



Pysanka Symbols and Motifs



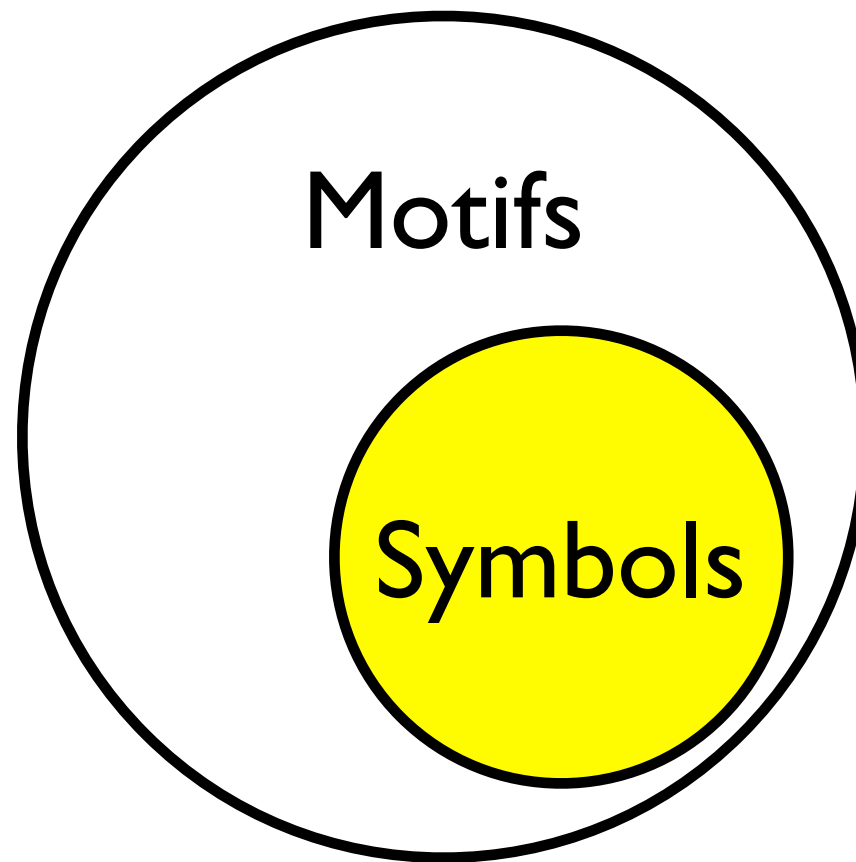
Motif: a single or repeated design, a decorative element

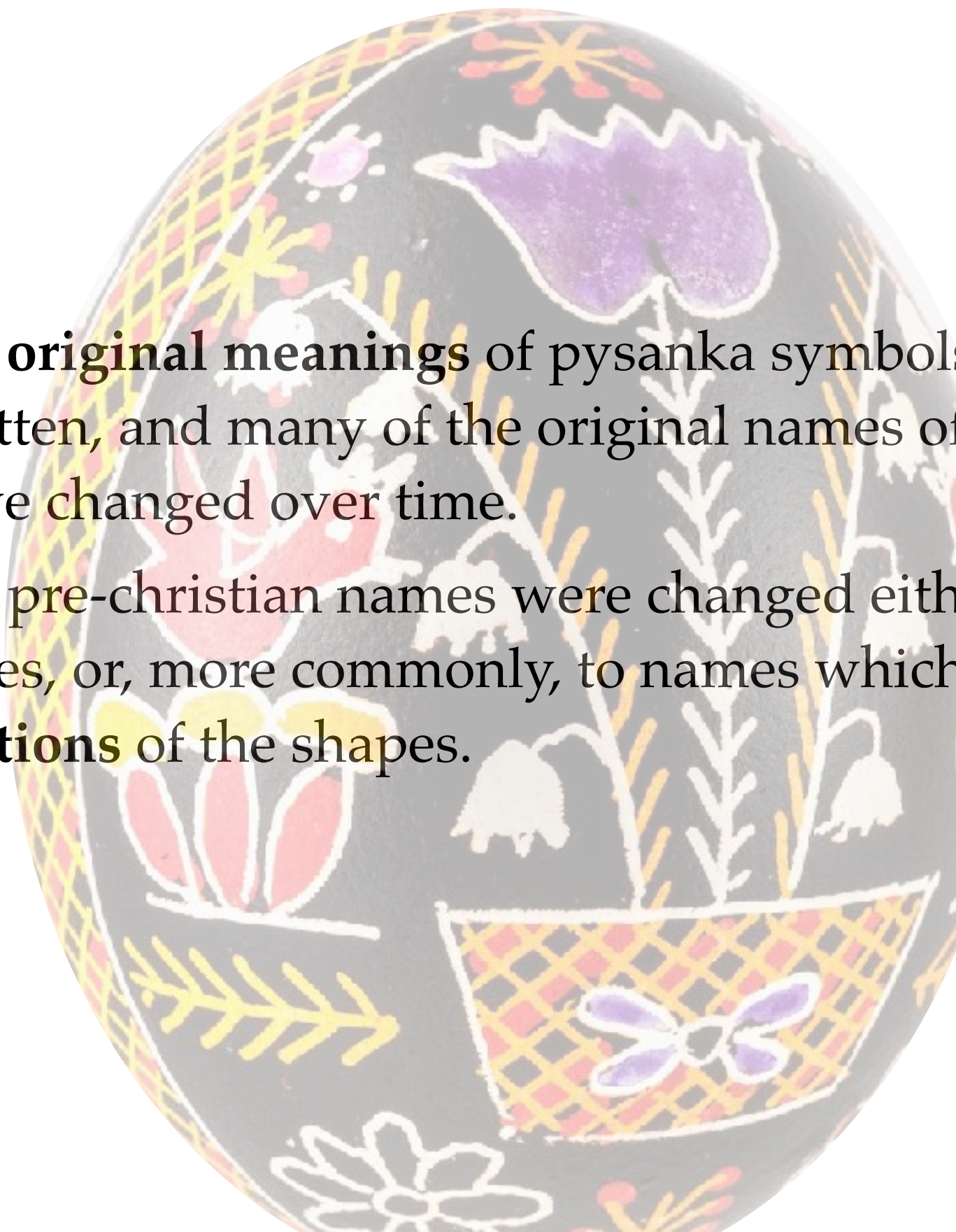


Symbol: a motif that stands for something else by reason of convention or tradition



Not all motifs are symbols;
many are purely decorative





Many of the **original meanings** of pysanka symbols have been lost or forgotten, and many of the original names of the symbols have **changed over time**.

The original **pre-christian** names were changed either to more **christian** ones, or, more commonly, to names which reflected **reinterpretations** of the shapes.



Old: kucheri with wings

New: “piavky” (leeches)



Old: hand of god

New: “pavy” (peacocks)



Old: waves/zmiya

New: “livi rukavy” (left sleeves)

The symbols and motifs found on pysanky do not exist in isolation—the same ones are often found on other types of **Ukrainian folk art**: weaving, embroidery, wood carving, beadwork, metalwork, ceramics, leather craft, etc.

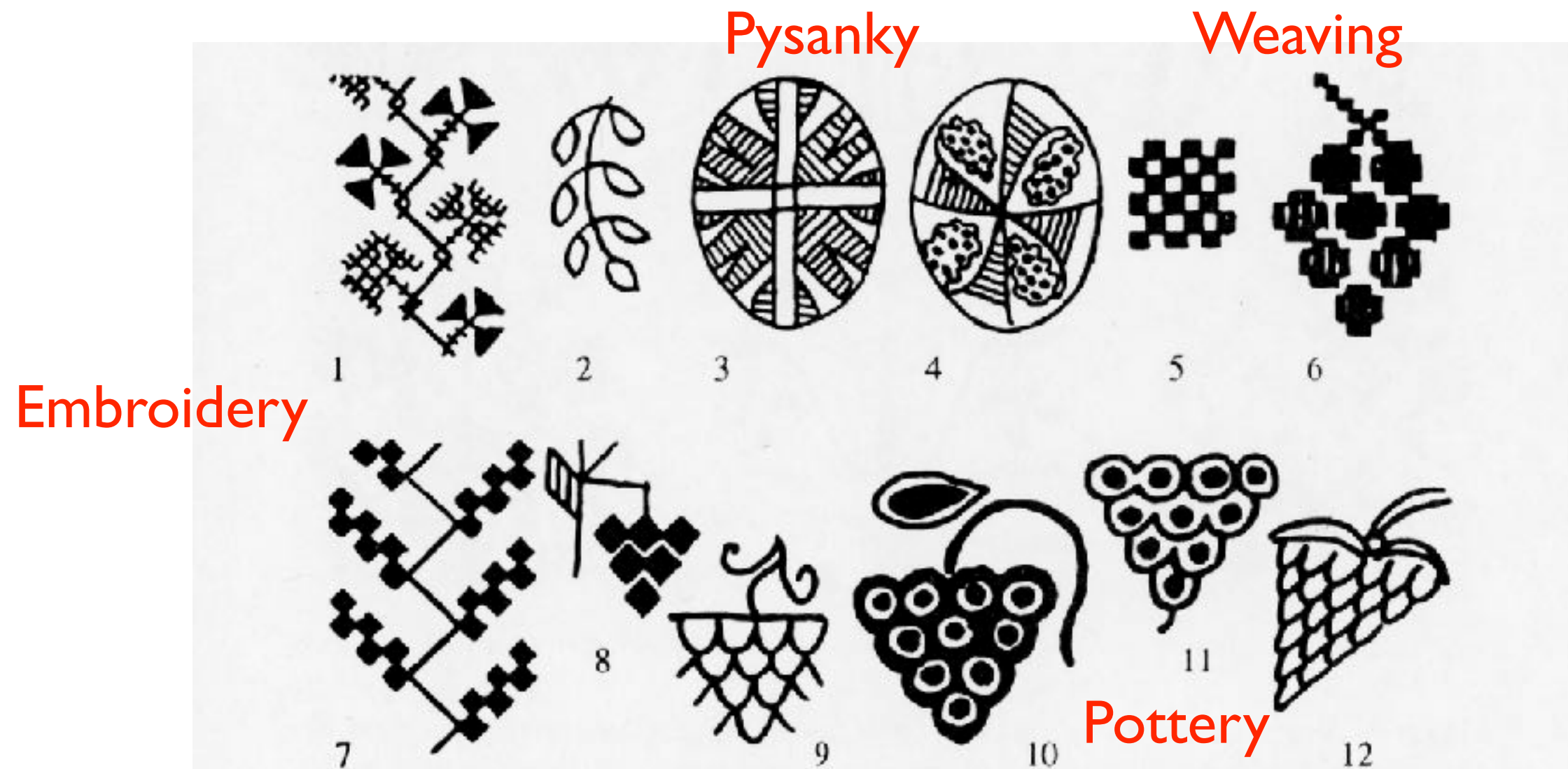


Figure VII. Variations of the *vynohrad* (grape) motif: 1) embroidery: Chernivtsi; 2 – 3) Easter egg: Vinnytsia; 4) *vynohradom* (E. egg: Lviv); 5 – 6) weaving: Chernihiv, Volhynia; 7 – 8) embroidery: Poltava; 9 – 10) pottery: Poltava; 11 – 12) pottery: Vinnytsia, I.-Frankivsk.



Why were pysanky written?

Pysanky were written for different reasons at different times. In **pre-modern** times, pysanky were considered to be folk magic and they were written for talismanic reasons:

1. to ensure the return of the **sun** and of spring
2. to ensure **fertility** of the fields and livestock
3. for **protection** from various dangers – from fire and other catastrophes, and from the various devils and demons that might be about

The symbols on folk pysanky reflect these purposes. The most common symbols are sun symbols, but we also find representations of the old gods and water symbols.

In the **modern era**, from the mid-1800s onward, pysanky were often written for **commercial** reasons (to sell).

This is still often the case, especially among the traditional pysankarky of Hutsulshchyna, Bukovyna and Pokuttia.





More often, nowadays, they are written simply for their pure beauty and **decorative** value. In the words of Keats

*A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness*

And, as Emerson more succinctly noted, “*Beauty is its own excuse for being.*”



How are pysanky read?

A pysanka is NOT a rebus or detailed hidden message. Not every motif on it has a hidden meaning. Many motifs are simply **decorative**.

A pysanka should be considered **as a whole**, and the overall meaning intuited from the main motifs. *As noted before, the symbols on pysanky are generally for protection, fertility, and to call out spring.*

And, it should be noted, these interpretations are often guesswork—we don't really know the meanings behind everything that our ancestors did.



Questions?

