welcoming remarks by Jurij Dobczansky, who conceived and spearheaded the event. "Our goal in organizing this symposium was to provide a forum for pysanka specialists, writers and connoisseurs. We wanted to share our collective knowledge and experience and document it in an accessible way. Pysanka writers today creatively reconstruct traditional patterns into individual works of art leading some to declare it is no longer a 'folk art.' The explosion of information about the pysanka challenges us to ensure that the essence of traditional pysanka writing doesn't become obscured," he said.

Dr. Andrew Sorokowski, known to readers of *The Ukrainian Weekly* through his column "CrossCurrents," introduced the speakers and served as moderator of the symposium. In introducing Helen Badulak of Reading, Pa., Dr. Sorokowski noted that she represented the creation phase of pysanky.

Ms. Badulak spoke about the life of a pysanka artist and displayed a selection of her exquisite work. The winner of numerous awards and distinctions including Master of Pysanka by the International Egg Art Guild, Ms. Badulak conducted a Pysanka Master Class on Sunday with her daughter Nina Badulak-McDaniel.

The second speaker, Orysia Paszczak Tracz, is a writer whose column, "The things we do ...," also is familiar to readers of *The Ukrainian Weekly*. A researcher, lecturer and translator based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, she spoke about the traditions rooted in pagan and Christian rituals, as well as several modern-day interpretations of pysanky in North America.

Ms. Tracz noted that, like so many other Ukrainian traditions in both North America and Ukraine, the pysanka has evolved into a symbol of Ukrainian identity. She illustrated her talk "From the sublime to the ridiculous" with numerous examples – the ridiculous represented by a set of golf balls with pysanka motifs.

These two speakers set the stage for the main issues discussed at the conference: the role of the pysanka as a traditional ritual object versus the pysanka as a personal expression of an artist's creativity. Should an egg, exquisitely decorated in the reverse batik method but devoid of traditional symbolism, still be called a pysanka? Or does it merely become a decorated egg? Does there have to be a connection to Ukraine or to the traditional Ukrainian Easter basket for an egg to be called a pysanka? Can another object, such as a golf ball or a Christmas tree ornament with traditional pysanka motifs, be called a pysanka? What about whimsically designed eggs that employ traditional and non-traditional patterns and motifs?

After a brief refreshment break, during which intense conversations continued, Dr. Sorokowski introduced Joan Brander from Richmond, British Columbia. Ms. Brander is a pysanka artist, instructor and the founder of Baba's Beeswax, a popular website devoted to the pysanka.

She presented her book "About the



A view of some of the pysanky in the collection of Luba Chornodolsky (by Olenka Kuzminsky and Maria Hawrych).

Pysanka – it is written! A bibliography." Her colorfully illustrated guide includes over 200 books, audio-visuals and articles in Ukrainian, English, German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and Japanese. Ms. Brander also displayed books, clippings and photographs of her work in teaching and popularizing the pysanka on Canada's Pacific Coast.

Dr. Andriy Hornjatkevyc said his illustrated talk centered on the collection and preservation aspects of pysanky. A linguist by profession, Dr. Hornjatkevyc's interest in pysanky comes from his father, Damian's, collection, which he preserved and whose recording in electronic format by the Ukrainian Folklore Chairs at the University of Alberta he facilitated. He described how his father collected pysanky and embroidery in western Ukraine and safeguarded them during the second world war. He managed to bring the collections with him when he immigrated to the United States, despite customs officials damaging some in an effort to determine whether they were real eggs.

Dr. Hornjatkevyc demonstrated how his father's pysanka collection can now be viewed online from any angle rotating them 360 degrees (<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/uvp/pages/media/edpysanky/images/dh1/dh1.htm>). In addition, Dr. Hornjatkevyc announced that he had brought both collections from Edmonton, in order to give them a permanent home at The Ukrainian Museum in New York immediately after the symposium.

The last speaker was Lubow Wolynetz, the representative of the Ukrainian Museum who facilitated Dr. Hornjatkevyc's donation. A librarian by profession, she is presently a professor and museum curator of the Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, Conn., as well as the folk art curator of The Ukrainian Museum in New York.

