

Cosmomorphic Motifs: Symbols which depict the sun, stars and Milky Way. The most common is the eight-pointed star, a sun motif which symbolizes the ancient god Dazhboh

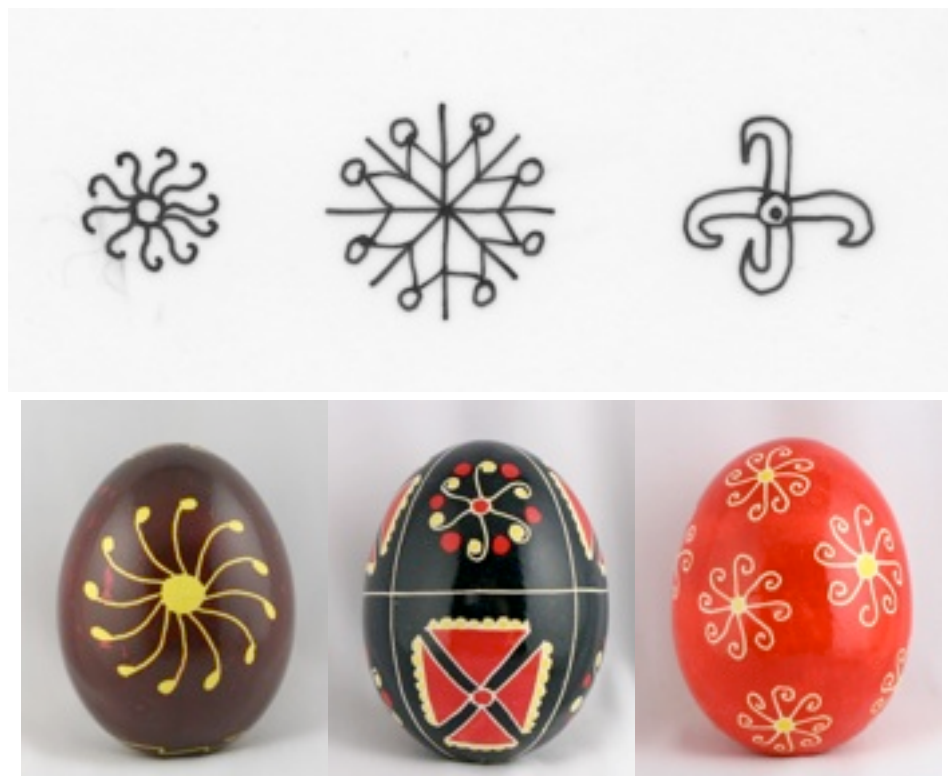
Sun

The sun was hugely important to ancient Ukrainians, and representations of it were common in all of the traditional folk arts, including *pysanky*. *Pysanky* were written to celebrate the spring holiday, a celebration of the return of the sun after a long, dark winter.

A variety of sun symbols can be found on *pysanky*, including horses and stags (thought to carry the sun across the sky), and birds (in some legends the sun itself was a bird). The most common, though, are the eight-pointed star,



circles (with or without rays of light), and variations on the *svarha* (broken cross), which depicted the movement of the sun across the sky.



Phytomorphic Motifs: The most common Ukrainian motifs are those depicting plants and their parts: leaves, flowers and fruit. Among the most ancient is the *vazon*, a “tree of life” motif, whose outstretched branches mirror the arms of the goddess *Berehynia*.

Flowers

Flower symbols are frequently found on *pysanky*, and fall into three general categories: *vazon* (flowers in a flowerpot), *ruzhi* (or *rozhi*, eight petal flowers), and other. The first are a *berehynia* symbol; the second, sun symbols; the last are discussed here.

Traditional *pysanky* abound with flowers. These include named flowers, which often bear at least a passing resemblance to their botanical namesakes: carnations, bells, poppies, daisies, violets, and sunflowers. Exceptions are tulips and orchids: these names were assigned to any “exotic” looking flowers. There are also simple “*kvitky*,” which are flower-like motifs, but do not resemble any specific flowers.