Animal Motifs

Zoomorphic

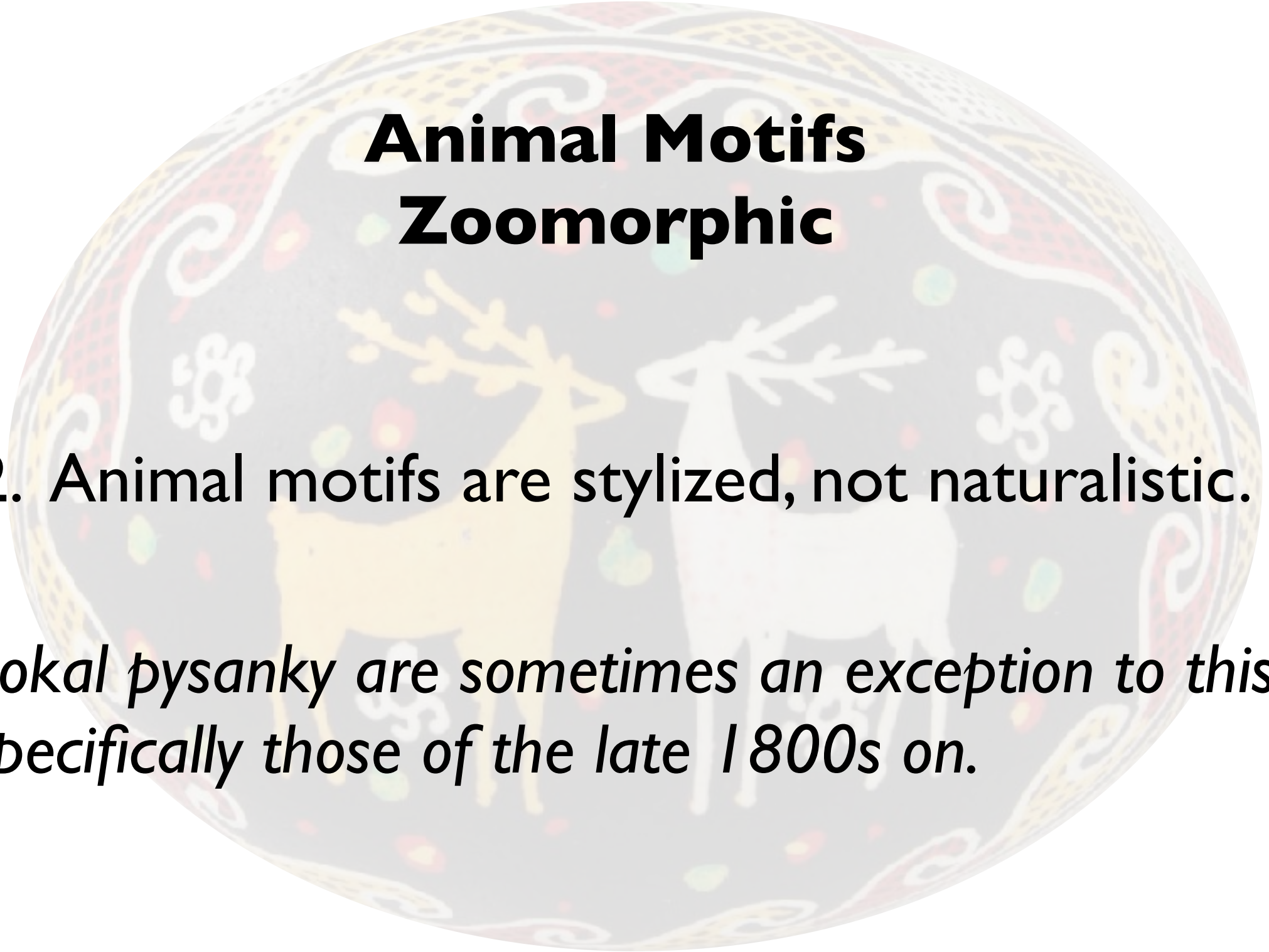




Animal Motifs Zoomorphic

I. The entire animal is not always shown; quite often it is represented by a characteristic part.

Horses, stags, fish and some birds are usually represented whole; others are more often not.



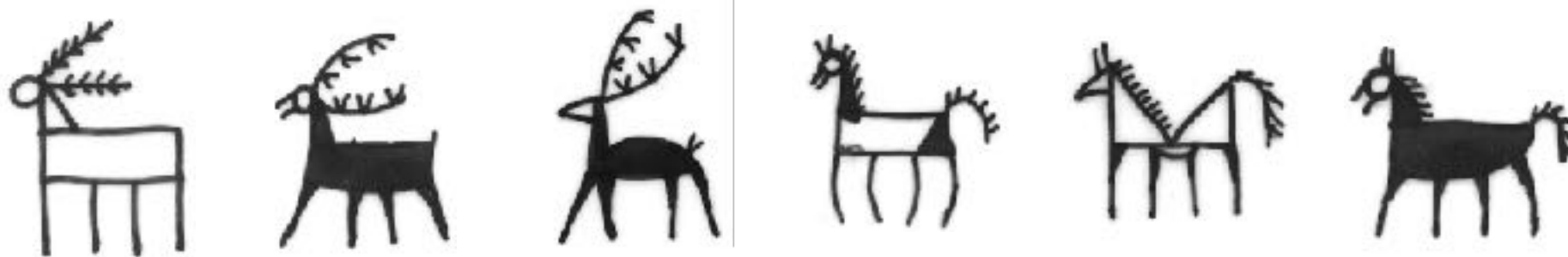
Animal Motifs Zoomorphic

2. Animal motifs are stylized, not naturalistic.

Sokal pysanky are sometimes an exception to this, specifically those of the late 1800s on.

Stags (Deer) & Horses

Solar Symbols



Stags/Horses

1. Only seen on pysanky from **Carpathian** regions
2. Always stylized; horse has characteristic **mane** and tail, stag has **antlers**



Stags (Deer)

Solar Symbols



In early Slavic mythology, it was believed that a stag carried the sun across the sky on his antlers.

Stags

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.



Stags

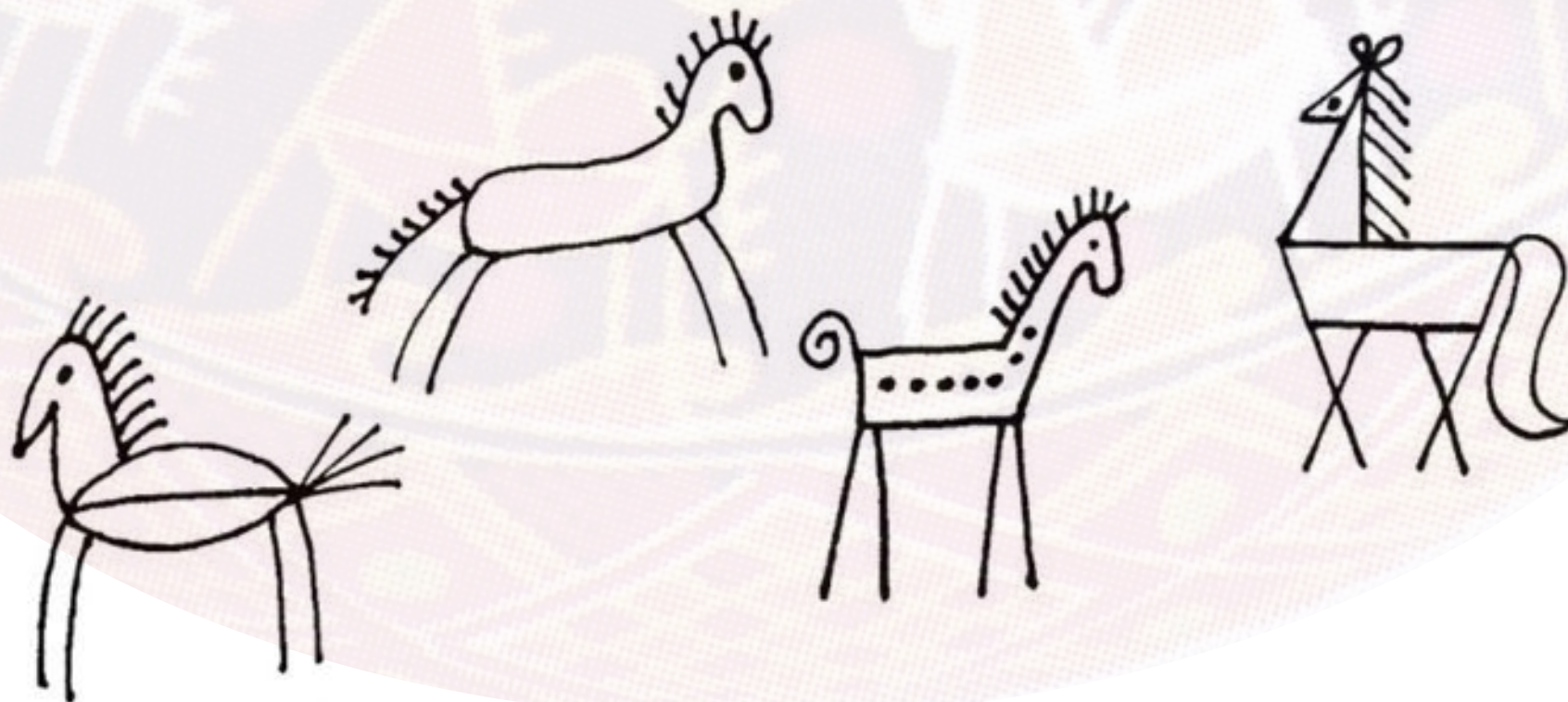
Stags are often pictured on Hutsul pysanky with **birds** near or on them. Stags are also often portrayed in **pairs**, usually on either side of a tree or branch.



Horses

Solar Symbols

In later times, these beliefs were carried over to horses, and it was said that the sun traveled across the sky in a chariot drawn by fiery horses. Dazhboh was the ancient god of the sun, and these horses were his steeds.



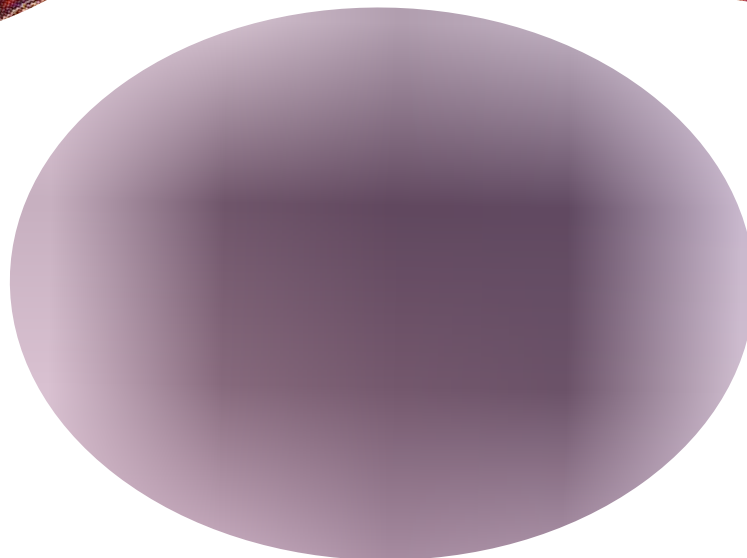
Horses

Horse motifs are popular among the pysankarky of Kosmach, and can be found on many pysanky from there. Some examples:



Horses

As with deer, horses are often pictured on Hutsul pysanky with **birds** near or on them. They are also often portrayed in **pairs**, sometimes on either side of a tree or branch.



Horses

These two pysanky are interesting. One shows horses being ridden (Zamahora); another shows two horse ?kissing(Kosmach).



Rams and Ram's horns

Male fertility; Strength, perseverance



Rams and Ram's horns

Horn motifs are an ancient symbol, and found throughout Ukraine. According to Selivachov, archeologists think that, in the Trypillian culture, the spiral element now called “ram’s horns” was a sign of **male fertility**, alongside the diamond, which was a female sign.

Framed by a pair of bull’s horns, the diamond signifies the marriage of the female deity with the sun in the form of a bull. You can see the juxtaposition of these two symbols in the pysanky below.



Rams and Ram's horns

These Trypillian beliefs may have carried over in the symbol, as the ram (sheep) remained a symbol of male fertility. Animal motifs are sometimes thought to bestow the best characteristics of the animal onto the bearer. In the case of the ram, these would be leadership, perseverance and strength.

Rams were sometimes depicted whole, as in these Hutsul pysanky:



Rams and Ram's horns

Some sources identify the motifs below as a rams; they are **not**. These are actually “hand of god” symbols.



Rams and Ram horns

The most common representation of rams on pysanky is via their horns alone--**curved spiral elements**, with a **mirror image** of two diametrically opposed horns. According to M. Korduba (1896), in Subcarpathia paired spirals give the sign of the ram.

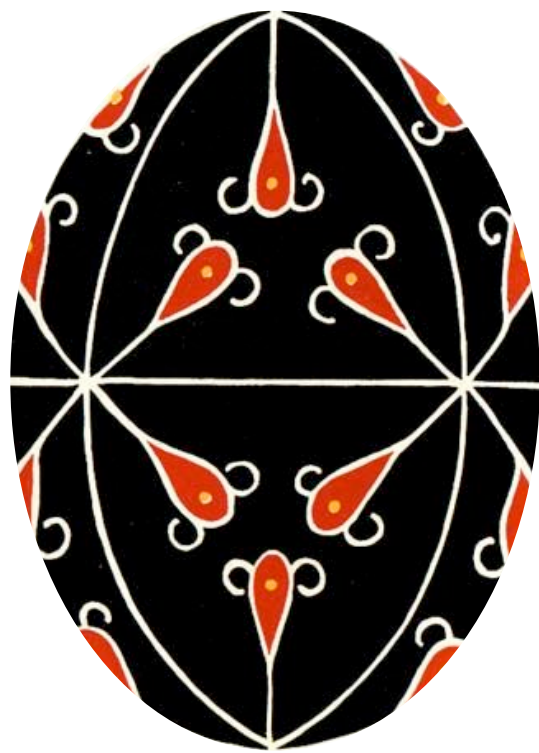
Selivachov notes that rams horns sometimes are inclined together and have forms of symmetry other than mirror image, or are totally devoid of symmetry. Podillia has the largest number of iconographic variants--apart from the mirror image spiral, here we can find three- and four-armed, and even eight-armed figures with S-shaped elements resembling swastikas.

These are a few examples of pysanka ram's horn motifs from Selivachov:



Rams and Ram horns

Some examples of paired rams horns on pysanky from Western Polissia, and Cherkasy and Chernihiv (2) regions.