Ms. Wolynetz focused on the preservation of pysanky for posterity based on more than 20 years' experience organizing The Ukrainian Museum's annual pysanka exhibit. In her illustrated presentation she traced the evolution of the very popular exhibit and the ways in which the museum strives to make each year's exhibit unique by featuring the pysanka's link to other elements of Ukrainian culture – Easter "pasky" (breads) or embroidered "rushnyky" (ritual cloths), for example.

Additional features

Besides the program of speakers, the Pysanka Symposium featured a three-part exhibit designed and created by Larysa Kurylas and Olenka Dobczanska.

The display case titled "Passing on the Pysanka Legacy" chronicled 25 years of

pysanka workshops conducted by Mr. Dobczansky at the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine in the form of photographs, flyers, press clippings and related publications.

"Paths to the Pysanka" presented pysanky from eight pysanka-writers and collectors: Luba Chornodolsky, Jurij Dobczansky, Olha Kurylas, Lesia Mandzia, Ihor Masnyk, Nadia O'Shea, Ihor Slabicky and Sofika Zielyk.

The exhibit and the accompanying booklet underscored the fact that everyone who has written, collected or inherited pysanky has a unique story to tell. Some are hooked the minute they see a pysanka emerging from beneath the blackened beeswax. Some are intrigued by the challenge of creating the "perfect pysanka." Some cherish pysanky as gifts that bring memories of friends or loved ones. For others, pysanky evoke a cherished family tradition spanning several generations.

The third exhibit, "Tools for the Pysanka," focused on the absolute simplicity of tools and techniques required for pysanka-writing. It highlighted the development of the electric kistka by Wasyl Ohar of Detroit. This "New World" innovation has significantly changed the way pysanky are written today. The electric kistka is now widely used even in the "Old World."

A map, "Pysanky of Ukraine," based on information and illustrations from Vira Manko's book "The Ukrainian Folk Pysanka" was displayed at the entrance. It gives an impressionistic portrait of the

regional variations in decorative patterns. These exhibits are on display through May 19.

At the conclusion of the symposium the main participants and members of the organizing committee enjoyed a dinner next door at St. Josaphat Ukrainian Catholic Seminary, hosted by the seminary's rector, The Rev. Robert Hitchens.

Mr. Dobczansky again thanked the speakers and members of the organizing committee, including: Zenowia Choma and Norm Thompson, who produced the handsome program booklet; Christine Paclawsky, who assisted with announcements and media publicity; Oksana Sorokowski, who managed the book sale table; and all the community organizations that financially supported the symposium. Conversations continued late into the evening. Among the many ideas voiced that evening was the need for another such event to explore those aspects not fully discussed at the symposium.

Sunday events

The symposium was followed on Sunday by two hands-on pysanka-decorating workshops, held in conjunction with the annual Easter Bazaar at the Holy Family Parish.

Thirteen pysanka-writers attended the Pysanka Master Class with Ms. Badulak, and the 25th annual Pysanka Workshop for pysanka-writers of all ages and levels with Mr. Dobczansky attracted a total of 63 participants.

Overall, participants of the symposium, the workshop and the master class were very positive about their experience. The Ukrainian Service of the Voice of America recorded several interviews with participants and presenters, which were included in a special broadcast to Ukraine on March 19. (The full Ukrainian-language text and a video clip may be viewed at <https://author.voanews.com/ukrainian/2008-03-19-voa8.cfm>.)

Mr. Dobczansky observed at the outset: "Often it is asked why we invest so much time and effort into decorating a fragile eggshell. Were you to ask the over 800 individuals who have participated in our workshops you would probably hear 800 reasons. But above all, you would readily sense an excitement and joy in learning this craft and its traditions. Yes, it appears the eggshell is indeed fragile, but the legacy of the pysanka is quite strong."



At the Pysanka Symposium (from left) are: Andrew Sorokowski, Lubow Wolynetz, Andriy Hornjatkevyc, Joan Brander, Orysia Paszczak Tracz, Jurij Dobczansky and Helen Badulak.