Flowers are said to be a female symbol, signifying wisdom, elegance and beauty.



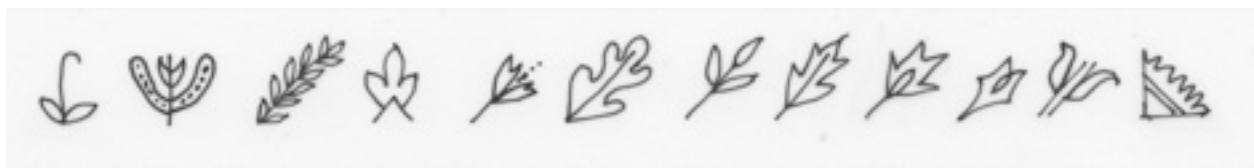
Leaves

Plants could be represented in whole or in part. Most often, it was only the leaves that were depicted. They were generally elongated, and could be simple or compound, smooth or faceted.

There were several types of leaves that were distinct and named. Oak leaves were shown with wavy contours, and sometimes interspersed with acorns. In Ancient Ukrainian mythology, the oak and its leaves symbolize *Perun*, the god of lightning; to honor him, the Slavs burned fires of oak logs and branches. The oak carries his attributes: strength and power.



The clover or *trylystok* (three-leaf), with its characteristic shape, is commonly found on *pysanky*. Those from Podillia or the Kherson region use the first name. It is most commonly seen on *pysanky* from the Poltava and Middle Dnipro regions, where it is called the *trylystok*.



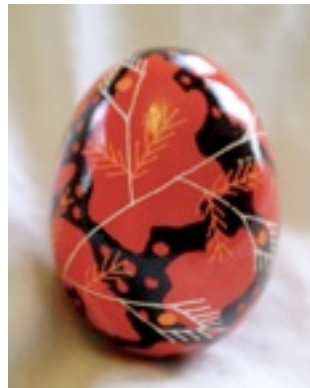


Plants

Plants, like animals, were sometimes portrayed whole, but more often as their parts. Leaves or flowers were the most common manifestations, but plants could be represented as branches (*hilyky*).

In the mountainous regions of Ukraine, pine or spruce branches were often depicted. The evergreen nature of these plants meant they symbolized long life.

In other regions, the *sozonka* was a favorite motif. It appears similar to a pine branch, but without branching. The *sozonka* is the horsetail plant, the first greenery to appear in the spring. It is a symbol of spring, life, and rebirth.



Ruzha

The *ruzha*, or *rozha*, is not a rose. It is a representation of the mallow flower, although not an accurate one. An actual mallow flower has 5 petals, while a *ruzha* symbol almost always has 8. (Variations with six petals are much less common.)

It is a variation of the eight pointed star, a sun symbol, and is one of the most common motifs found on *pysanky*. It is one of the motifs that can be found in any region of Ukraine.



Vazon

The “tree of life,” is widely used in *pysanky* designs. It can be represented in many ways. Sometimes it appears as two deer on either side of a pine tree. More often it manifests as a flower pot (“*vazon*”), filled with leaves and flowers.

The pot itself is usually a rectangle, triangle or a rhomboid (symbolic of the earth), and is covered with dots (seeds) and dashes (water). Many branches grow out of it, in a symmetric fashion, with leaves and flowers. This plant is a *berehynia* (goddess) symbol.



Zoomorphic Motifs: Animals are often depicted on *pysanky*, but usually in a stylized manner: wolves' teeth, ram's horns, duck's feet. Birds are an exception; they are portrayed perched, in full profile.

Birds

Birds were the harbingers of spring, and are often depicted on *pysanky*. Some ancient beliefs associated the ancient sun god with birds, and his handprint was said to be similar to a bird's claw.

Birds were thought to be able to fly to heaven, and are sometimes pictured carrying letters in their beaks as they fly upwards.