Rams and Ram horns

More commonly seen are larger versions of ram's horns symbols, like those in in these pysanky from eastern Podillia (Vinnytsia). They come in a variety of shapes:



Rams and Ram horns

Some more of the larger versions of ram's horns symbols; these are from Kyiv, the Cherkasy, Poltava and Kirovohrad regions, and western Polissia:



Other Mammals

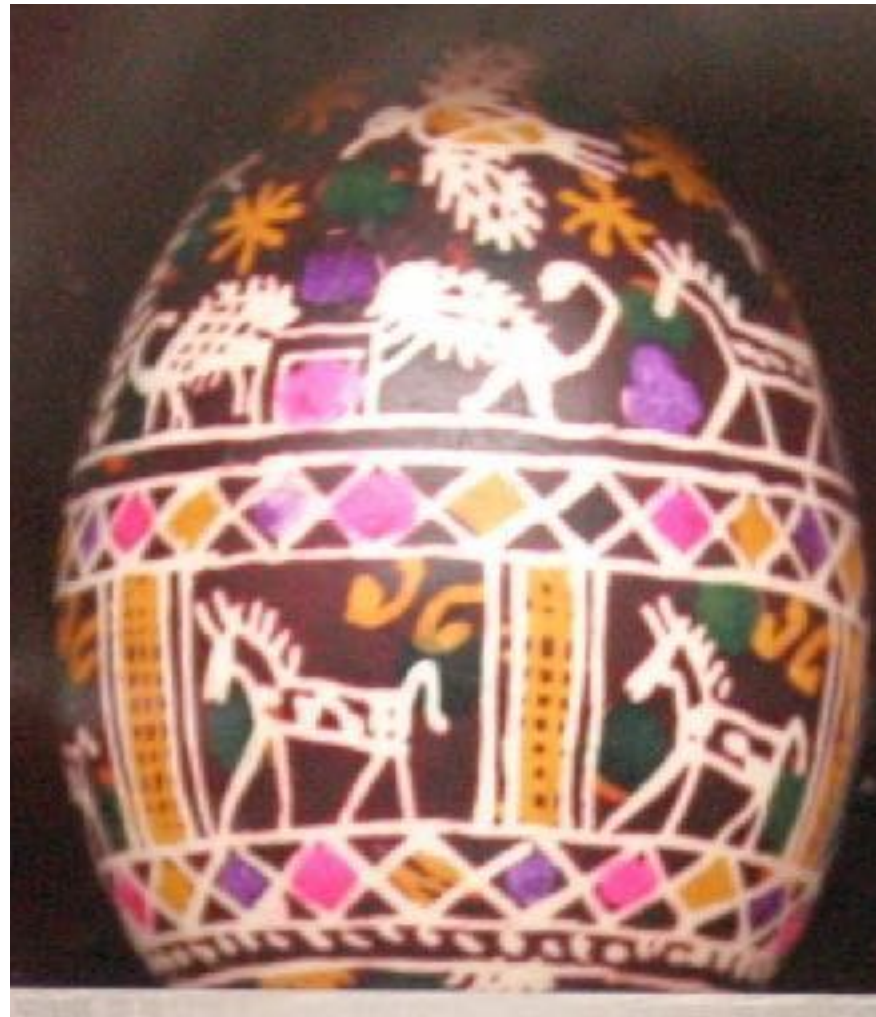
Lions and Wolves and Bears, oh my! Other mammals also appear on pysanky, albeit much less frequently.

I have seen single examples of pysanky with goats, lions and boars. This is the goat pysanka; it is from Binyashevsky, and Hutsul:



Boar

Boars can be seen on this pysanka from Zamahora; it is a more modern folk pysanka, and appears to be the work of a single pysankar.



Cows

Cows are also a contemporary Hutsul motif, found occasionally on pysanky from Zamahora.



Cows

Another pastoral pysanka from Zamahora with a cow on it. Both are the work of a single pysankar.



Lions

Lions have been mentioned in several US publications, but I have never seen such a symbol on a folk pysanka, nor mentioned in any of the Ukrainian texts.

I did find this pysanka in a set of photos of the pysanky of Olena Kulchytska, a Ukrainian artist. The collection is in a museum in Lviv, but there is no further information on the provenance of the designs, whether they are traditional or her own.



Wolves

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.



The mystical power of a wolf bite can be somewhat explained if we realize that the wolf is one of the forms taken by the serpent (zmiya) – the god of the earth. Ancient legends suggest that a serpent’s bite can introduce evil into a person.

This pysanka is an example from the Odesa region in which the teeth are a major motif, not merely part of a border.



Bears

Bear paws (below) are a common motif, which, according to Marusia Chaika, echo bear worship from the Paleolithic era. Bear paws, along with a bear's head, played a role in ancient ritual worship of the god of the earth.



This pysanka from Podillia (Vinnytsia) appears to have bear paw motifs, although local usage gives it the name of “Doves’ wings.” (This motif is also called the hand of god.)



Oxen

Another interesting motif is the oxen (bull's) eye, which is portrayed by two or three concentric circles. Binyashevsky interprets this symbol as the eye of Veles, who was the ancient Ukrainian protector of livestock, and thus the god of prosperity. This symbol was meant to protect all agriculture.

Below are examples in pysanky from the Lviv and Sumy regions, and Polissia.



Wild Birds

Sun Symbols



Birds

Birds were the harbingers of spring, and are quite frequently 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.....they sometimes pictured carrying letters in their beaks as they fly upwards. This, however, seems to be a fairly recent addition to pysanka symbols, and is found only on Hutsul pysanky.



Swallows

Swallows are always shown in flight. They are a common motif on Lemko drop-pull pysanky, and you rarely see just one—there is usually a line of them going around the egg. Both of the designs below are from Onyshchuk.



Swallows

On the left is an example of a pysanka with the motif of a swallow's tail from Kherson. This design was originally collected by Kulzhynsky in 1899. My suspicion is that is actually a berehynia motif of the "curl" type that was renamed. *These are NOT butterflies!!!*

On the right is a version from eastern Podillia.



Birds

With the exceptions of doves with envelopes, swallows and storks, wild birds were usually pictured perched or standing, not flying, on pysanky. These pysanky are from Pokuttia and the Poltava region.



Birds

While most animals (horses and deer excepted) are depicted on pysanky only by their most characteristic features, wild birds were usually shown whole, and in profile.



Poultry, in contrast, is usually represented by a characteristic part, usually a foot. One exception to this apparently “sorochi lapky” (magpie feet). These examples are from Selivachov, two pysanka motifs from Podillia and Poltava.



Magpie Feet

Magpie feet appears to be a common motif. On left is a Boiko pysanka (Binyashevsky) called "Sorochaty lapky." The two on the right are from the Poltava region, and called "Sorochi lapky."



Cuckoo

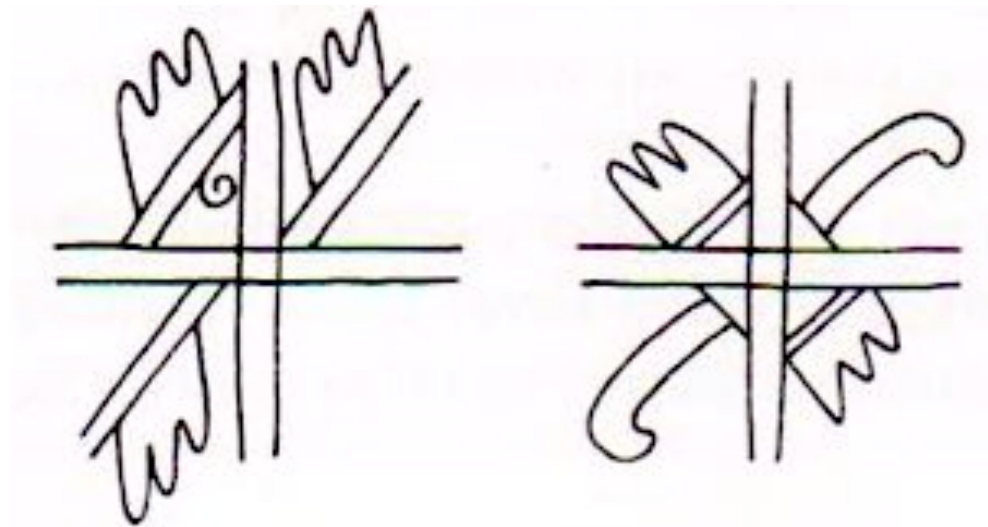
The Lemko pysanka below is another exception to the rule (from Onyshchuk), a zozulia (cuckoo) with only head and wing portrayed.



Doves' Wings

This interesting pysanka is from Podillia, and is called “Doves’ wings” (Yavoriv village, Pishchany raion, Vinnytsia oblast).

The motif is quite similar to those usually referred to as “bear paws,” which themselves are a variation of the “hand of god” motif that dates back to the Paleolithic era.



Magpies

More often you will see the whole bird, as with soroky (magpies) on the pysanka below on the left (Poltava region, Binyashevsky). The pysanka to its right is also called “Soroky,” but is probably just a renamed windmill motif. The arms of the windmill / svarha do appear to resemble bird heads a bit (Kyiv region, Binyashevsky).



Birds

Most often the birds are quite simple; occasionally they might be given fanciful features. Most are unnamed; if named, the birds may not resemble their namesakes very closely.



On diasporan pysanky one can often find quite intricate bird motifs, and even some that have the features of real birds. This is a diasporan feature, not a traditional one.



Peacocks

“Pavy” (peacocks) are a popular motif; they usually have a classic curl on the bird’s head. Below are examples from Podillia (left) and Poltava. The example from Podillia appears to be a renamed hand of god motif; these are often called “holuby” (doves).



Doves

In eastern Podillia, the hand of god motif has several names; sometimes it is called “besahy” (saddlebags), but quite often it is called a “holub” (dove).



Storks and Ravens

Two other named birds found on pysanky are botsiuny (storks) and kruky (ravens); these pysanky are from eastern and western Podillia, respectively.



Storks

Storks are also depicted on Lemko pysanky. These two pysanky below both apparently depict storks; the one on the left is from Binyashevsky, and the one on the right from Onyshchuk.



Birds

This is an example of a bird motif from Vinnytsia, from the Lviv Ethnographic Museum. These pysanky appear to be the work of a single pysankarka:



Birds

Some examples from Elyjiw, from Vorobiyivka (Kursk region), western Ukraine, Sokal, Hutsul (5 pysanky):



Birds

Three examples from Korduba, from the Sokal region (Halytska Volyn):,



Birds

Also from Sokal, from Vira Manko (written by Taras Horodetsky):



Birds

And, lastly, you can appreciate the variety of bird motifs on Ukrainian pysanky from this page of Vira Manko's book «Летіть соловейки на рідні земельки» (Fly, nightingales, to your native lands):





Poultry

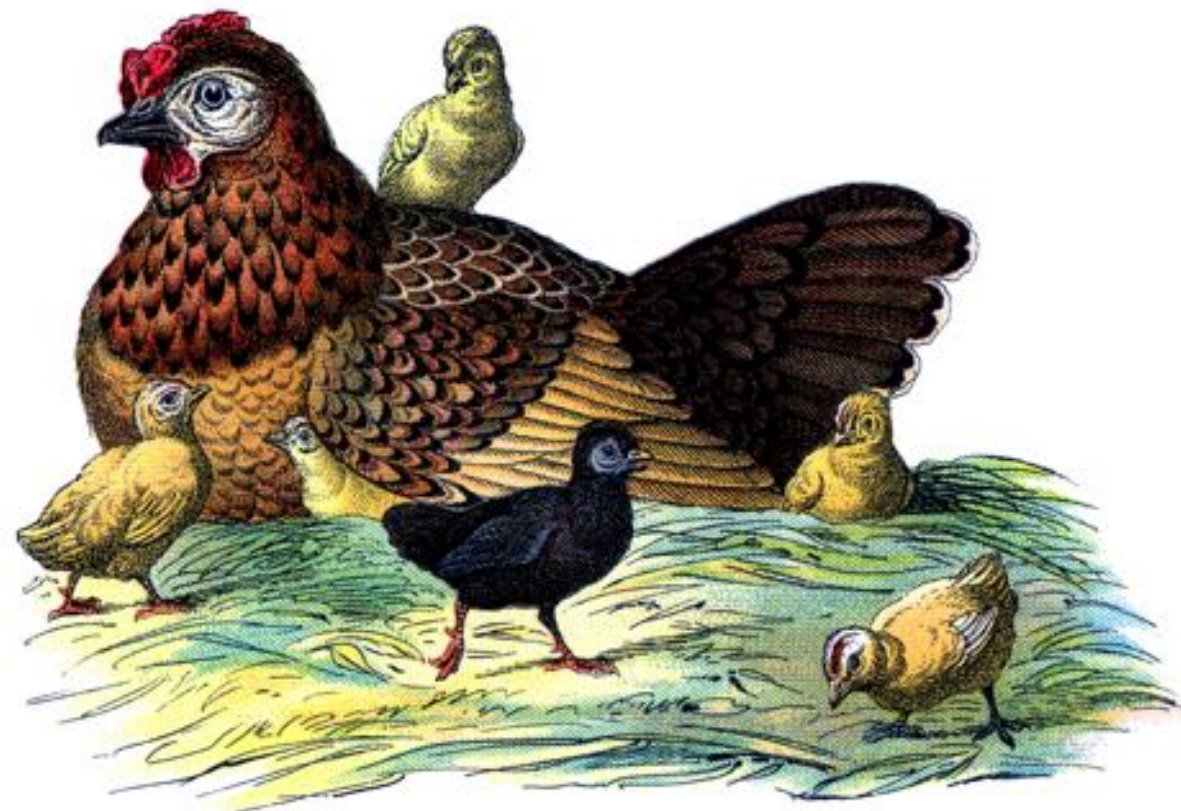
Fertility Symbols



Poultry

Animal symbols on pysanky can have a variety of meanings. According to Marusia Chaika, they can represent different levels of the universe, different attributes of the Berehynia, or be meant to have an influence on the fertility of a household's own animals.

Poultry are first and foremost birds, and birds are what links us to the heavens. They are messengers from a higher plane. Birds are also **solar symbols**, especially roosters, who greet the sun at dawn. And chickens, ducks and geese are an important part of any village household; their **fertility** was important to a household's survival and future prosperity.



Poultry

In Ukrainian folk pysankarstvo 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/feet” being depicted. While chickens are sometime portrayed whole on pysanky, ducks and geese almost never are. They are usually represented by their feet or, less commonly, their combs (roosters) or necks.



Poultry

Many of what we now consider to be bird “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.



Poultry

Other bird feet appear to be the same symbol as the “hand of god” symbols which date back to the Paleolithic era. Such symbols usually have three or sometimes four fingers—but not usually five.

This can be explained because to early people the god-sun was seen as a bird, and his handprint would thus be the print made by the feet/talons of a bird. These motifs are often called "chicken feet," “duck feet” or "magpie feet."



Chicken feet

Representations of bird parts (eyes, feet, beaks, combs, feathers), of course, carry the same meaning as the entire bird. These two pysanky are examples, from the Kyiv and Kirovohrad regions, of «курячі лапи» (chicken feet).



Duck feet

These three pysanky are examples, from the Kyiv, Lviv and Cherkasy regions, of «качачі лапки» (duck feet):



Duck necks

Ducks can also be represented by their necks. These three pysanky are examples, from eastern Podillia, of «качачі шийки» (duck necks):



Goose Feet

These pysanky present examples goose feet, from the Poltava region and from Podillia, respectively.



