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Community

TRADITION

Egging kids to keep craft alive

By MICHELLE HOPKINS
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Richmond's Joan Brander uses a long, slim tool called a kistka and fills the small funnel-like tip with clear beeswax. Then, using the sharp tip, the artist/author draws a thin black line on a hollow, cooked egg.

This is the first step in creating intricate and colourful pysanky eggs.

Brander, who is of Ukrainian descent, learned this ancient art form from her grandmother and mother when she was four years old.

"It was a cultural tradition in my family and, as I got older, I got more intricate in my designs," said Brander from her Richmond home, where she conducts some of her workshops.

Her home is filled with pysanky eggs — her collection includes some rare and unique pysanky eggs made from goose, ostrich and chicken eggs — as well as dozens of books on the subject.

Brander opens the glass shelving to show some very elaborate ones using age-old techniques and some rather whimsical ones such as Humpty Dumpty.

Brander herself is the author of *Pysanky on Paper: An Activity Book for Children* and more recently, *About the Pysanka: It Is Written*.

It isn't only at Easter that she enjoys creating and teaching about pysanky eggs.

Pysanky eggs pre-date Christianity. Initially, the tradition of pysanky eggs was part of the pagan religion of worshipping the sun, moon, stars, rain, fire and wind.

"The tradition started as a celebration of spring," she added. "People in the Ukraine have been decorating eggs using beeswax and dyes for generations."

"In ancient times, pysanky eggs were dyed using onion skins for yellow, beets or berries for red and walnut husks for black."

Today, most artists use chemical dyes but Brander recalled her grandmother using coloured crepe paper and boiling it with vinegar to extract colours.

During her youth, her family would bring the pysanky eggs and foodstuff to church to have the priest bless them — a custom still very much alive in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Historically, eggs were left to dry out, not hollowed out as they are today, in an attempt to ward off evil spirits.

"For example, people used to think that a pysanky egg left in a beehive would ensure the bees would work harder and produce more honey," Brander said. "Or if they were placed in a plow, it would mean the farmer would have a great crop."

Then, with the coming of Christianity in the Ukraine, the church merged the pagan ceremony of welcoming spring and rebirth, to Easter, the resurrection of Christ.

For all of the reasons and more, Brander wants to preserve the true pysanky egg. She explained that the word pysanky comes from the Ukrainian word pysary, which means to write.

"I want to preserve the Ukraine culture and tradition so I discourage departing from the true pysanky egg," she said. "I don't encourage putting a Canucks emblem or a McDonalds happy face ... if you do, that's fine, but don't call it a pysanky egg."

For a true pysanky egg, there are three patterns — geomet-



Michelle Hopkins/Richmond News

Joan Brander shows off some of her pysanky eggs, above and below. The eggs are a Ukrainian tradition.

ric, floral and animal motifs.

It takes patience to create a colourful egg, but Brander insists anyone can learn.

"With the proper tools and instruction, young children to seniors can learn to do this," she said. "It's a true labour of love each and every time."

For more than two decades now, Brander has been teaching about her craft in elementary schools, community and senior centres, arts centres as well as in her home workshop.

Learn to create your own pysanky Ukrainian Easter eggs during the Spring Break Pysanky 4 Kids workshops, which began Monday and run until March 21. Pre-registration is required by calling 604-27-8169. For more information, visit www.bababeeswax.com.



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