However, birds were usually pictured perched, not flying, on *pysanky* (with the exception of swallows, who are always shown in flight). While most animals are depicted on *pysanky* only by their most characteristic features, wild birds were shown whole, and in profile.

Domestic fowl, on the other hand, were often represented by their parts. One will frequently find duck or chicken feet on *pysanky*.



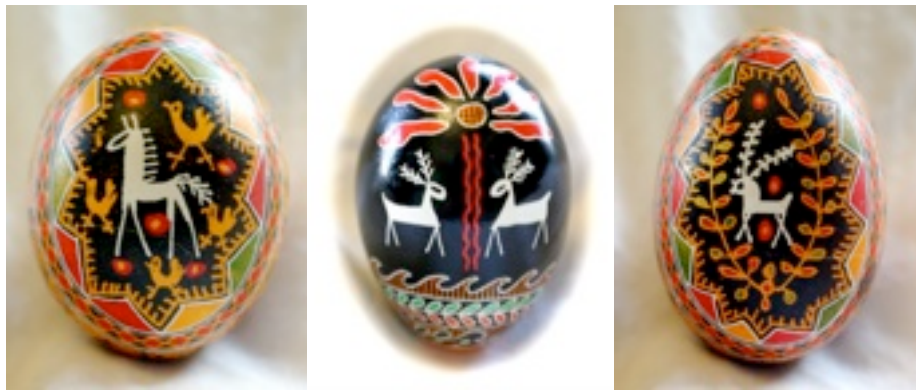
Deer/Horses

The stag and the horse are both sun symbols, and can be found on *pysanky* from the Hutsul regions.

In ancient Ukrainian mythology, it was believed that the sun remained underground at night, and that the stag carried it up into the heavens on its antlers every morning. Because of its gift of heavenly fire, the stag was felt to be charitable, and linked to the development of farming, trade and skills.

The stag carried the sun to the west, towards the land of death. This led to the belief that the stag carried the souls of the dead to the nether world.

In later times, these beliefs were carried over to horses as well.



Duck and Chicken Feet

In Ukrainian designs it is typical to depict only the most characteristic features of an animal, rather than the entire animal. Often this results in only “heads and paws” being depicted. While chickens are sometime portrayed whole on *pysanky*, ducks and geese never are. They are usually represented by their feet or, less commonly, their necks.

Many of what we now consider to be “feet” may have had earlier meanings that were lost over time, and the symbols renamed. Some scholars consider these symbols to be versions of the lotus or trident. These same symbols may, in different regions, be interpreted as leaves or plants.

Moszynski tells us that the ancient Slavs believed that *navy*, the souls of those who died unbaptized, left bird tracks in the ashes. *Navy* were portrayed as giant, featherless roosters, and they were said to attack pregnant women and children, sucking their blood, and to drink the milk of cattle. Charms against them included salt, fire or an axe.



Fish

The fish symbol is relatively uncommon on traditional *pysanky*. It is an ancient symbol of life, health and fertility. Pagan cultures associated the fish with vigilance. Fish feature often in Ukrainian folk tales; in many stories, a fish assists the hero in his quest.