Poultry

Chickens and ducks, of course, can sometimes can also be seen whole, as on the two Hutsul pysanky on the left. The pysanka on the right is from Kosmach, and has on it ducklings («каченята»).



Poultry

This pysanka from Binyashevsky is called by him «Качур» (drake, male duck), but that is, of course, a later reinterpretation. The design is from Western Podillia, and is actually a kucher (curl) with wings.



Roosters

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. Their screams and singing meant imminent death. Charms against them included salt, fire or an axe.

(Rooster motif pysanky from the Kursk and Cherkasy regions)



Fish

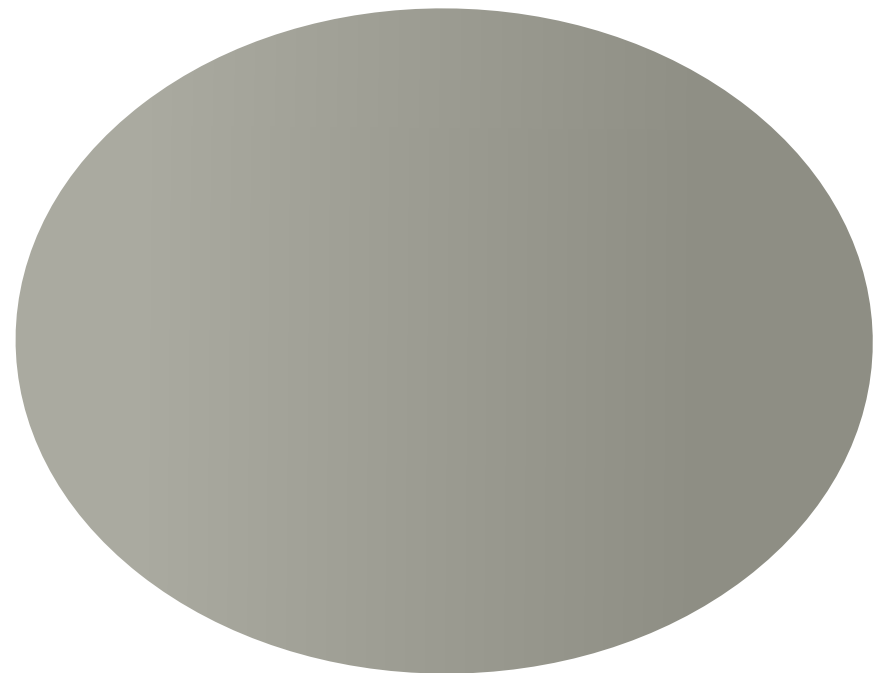
Life, health, abundance; Christ



Fish

The fish motif is relatively common on traditional in Carpathian areas, where zoomorphic motifs are most commonly seen. 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.

(Pokuttian pysanky from Illintsi)



Fish

In more recent times, the fish has taken on Christian meanings, as, in the christian tradition, the fish is a symbol of Christ. It was an early christian symbol, and had become quite popular by the 2nd century AD, and may have been adapted from pre-christian religious imagery (Orpheus was said to be a “fisher of men,” and other gods had fish imagery associated with them).

According to tradition, ancient Christians, during their persecution by the Roman Empire in the first few centuries after Christ, used the fish symbol to mark meeting places and tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes.



Fish

Another explanation is that ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthys) is an acrostic for "Ιησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", (Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr), which translates into English as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour."

The fish once represented abundance; the modern Christian interpretation is of Christ himself.



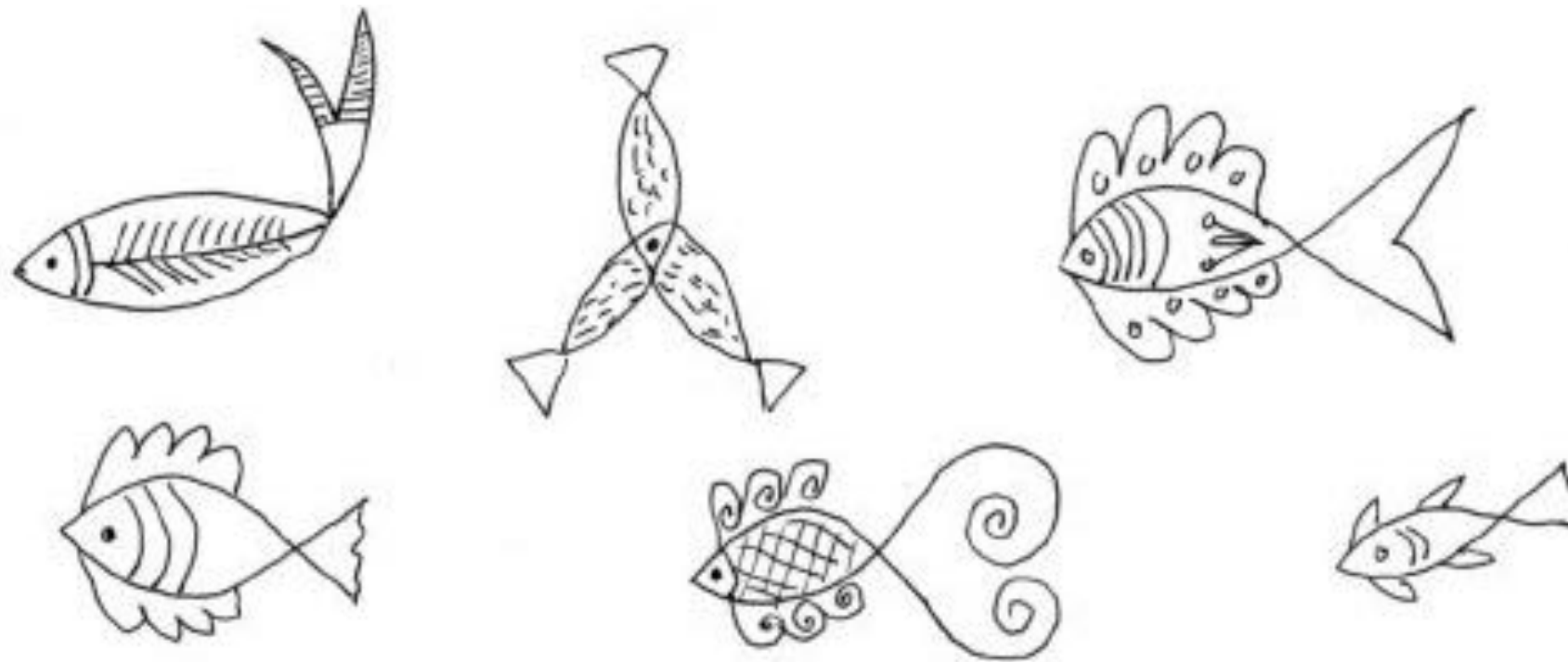
Fish

Traditional fish motifs found on Ukrainian folk pysanky are fairly simply, elongated creatures. There may be eye markings, fins, a tail. They may have some spots or stripes.



Fish

Diasporan (non-traditional) fish motifs tend to be more ornate and geometrically complex, as would be expected with their decorative, rather than talismanic, origins:



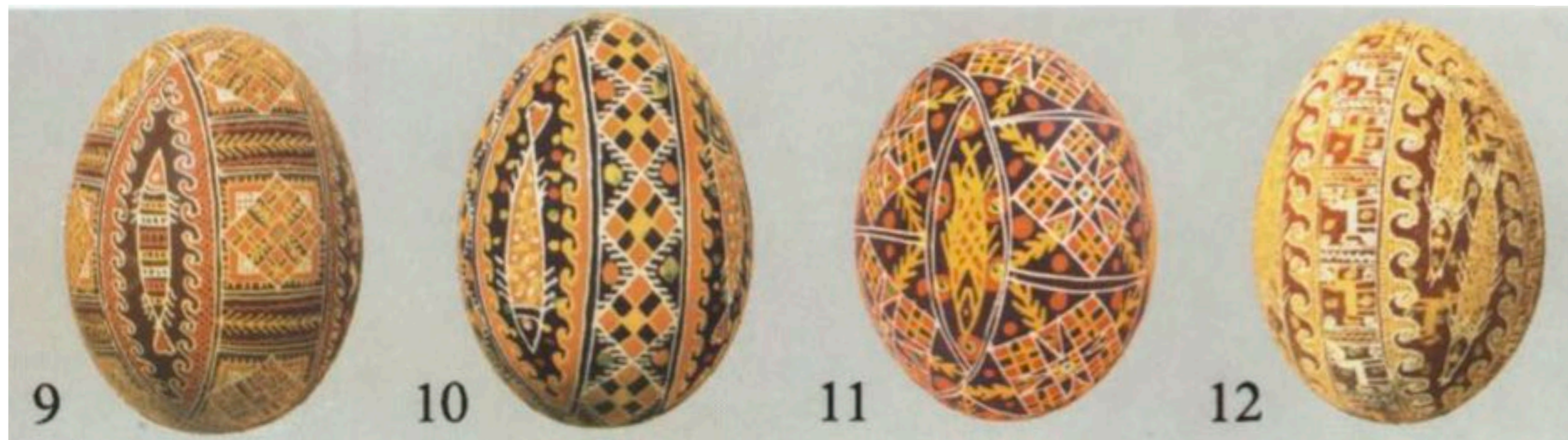
Fish

Traditional fish motifs are found most commonly on pysanky of the Carpathian mountain regions: among the Hutsuls, Pokuttians, Bukovynians, where they are being written still.

These are examples of Hutsul fish motif pysanky:



More examples of Hutsul fish motif pysanky:



Fish

Examples of fish motifs on the pysanky of Pokuttia:



Fish

Selivachov notes that they can be found in other regions as well: eastern Podillia and the Kyiv region (Nemyriv and Shuliavka). He points out that the Shuliavka “rybky” (little fish) look more like insects with wings and whiskers, or reptiles with three pairs of hooked feet (left). The pysanka from Nemyriv has a fairly standard looking fish.



Piranha

An interesting pysanka collected by Vira Manko, this Hutsul pysanka from Kosmach is called «Піранії», or “Piranhas.” She thinks it may have been named such by someone who’d spent time in Brazil and returned—or perhaps a Hutsul with a vivid imagination!



Crayfish

A second type of “fish” motif found in Ukrainian folk art is that of the **crayfish** “rak” (рак). It is quite commonly found in Hutsul woodwork and in the morocco appliqué on the corners of their keptaryky (sheepskin vests), where it is a symmetric symbol with 4 to 8 extremities.

Selivachov has this to say about the rak symbol:

There are grounds to consider the “crayfish” (which walks back-to-front or sideways) a kind of amulet associated with “reverse” incantations, whose texts contain themes such as “walking without washing,” reading the Lord’s prayer back to front, beating about the bush rather than using roads.

Crayfish

The rak is uncommon on pysanky—except in “Galician Volhynia,” also known as the Sokal region. Isomorphic, rather than conceptualized, crayfish also began to appear on their pysanky. Korduba gives these two examples :



Spiders and spider webs

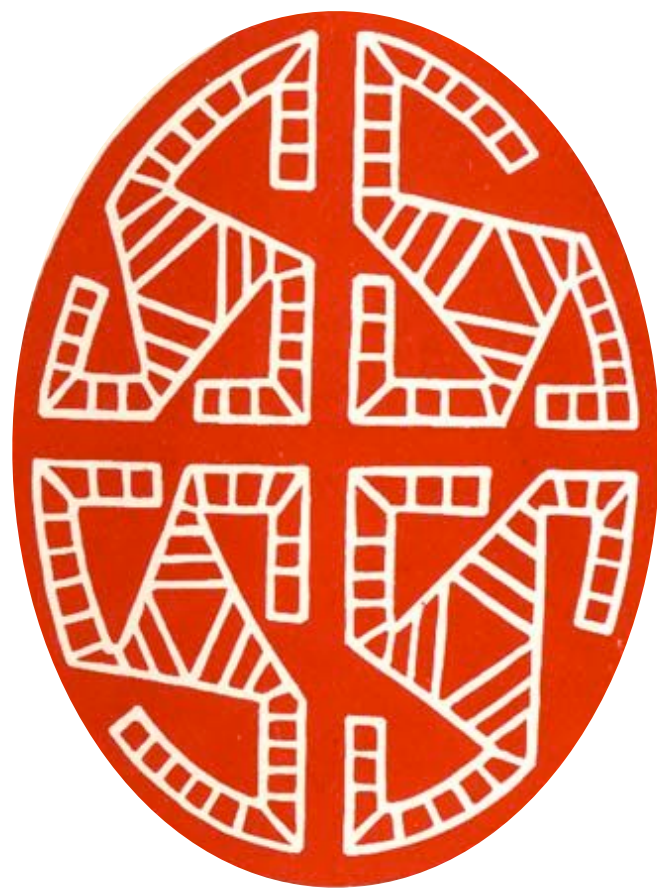
Good luck



Pavuky

“Pavuchky” are the most common “insect” motif found on pysanky and are common in Ukrainian folk art in general. Spider motifs generally have a centrifugal or complex net-like composition, resembling the outline of a spider and its web or a swastika.

These pysanky, from eastern Polissia and the Odesa and Chernihiv region are examples:



Pavuky

As with most zoomorphic motifs, the “pavuky” on pysanky rarely look anything like an actual living spider. They are highly stylized, and the name is given to various odd-looking creatures with any number of legs from three on up, as on these pysanka from Podillia and the Kherson region:



Pavuky

The motifs called “pavuky” found on the folk pysanky from Poltava to southern Ukraine can also have the appearance of star-like linear rosettes, variations on the star / ruzha motif. The name was apparently given to a huge variety of different motifs, with varying regional usages, including this pysanka from Vinnytsia (eastern Podillia). It is called «На copока клинцях павук» (“A spider on forty wedges”), and it is from the village of Yavorivka in Pishchany raion.