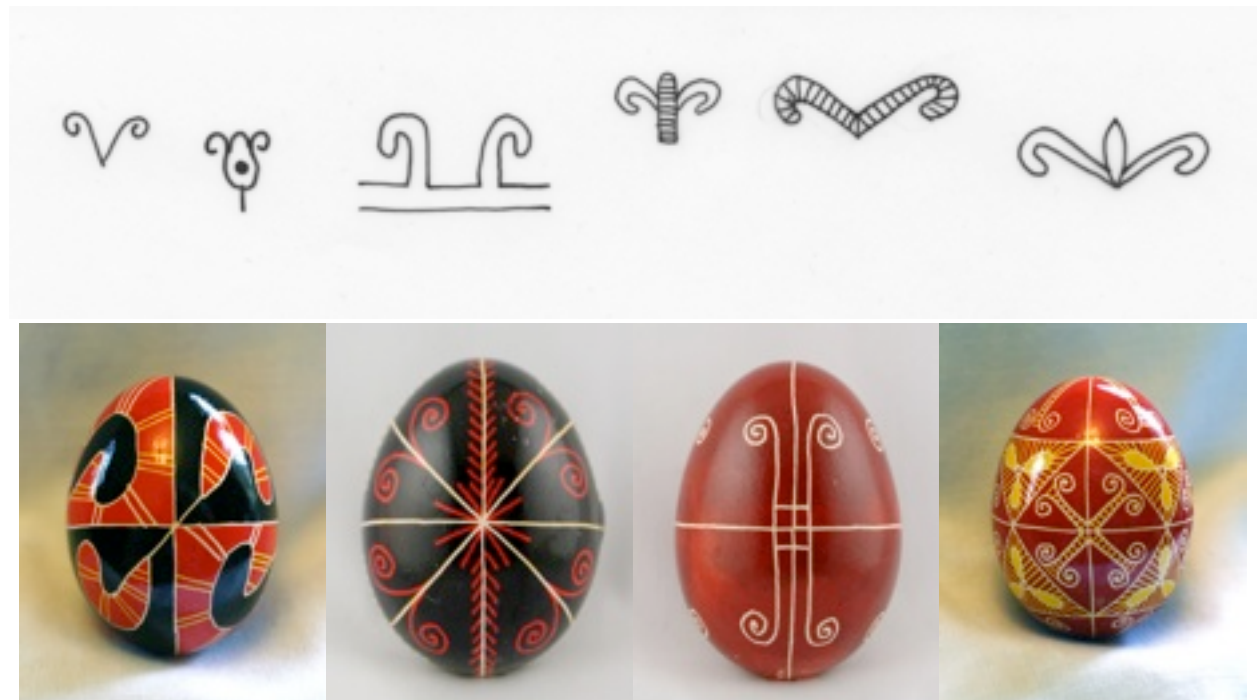
In more recent times, the fish has taken on Christian connotations. The fish is said to symbolize Christ.



Rams' Horns

Animals were usually represented by their parts; in the case of rams, it was their horns. The ram's horn is an ancient symbol, being found on Trypillian pottery from the Neolithic era.

The ram (sheep) was a symbol of spring rebirth, as well as of male fertility. Animal motifs are thought to bestow the best characteristics of the animal onto the bearer. In the case of the ram, these are leadership and strength.



Wolves' Teeth

The "teeth" motif is usually called "wolves' teeth," but can also be known as "hare's teeth," or simply "teeth." This is usually a border motif, and consists of a row of triangles.



Scevomorphic Motifs: The second most common group of Ukrainian motifs is those representing man-made objects: rakes, combs, ladders, windows, keys. Bread-related motifs are included here.

Rakes

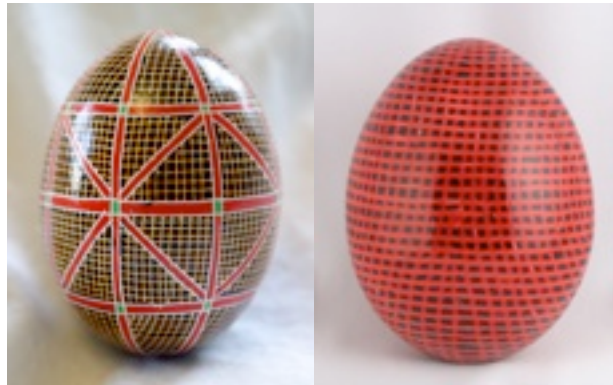
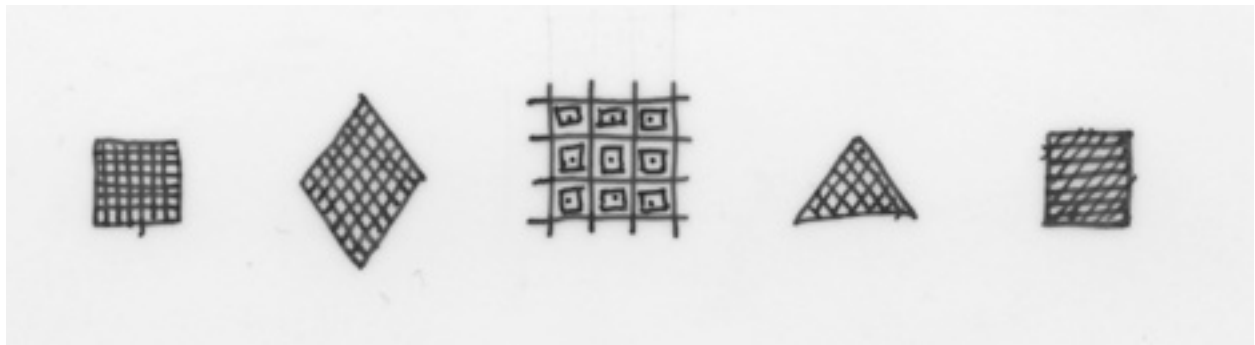
Rakes are an agricultural symbol, but not because they are farming implements. They are actually water symbols, and represent clouds and rain. They usually are shaped like triangles, with the dashed lines representing rain itself.

Sometimes the triangles are surrounded by dots. These dots symbolize seeds, which are watered by the rain and then grow to yield a bountiful crop.



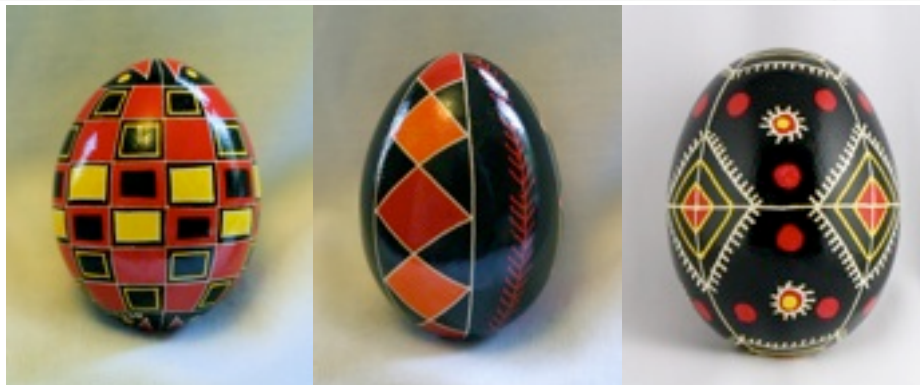
Resheto

Resheto is the Ukrainian word for a net design which resembles grating or a sieve. Such netting is an ancient design which dates back to the Paleolithic Era, and symbolized the goddess of the sky.



Rhombs and Triangles

Rhombs, squares and triangles symbolized plowed fields. "Dashed" versions could also symbolize rain.



Abstract Poetical Images: A wide group of designs depicting mythological and folkloric personages and metaphors. These include depictions of the *berehynia* and *zmiya*, crosses, and the *bezkonachnyk*, a meandering, never-ending line.

Goddess/ Berehynia

The goddess motif is an ancient one, and most commonly found in *pysanky* from Polissia or Western Podillia. The *berehynia* was believed to be the source of life and death. On the one hand, she is a life giving mother, the creator of heaven and all living things, and the mistress of heavenly water (rain), upon which the world relies for fertility and fruitfulness. On the other hand, she was the merciless controller of destinies.

The goddess is sometimes depicted with arms upraised, and the arms vary in number but are always in pairs: 2, 4 or 6. This is similar to the appearance of the Christian Oranta. *Pysanky* with this motif were called "*bohyn'ky*" (little goddesses) or "*zhuchky*" (beetles), the latter because they are similar in appearance to the Cyrillic letter (zh).



Sometimes the *berehynia* has become abstracted, and is represented by a plant--*vazon*--the tree of life. Her arms become the branches and flowers, and she is firmly rooted in a flowerpot.