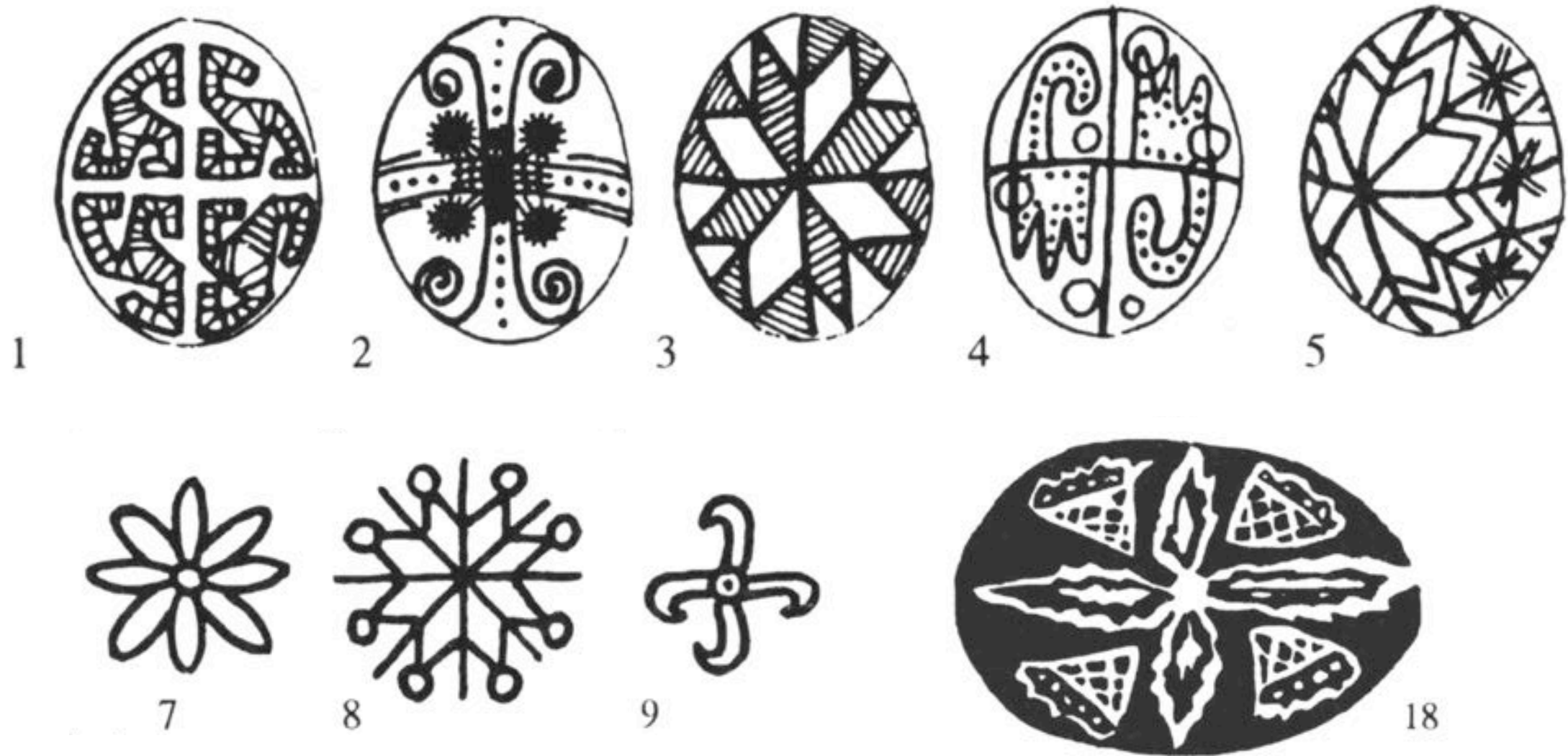
Pavuky

This pysanka from Podillia, seen in two views, is called «Павук з мушкою» (Spider with fly). The spider is the complex half rosette; the fly is depicted with two little triangles. The red lines represent the spider web.



Pavuky

Selivachov provides these examples of the various spider motifs on pysanky.





Pavuky

What do spiders symbolize? In many folk beliefs, spiders and their webs symbolized perseverance, patience. Olena Boriak explains that in some Ukrainian folk beliefs, the earth was suspended on a warp spun by a spider.

In Ukrainian folk traditions, the spider's web is associated with fortune telling, with the fulfillment of wishes, and with love.

Ethnographers consider pavuk symbols to be, based on their appearance, **sun symbols** for the most part.

Other Insects



Butterflies

The **butterfly** is not a symbol found on traditional pysanky. There are several traditional pysanky which can be found in the literature which have been given the name “metelyky” or “babky,” but these names do not appear to be original, and may be later reinterpretations by Binyashevsky and Onyshchuk. Both of them are known to have created new names for pysanky when it suited them.

These examples are from Binyashevsky, and are three-winged; the original designs are from the Hutsul region and Kurshchyna.



Butterflies

Onyshchuk includes a version of this pysanka, first recorded by Kulzhynsky, in her book as an example of “metelyky”; however, these motifs are quite obviously “swallow tails” that she has simply renamed “butterflies.”



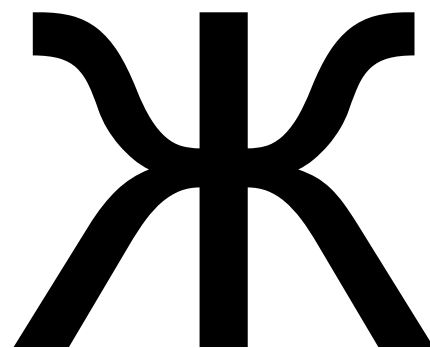
Butterflies

The only pysanky with actual “butterflies” on them hail from Sokal, where isomorphic (rather than stylized) animals began to appear on pysanky from the late 1800s on (from Korduba):



“Zhuchok”

Beetles are not common motifs on pysanky, but they do occur. These are two examples, from Western Ukraine, as collected by Elyjiw, and from Vinnytsia oblast (eastern Podillia). Neither one looks anything like a beetle, nor much like any particular insect. What these “bugs” do resemble, somewhat, is the letter Ж, which is pronounced “zh.” That is where its name is said to come from, the resemblance to the shape of the letter.



A wooden bowl filled with approximately 15 decorated Easter eggs, resting on a red and white striped cloth. The eggs feature various designs, including birds, flowers, and abstract patterns in colors like red, black, white, and gold. The word "QUESTIONS?" is overlaid in a large, black, serif font across the center of the bowl.

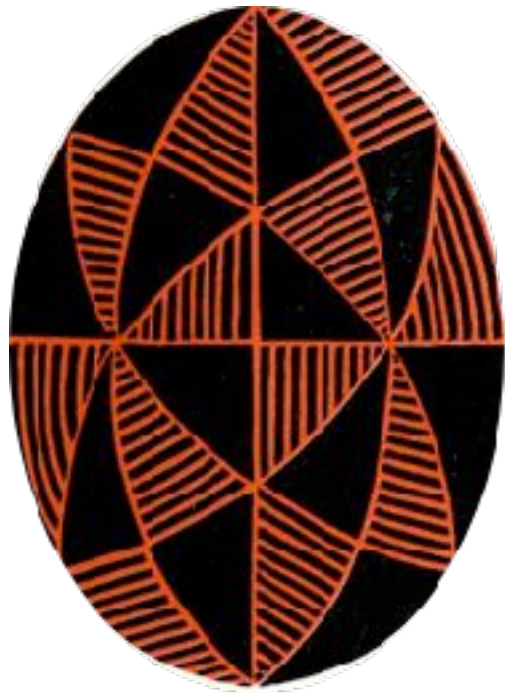
QUESTIONS?

Geometric Motifs



Sorokoklyn (Forty Triangles)

“40 days of Lent”



“Sorokoklyn”

One interesting division which produces a geometric design is often called "forty triangles" (there are actually 48) or *Sorokoklyn* (Сорококлин, from «сорок клинців» meaning “forty wedges”).

The original symbolism, if any, has been lost (this is a division rather than a symbol per se), but it is now taken to symbolize of the forty days of Lent, the forty martyrs, the forty days that Christ spent in the desert, and the forty life tasks of married couples. (No, I don't know what they are.)



“Sorokoklyn”

A couple of interesting variants from Binyashevsky.



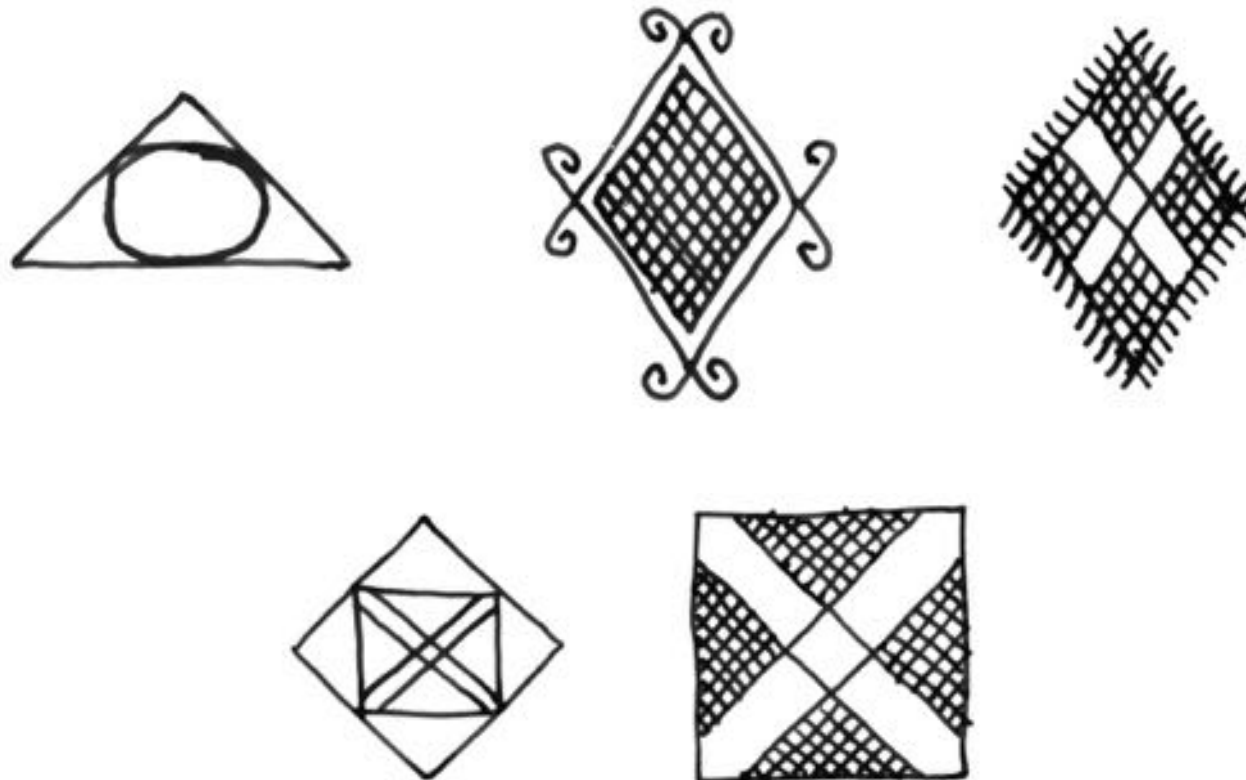
Rhombs and Triangles

Farm fields



Rhombs and Triangles

Rhombs (including squares and rectangles) and triangles are simple geometric motifs, and can be found on a variety of ancient Ukrainian artifacts dating back to the Paleolith. They symbolized plowed fields. “Dashed” versions (those with a fringe) could also symbolize rain.



Triangles

The **triangle** is also one type of representation of the various trinities: in prechristian times it symbolized the three elements (air, fire and water), the cycle of life (birth, life, death) or the family unit (mother, father, child), while in modern times it is taken to symbolize the Holy Trinity.

Binyashevsky provides us with these examples of triangles from the Kyiv (left) and Poltava regions:



Tripod

Various trinitities



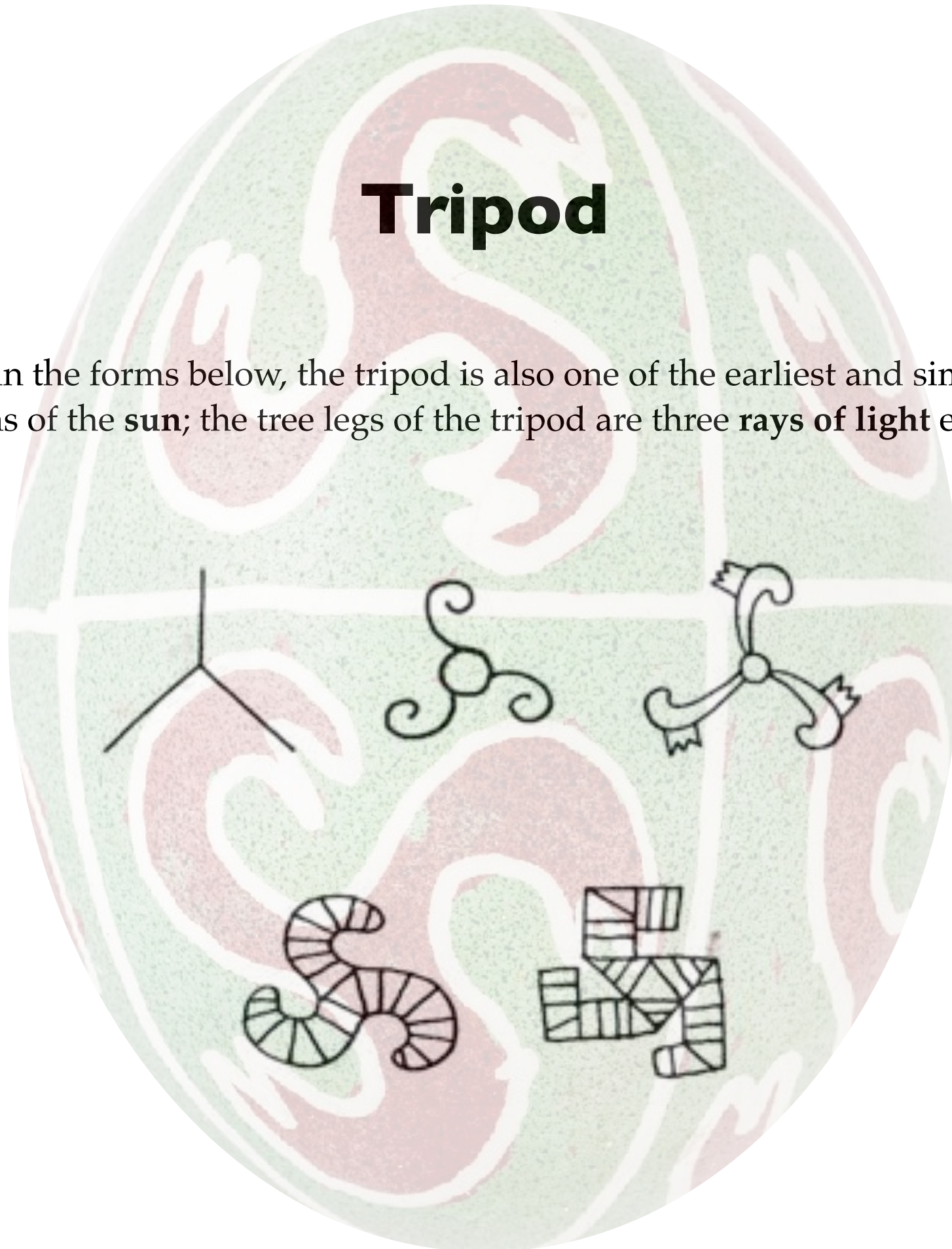
Tripod

The tripod, known in Ukrainian as the «триніг» (trynih, three-legs) has many different manifestations in pysanka symbolism, and many different meanings. It can assume the meanings of the various trinities, much like the triangle:



Tripod

When drawn in the forms below, the tripod is also one of the earliest and simplest representations of the **sun**; the tree legs of the tripod are three **rays of light** emanating from the sun.