The most common depiction of the great goddess is a composition containing "*kucheri*" (curls). The *berehynia* may be seen perched on a curl, or a curl may be given wings. Often there is a crown on the *berehynia's* head. These compositions are given the folk names of "queen," "princess," "scythe," "drake," or simply "wings."



Zmiya/Serpent

The *Zmiya*, or Serpent, was the god of the earth itself, that which lies beneath our feet. He was the god of water, soil, and the minerals within the earth. His domain was this underground kingdom, a source of wealth. The serpent had attributes of intelligence, immortality, healing powers, and the ability to impregnate all living thing.

Ancient Ukrainians prayed to the Serpent-god and decorated *pysanky* with his symbols in hope of healthy livestock, swarming bees, and fertile poultry.

The symbol of the Serpent was the “*sumha*” (letter S), along with wavy lines and spirals.



Spirals

The spiral is a powerful motif, and is an ancient depiction of the *Zmiya* (Serpent), the god of water and earth.

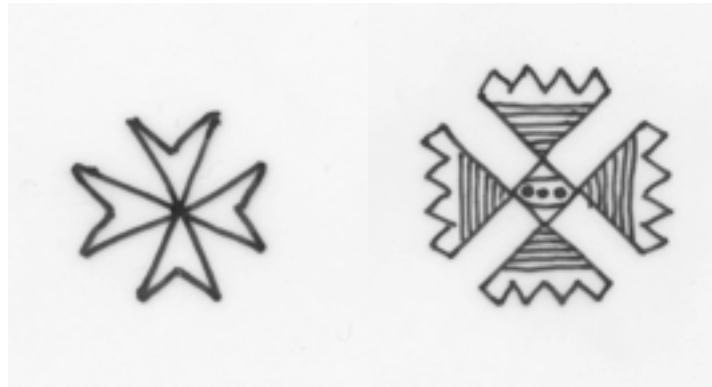
The spiral was drawn onto *pysanky* as a protective motif. It was said to protect a house and its occupants from evil spirits: those evil spirits which entered the house would be drawn to the spiral, and then trapped in its endless curves.



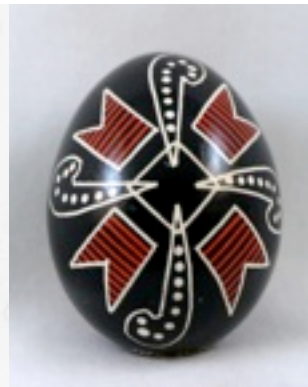
Crosses

The cross is an ancient symbol, a simple geometric form whose meaning has changed much over time. Early crosses had arms of equal length. In ancient agricultural times, the cross symbolized the god of the earth. It was also a sun symbol, with the *svarha*, or broken cross, depicting the movement of the sun through the sky.

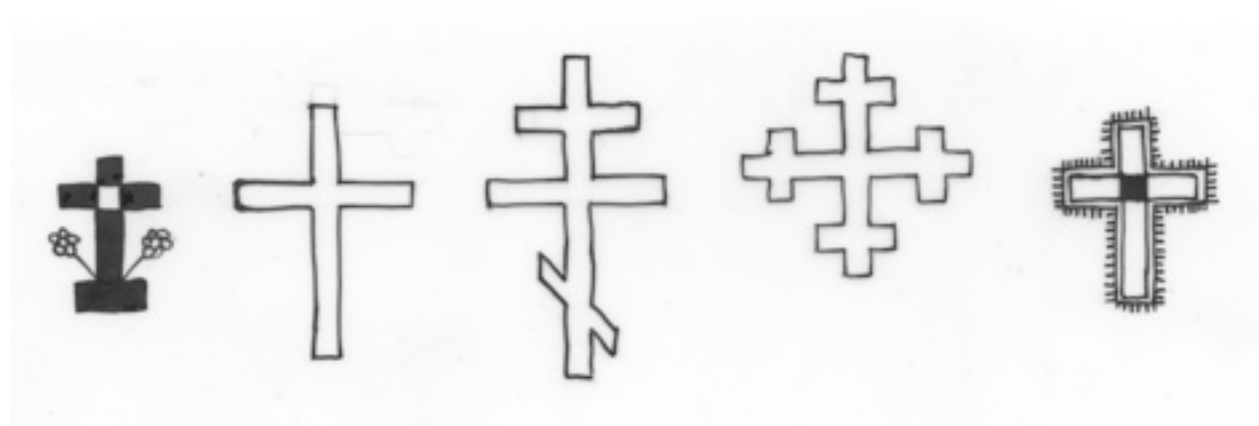
The “sloping” cross, X, was a goddess symbol.



Often the two crosses were combined, symbolizing the notion of the male and female union as the driving force of life.



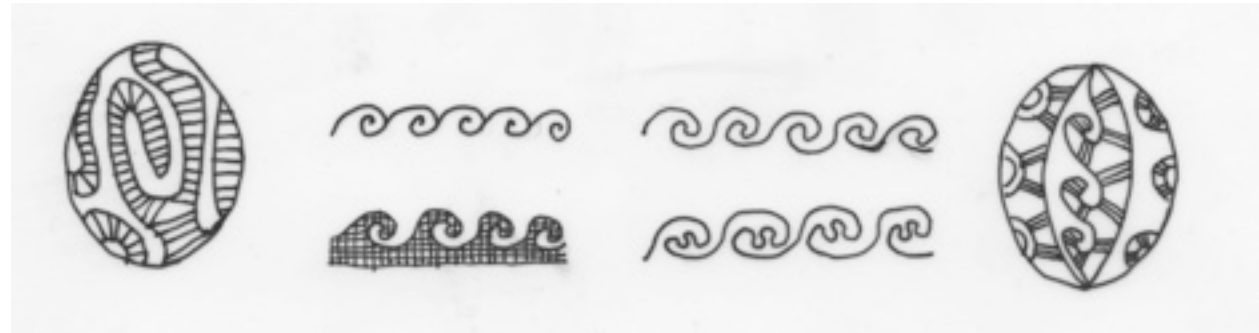
In more recent times, the cross has come to take on a Christian meaning. While the ancient equilateral crosses are still most commonly seen on *pysanky*, the Christian cross, with its unequal arms, can sometimes be seen on Hutsul *pysanky*.



Bezkoniecznyk

The *bezkoniecznyk*, or meander, a wavy line, can be found on Trypillian ceramics from the Neolithic Era. It is a representation of eternity, having no beginning or end.

In eastern and central Ukraine, the *bezkoniecznyk* is a prominent motif, consisting of large waves which encompass the entire *pysanka*. In western Ukraine, the *bezkoniecznyk* is less prominent, and usually serves merely as a border for the primary design on the egg.





Hearts

Hearts are a universal symbol of love, and they have this meaning when placed on *pysanky*, too. The heart is also the symbol of the goddess *Rozhanitsa*, the Slavic goddess of birth.



Church and Heraldic Images: With the coming of Christianity, churches began appearing on pysanky. Also present are heraldic images, for example flags and *tryzyb*.

Churches

Churches can often be found on the *pysanky* written in the Carpathian regions of Ukraine, primarily Hutsul and Bukovynian. They may be a truly Christian motif, unlike most others, which were adapted from earlier pagan motifs.

Churches are often highly abstracted; a series of triangles or quadrangles piled one atop the other. Smaller church-type motifs can symbolize as *dzvinytsia*, or bell-tower.

More recent folk *pysanky* have included larger and more intricate churches. These usually have three towers, each with crosses, windows and doors.



Designs Drawn by Folk Artist Arnie Klein

Information and *pysanky* by Luba Petrusha

Editing by Max Walters

Information from: Mykhailo Selivachov. *Folk Designs of Ukraine*. Doncaster, Australia/Kyiv, Ukraine: Bayda Books/Ivan Honchar Museum, 1995.