Tripod

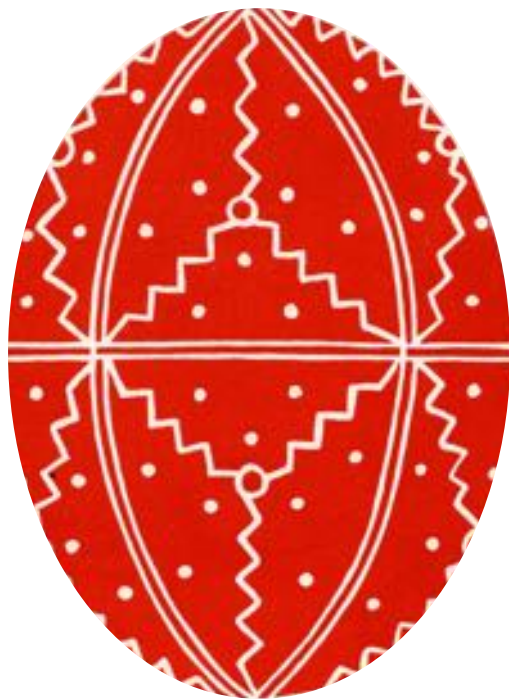
These are examples of folk pysanky with a tripod / trynih motif:



Tripod

The pysanky below are from Binyashevsky. This first one is a simple linear tripod, albeit with “shaky” lines. It is from Central Halychyna, and Binyashevsky calls it “24 wedges.”

The next is called “Krutorohy (Крутороги),” or curved horns, and is from Western Podillia. The last one is from eastern Polissia and is called “Pavuky (Павуки)” or “Spiders.”



Spirals and curls

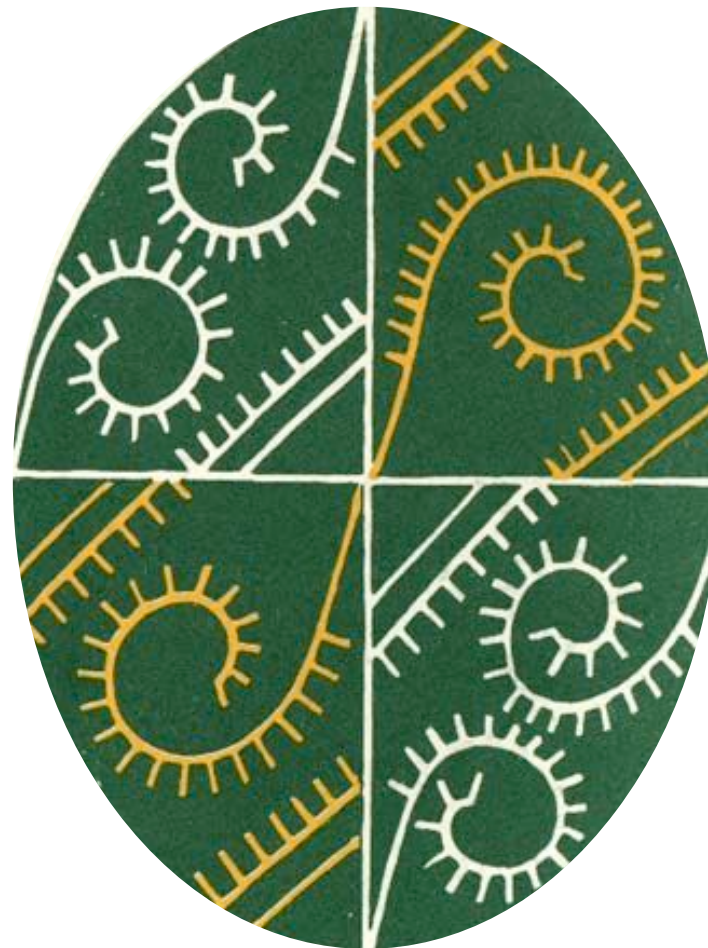
Protection; Zmiya



Spirals and Curls

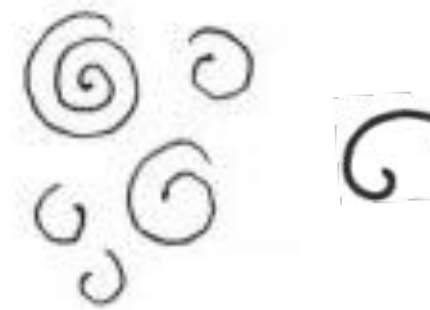
The spiral is a powerful motif, and is one of the many ancient depictions of the Zmiya (Serpent), the god of water and earth.

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.



“Kucheri” (Curls)

Curls (kucheri) are small, truncated spirals, and usually have the same meaning. These are examples of simple curls:



“Kucheri” (Curls)

The pysanka on the left is called “Kruchenyky (Крученики),” or little curls, and is from Volyn. Next to it are pysanky from Eastern Podillia and Pokuttia which are called “Perervy (Переви),” (breaks or interruptions).



The Kucheri of Western Podillia

Kucheri are very common on the pysanky of Western Podillia, where they are used to represent the Berehynia, the great goddess. These kucheri are not simple curls, but have added features—wings, a crown—and are usually duplicated as mirror images. They are ancient symbols, and have odd names: “Curl with tree and sun,” “princess,” “queen,” “roosters,” “drake,” “scythe,” “wings.” These names are mostly later attempts to describe the symbol, but a few (princess, queen) contain echoes of the original meanings.

These are a few examples from Binyashevsky of these ancient designs; the pysanky are named “Качур” or “Drake (male duck)”, “Заячі зуби” or “Rabbits’ teeth” and “Королева” or “Queen.”



The Kucheri of Western Podillia

Below we have “Кучері з гілочками” or “Curls with branches,” “Кучер з деревом і сонцем” or “Curl with tree and sun,” and “Круки” or “Ravens.”



The Kucheri of Western Podillia

Also from Western Podillia are these pysanky from Binyashevsky. They are called “Кучер з квітами” or “Curl with flowers,” “Зірка” or “Star,” and “Княгиня” or “Princess.”



Spirals

Here you see three pysanky with simple spirals: a row of white on black spirals from the Boiko lands, a dual spiral (Sigma) and a small spiral from the Kyiv region.



Spirals

And this is a classic zmiya/ serpent representation, a sigma (double curl/spiral) with curls arising from it:



Hearts

Love



Hearts

Simple hearts are not a common motif on traditional pysanky. These are a few examples of pysanka heart motifs:



Some Ukrainian sources claim the heart motif is a Christian symbol, the “Sacred Heart of Jesus.” This is much less likely, and would only apply to some areas of western Ukraine, where the Greek Catholic (Uniate) religion is practiced.

Hearts

Hearts are universal symbols of love, but they were also the symbol of the Rozhanytsi (Рожаниці), the ancient Slavic goddesses of birth. These goddesses not only promoted fertility, but protected the home, the family, and the hearth. Below are two Hutsul pysanky which features hearts prominently:



Hearts

Sometimes, heart shapes are part of a plant motif (leaves or petals), as in the Hutsul pysanka on the left. Other times, as in the Pokuttian pysanky on the right, they just seem to be random geometric shapes.



Hearts

These two pysanky from the Kyiv region also feature hearts:



Hearts

The heart motifs found on pysanky can be love symbols, and were used by young women who would write them on the pysanky they wanted to give to the young men they liked, to express their affection for them. (Below: end motif of a pysanka from Roztoky, Bukovyna).



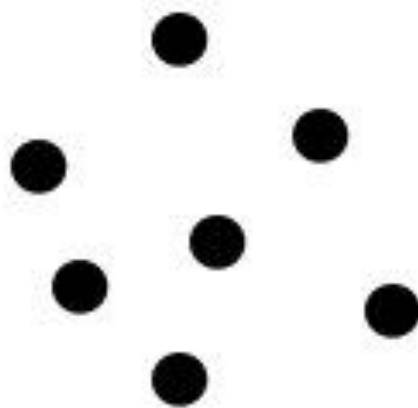
Dots and Spots

Stars and Seeds



Dots and Spots

Dots or spots on an egg are a very simple and thus fairly common motif. They can be simple, pinpoint dots, like these



Dots and Spots

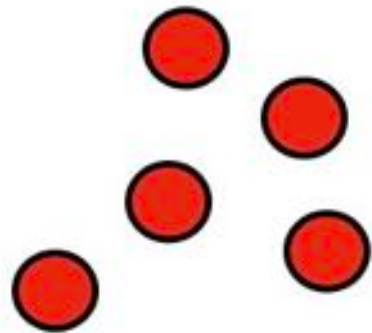
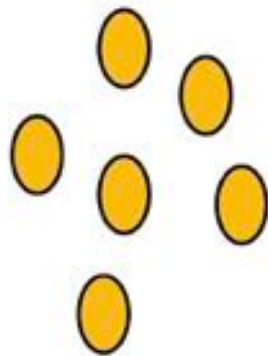
These simple dots are said to have many meanings. Scattered or clustered spots can be said to represent either the stars in the sky, or cuckoo birds' eggs, the latter being a symbol of spring.

This pysanka on the left from Vinnytsia has many dots, probably representing stars; the one on the right, from the Poltava region, intersperses larger dots (stars) with crossed circles (moons):



Dots and Spots

Dots can also be larger, (usually) colored in circles or ovals. Dots of this sort were often placed on a pysanky along with rain and agricultural motifs, and are generally understood to symbolize seeds. Examples of simple seed motifs can be seen in this pysanka from the Chernihiv region:



Dots and Spots

The pysanka on the left below is from the Hrubeshiv area (now in Poland, formerly the Kholm region). The seeds (dots) are surrounded by waved lines (a water motif). The one on the right is from Binyashevsky, from the village of Yavoriv in the Kosiv region (Hutsul); we see curls, which are water symbols (Zmiya), in conjunction with seeds / dots.



Dots and Spots

These pysanky, from the Vinnytsia region, show dots and circles in conjunction with “rakes”; the rakes, of course, are actually clouds, with the tines representing rain.



Dots and Spots

Dots/seeds can also be seen in conjunction with plants. In the pysanky below from the Talne region of Cherkasy oblast (Central Podniprovia), are two such examples. In one we see leaves and seeds; in another the seeds are shown in a flower head.



Dots and Spots

“Slezy” (tears) are larger spots that are randomly placed and of various colors; they are not outlined. They were created by drawing or dabbing small drops of wax onto the eggshell. In Pokuttia, these dots are usually orange, yellow and red; in other areas, they can be of other colors.



Dots and Spots

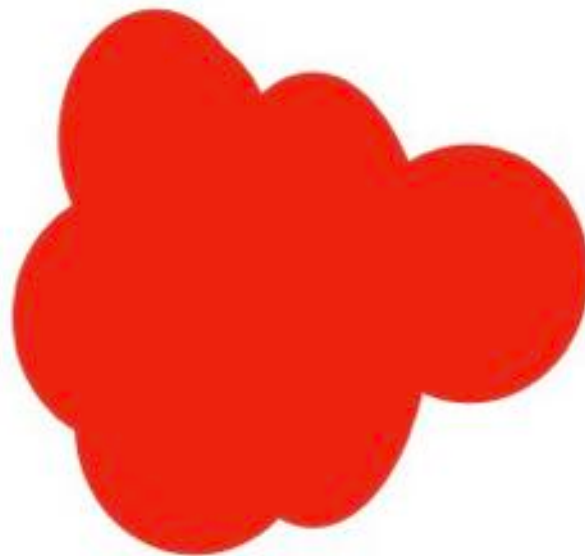
Slezy are seen most often in Hutsul and Pokuttian pysanky, but appear in those of other regions as well, particularly Podillia.



Dots and Spots

Slezy can also be large, irregularly shaped “splotches” like the one below. These were created by dripping or smearing wax onto a pysanka, or using the handle of the pysachok to apply the wax. They were probably placed on the eggshell to add more color to a pysanka with a dark background without a lot more work.

They are seen most often in Hutsul and Pokuttian pysanky, but appear in those of other regions as well. These big slezy are most often red smears on a dark background.



Dots and Spots

These are examples of the larger type of slezy on Hutsul and Pokuttian pysanky



Dots and Spots

These pysanky also have slezy, but they are more scribbled than globular.



The background image features three decorated Easter eggs resting on a dark, textured wooden surface. The eggs are decorated with white and yellow geometric patterns, including stripes and polka dots, on a dark base. They are surrounded by clusters of small, red, glossy berries on thin, light-colored stems. The word "QUESTIONS?" is overlaid in a large, black, serif font across the center of the image.

QUESTIONS?

Plant Motifs

Phytomorphic



Pine, horsetail

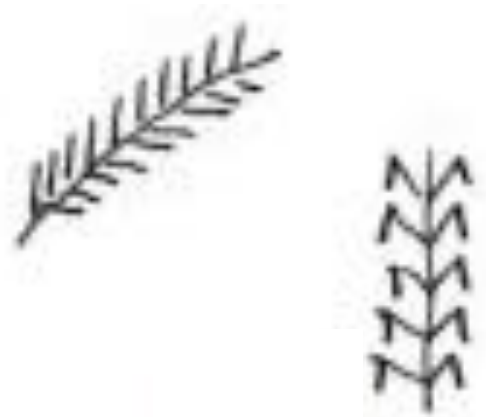
Eternal youth



Sosonka

In many regions, the sosonka (хвощ) was a favorite motif. The sosonka is the horsetail plant, *Equisetum arvense*, the first greenery to appear in the spring. It is a symbol of spring, life, rebirth.

The sosonka motif appears in many shapes and forms, one of the most common being similar to a pine branch, but *without any branching*—it is a straight line with smaller ones coming off of it.



As such, it is often confused with the sosna, or pine (branch).



Sosonka

But the sosonka is not so simple, and there are many other versions of it among pysanka and other folk art motifs. Selivachov gives us this set:



Sosonka

The pysanka below on the left is an example of a sosonka motif, and is from the Lemko regions; it is an example of the drop-pull technique of pysankarstvo. On the right is a depiction of a ceramic pysanka from the tenth century; it also displays a sosonka motif, demonstrating the antiquity of this symbol.



Sosonka

This pysanka, also called “Sosonka,” is from Shuliavka, near Kyiv (once a separate village, it has become swallowed up into the metropolis). It has a quite different appearance, one which is quite characteristic of Shuliavka, but one can make out the classic shape of the open plant.



Sosonka

Another example of a full bodied version of the sosonka is this one from Vinnytsia oblast (Podillia):





Sosonka vs. Sosna

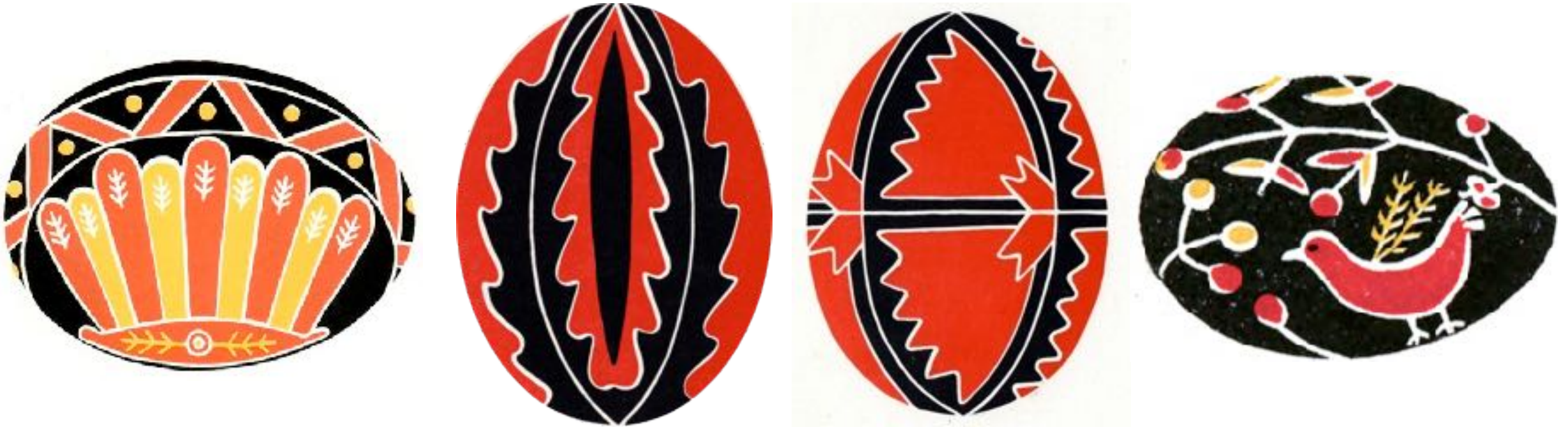
Selivachov points out that, in some regions, like Poltavshchyna, the terms sosna (pine) and sosonka were often used interchangeably, due to the similarity of their etymology. We cannot always be sure which is being referred to, unless the researcher taking down the information was punctilious about getting such detailed botanical information.

In the mountainous regions of Ukraine, pine or spruce branches were often depicted, as those trees were very common.

In other regions, the *sosonka* was a favorite motif.

Trees, branches, leaves

Strength, growth



Trees

Whole trees are not often seen on pysanky and, when they are, they are usually versions of the “tree of life” or “vazon.”

Much like animals, on pysanky we often see trees represented by their characteristic parts.



Branches

Leaves are the most common manifestations of trees on pysanky, but they are also represented as branches (hilky). These can be either deciduous or evergreen branches:



Branches

These simple pysanky, from Lvivshchyna, demonstrate pine branches:



Leaves

Most often, it is only the leaves that are depicted. They are generally elongated, and can be simple or compound, smooth or faceted.

On pysanky, leaves can often look like flowers. The two are differentiated mainly by the fact that *leaves are usually solid or divided in half; they often have a central oval or other rounded shape*. Flowers have petals and are more compound structures. People unfamiliar with pysanka motifs often mistake leaves for flowers.



Leaves

These are examples of pysanky with simple leaf motifs from Kherson, Kharkiv and Cherkasy:



Leaves

These are examples of pysanky with simple leaf motifs from Podillia:



Oak: leaves and acorns

Perun; health, long life



Oaks

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.

Oak leaves are distinct, and were shown on pysanky with wavy contours, sometimes interspersed with acorns. These are examples of the oak leaf motif from Zaporizhia and Pokuttia:



Oaks

These are examples of pysanky with oak leaf motifs from Sokal; the one on the right also has acorns. Pysanky from Sokal often have botanical themes, and tend to be more naturalistic than those from other regions.



Oaks

These are pysanky with oak motifs from Vinnytsia (Podillia, 2) and the Cherkasy region. These oak leaves are much more stylized.



Willow

Energy; Goddess totem



Willow

In Ukraine the last Sunday before Easter (Palm Sunday) is called Willow Sunday (Verbna nedilia). On this day pussy willow branches are blessed in the church, instead of palms, as in the west. People tap one another with these blessed branches, repeating the wish:

Будь великим, як Верб,
А здоровим, як Вода,
А багатим, як Земля.

*Be as tall as the willow,
as healthy as the water,
and as rich as the earth.*

Or they may chant:

Не я б'ю – верба б'є
За тиждень Великдень
Недалечко червоне яєчко!

*The willow hits you, not I
In a week it will be Velykden
and soon you'll have a red egg!*



Willow

The origins of this custom are ancient, and probably precede the introduction of christianity to Ukraine. It is said that this tapping transferred living energy from the willow plant (which was a goddess totem) to the person being tapped. Children, particularly, would be tapped, so they would grow big, strong and healthy.

Pussy willow branches are sometimes depicted on pysanky, where they can be depicted with botanical accuracy or in a stylized form.



Pussy willow branches are not a common finding on older pysanky; perusing the pages of Elyjiw or Binyashevsky will give very few examples. This is the only one I could find: «Бечкова» from Berehomet, povit Storozhynets, Bukovyna.



Willow

Pussy willow branches have become quite frequent motifs on Pokuttian folk pysanky in recent years. They are rarely the central motif, but are included in compositions as a decorative element, perhaps replacing pine branches or other sorts of branching motifs.

Pokuttian pysankarky still produce many thousands of folk pysanky each spring for Easter markets in Kosiv, Zabolotiv and other towns. In the past decade pussy willow branches have become quite common. Below is a photo of one pysankarka's offerings at the 2016 Zabolotiv Easter market.



Willow

The most traditional sort of pussy willow pysanky are those where branches are used to **frame** another motif—a church, a cross, a basket. These are a few of those:



Willow

Next we have **traditional designs** into which willow branches appear to have been **intercalated**. They do not really add to the design, but they don't particularly detract. They're just.....there. In some cases, like the pysanky on the right, the willow branches have replaced the wings of the berehynia.



Willow

Third, we have examples of designs in which the pussy willow branches are used to **outline** or as **dividing lines**. These are not as common, but in these cases plain lines have been converted to willow branches.



Willow

And lastly we have the pussy willow used as a **decorative element** in and of itself. It may be small sprigs added here and there for an attractive effect, like a grace note in music:



Willow

Or it can be large branches of pussy willow, possibly **replacing** earlier decorative elements like pine branches or curls:



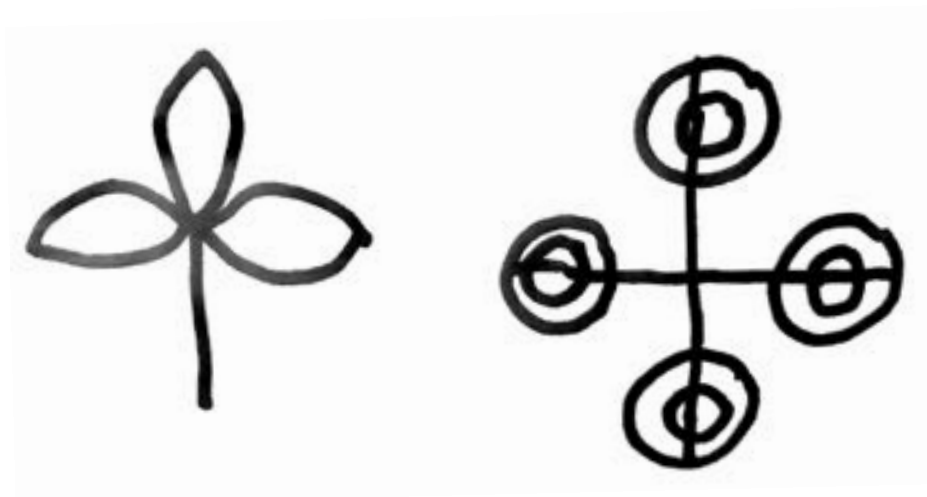
Willow

Or it can even be branches of pussy willow place **inside** of other elements, like these crosses:



Periwinkle

Periwinkle, aka “barvinok,” an evergreen plant, represents eternal life. It is also a vital component of every bride’s bouquet, and festoons the wedding bread (коровай). It is usually represented as a 3 or 4 leaf structure, but sometimes more oddly. Pysanky from Kyiv region and Podillia.



Tree of Life (Vazon)

Berehynia; Plant fertility



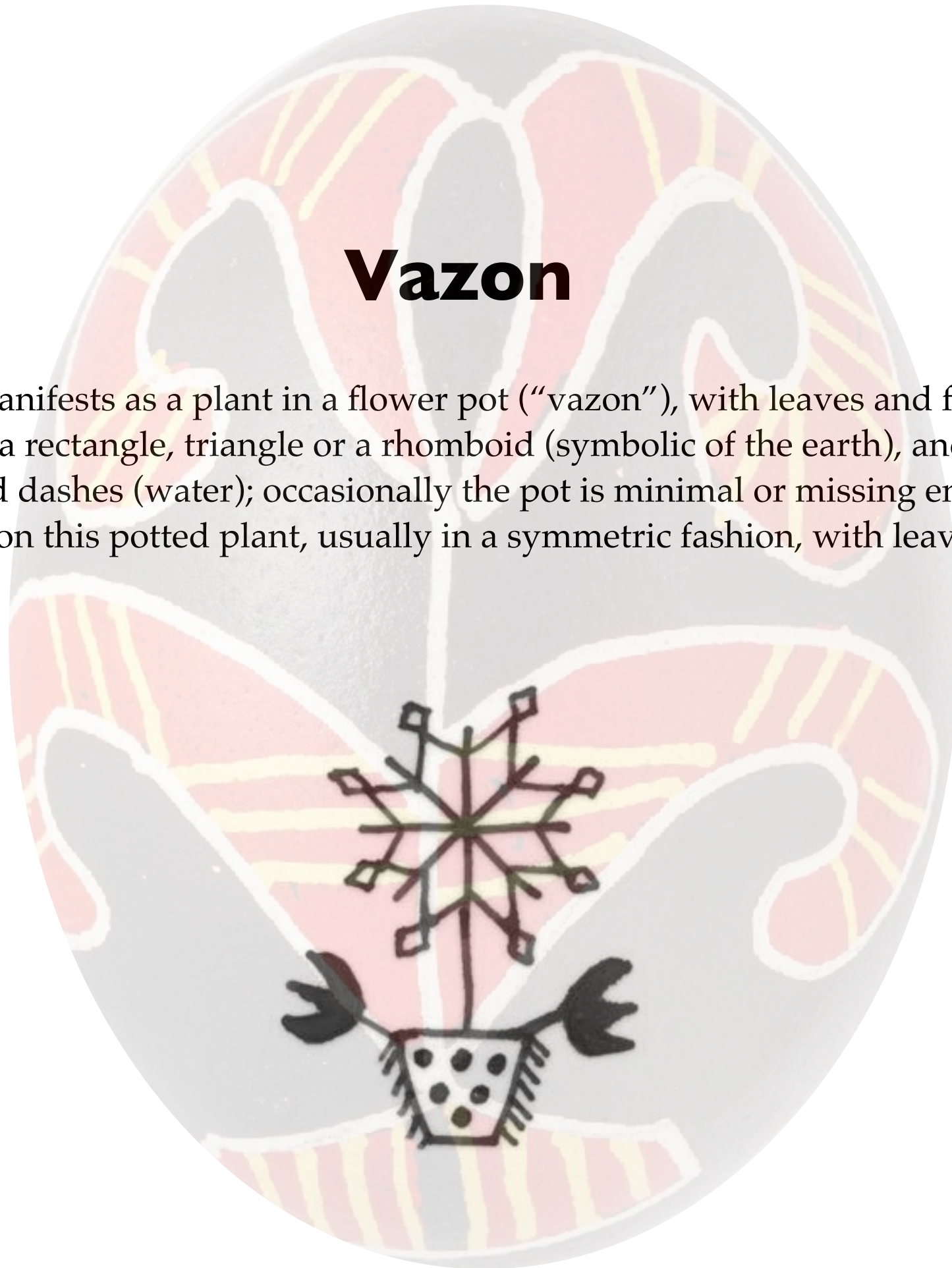
Tree of Life

The “tree of life,” is widely used in pysanky designs. It can be represented many ways. Sometimes, as is common in Hutsul pysanky, it appears as two deer on either side of a tree.



Vazon

More often it manifests as a plant in a flower pot (“vazon”), 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); occasionally the pot is minimal or missing entirely. Many branches grow on this potted plant, usually in a symmetric fashion, with leaves and flowers.



Vazon

This plant is a berehynia (goddess) symbol, as the branches represent her (many) arms. It is reminiscent of the Christian Oranta with her upraised arms.



Vazon

More examples of vazon symbols found on pysanky:



Vazon

The vazon motif is also said to represent the universe, because the tree of life unites the three worlds: the underground, our world, and the heavens/sky. These are examples of traditional pysanky with a tree of life/ vazon motif, from Kirovohrad, Podillia (2), and Volyn.



Vazon

More examples: Hutsul, Vinnytsia, Volyn, and Zhytomyr.



Vazon

More examples: Hrubeshiv and Podillia (3).



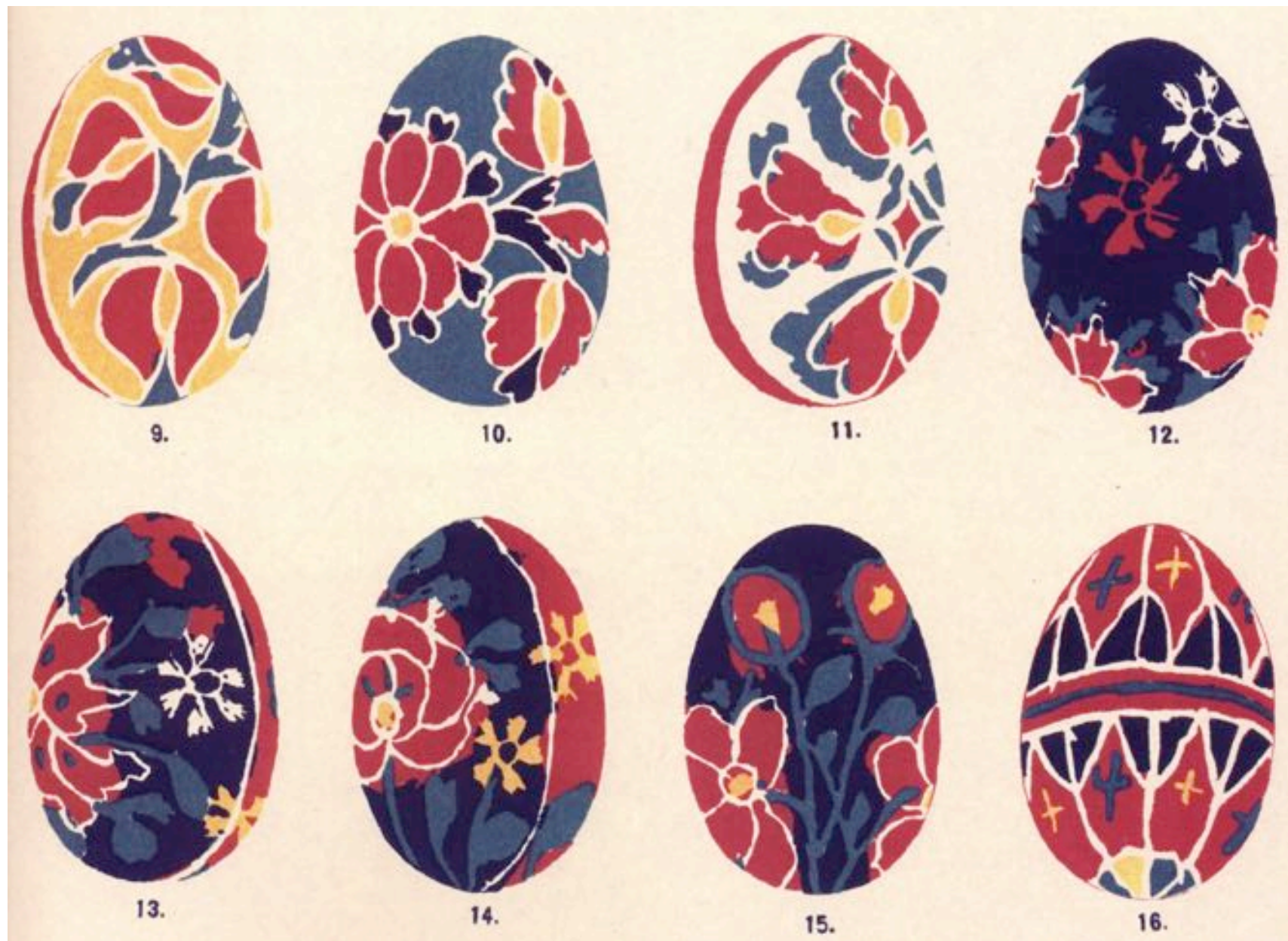
Flowers

Beauty, fertility, abundance



Flowers

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



Flowers

Flowers are a symbol of beauty and of fertility and abundance.

The “other flowers” found on pysanky can also be subdivided. First there are the very widespread “**kvitka**” (flower) motifs. These are defined by their non-definition--there are no specific botanical features, it is a generic flower, not a specific one.



Flowers

As you can see, flower motifs vary in size and shape, but have the common feature of a **lack of specific features**. They resemble a child's conception of a flower—petals, from a common center, in various arrangements. It is the **multiple** petals which make a motif a flower.

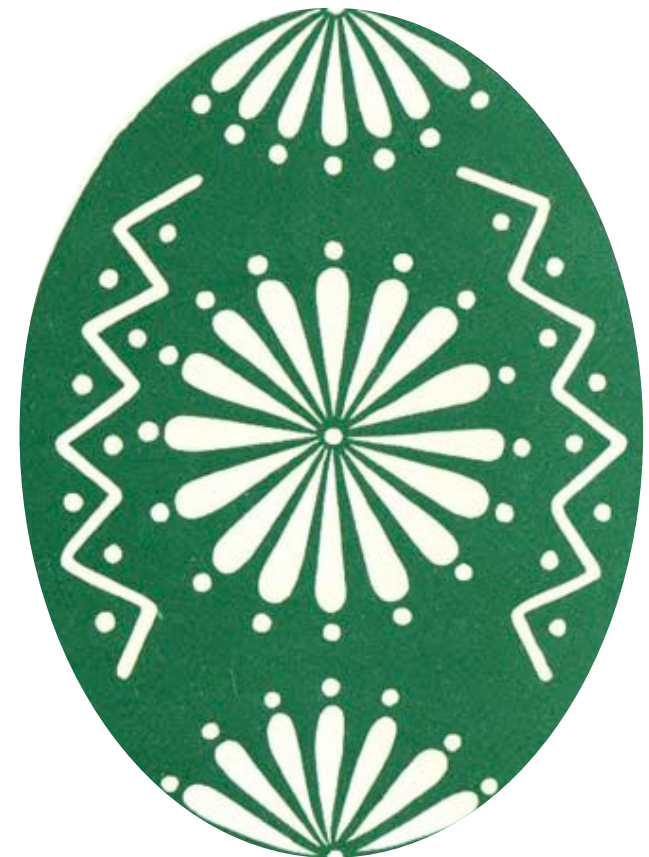
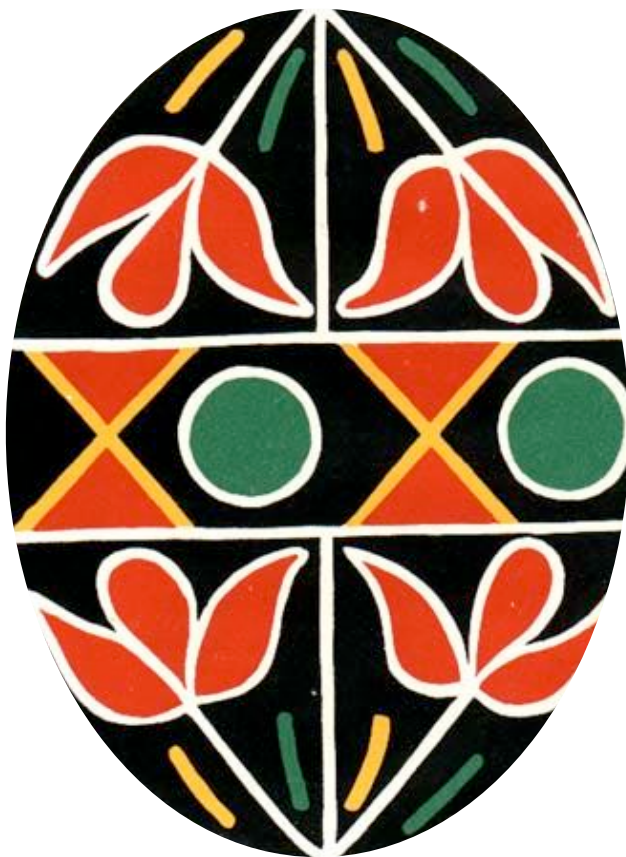


On the other hand, motifs like the ones below—a central ovoid with a serrated outline—are much more likely to be **leaves**, and are often identified as oak leaves. More complex designs of this sort, like the lower example below, can be seen on Sokal pysanky, where they may be leaves, flowers or buds.



Flowers

Below are a few examples of “kvitky” on pysanky from Binyashevsky, with examples from the Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Lemko regions:



Flowers

These are examples of a variety of kvitka motifs on pysanky I have written; these first three are from Zakarpattia and Cherkasy regions:



Flowers

These floral pysanky are from Hrubeshiv, Kuban and the Kirovohrad regions:



Flowers

These floral pysanky are from Chernihiv region (eastern Polissia):



Flowers

These floral pysanky are a bit more complex, and are from Podillia, Kyiv (2) and Odesa:



Flowers

These floral pysanky are from Sokal:



Flowers

More floral pysanky are from Sokal:



Flowers

The other category of floral pysanky is “named” flowers. These are pysanky given the names of actual flowers, and which usually possess some attributes of those flowers.



“Kosytsi”

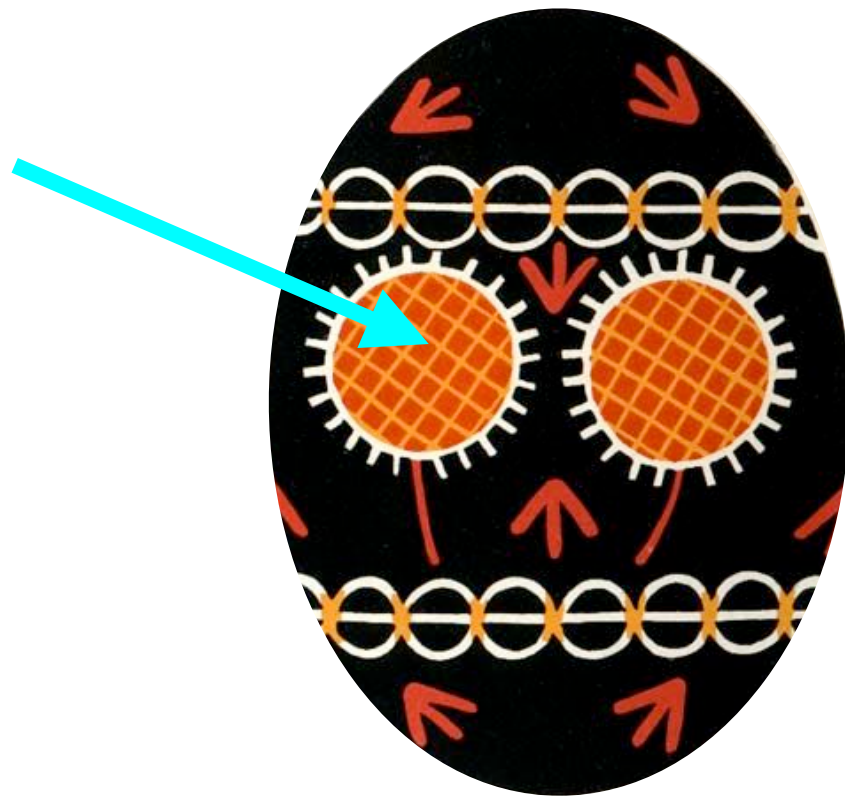
Pysanky called “Kosytsi” are found frequently in Bukovyna. The name translates to “edelweiss,” but these are actually a variation on the berehynia (kucheri with wings).



Sunflowers

Sunflowers, another Ukrainian favorite, are probably sun symbols.

Sunflowers on traditional folk pysanky tend to be very simple, a circle with fringe, as in these Boiko and Kyiv region pysanka from Binyashevsky. The latter is actually a berehynia motif which has been renamed due to the characteristics of the head.



Tulips

Tulip motifs are common in some regions, with many variations on the name. Tulips were not native to Ukraine, and not well known. Selivachov notes that the names “tulip” and “orchid” were often given to odd, fantastical flowers.



Carnations

Carnations can sometimes be seen on pysanky, and they resemble their real-life counterparts somewhat, like this pysanka from the Chernihiv region.



Campanula

Bellflowers can be seen in this pysanka from Chernihiv (“Дзвіночки”). It is not a common motif.



Lily of the Valley

“Konvalia” can sometimes be seen on pysanky. On the left is an example collected by Binyashevsky from Priashivshchyna (Slovakian Lemkivshchyna). On the right is a modern folk pysanka from Pokuttia.



Poppies

Poppy motifs, though, are **not found on traditional folk pysanky**, although they are quite common in the Diaspora, where they are considered emblematic of Ukraine.

Poppies were not written on pysanky because, in folk tradition, they symbolized death. Poppies were never embroidered on rushnyky, either, except on those meant for funerals. Nor were poppies woven into vinky, the floral wreath/headdresses that young women wore, unless the wearer was in mourning for the death of a brother.

Since the desovietization movement which began after the Maidan, what had been the “Great Patriotic War” has become known instead as WWII, and it is now symbolized not by the Russian St. George’s ribbon, but by the poppy, as in many western nations.

These are a few examples of Diasporan poppy motifs:



Grapes

Good harvest; Holy communion



Grapes

Grapes are probably the most commonly found fruit motif on pysanky; per Selivachov, this motif is found in just about every region of Ukraine, and varies from highly naturalistic to highly stylized. While this motif is more common on embroidery and pottery, it appears on pysanky as well. The motif consists of a compact grouping of rounded, faceted or even linear elements reminiscent of abundant bunches of grapes.

Whatever ancient symbolism there may have been to grapes and grapevines, they are now subsumed to christian ones. In the christian context, the vineyard is Christ's church, and the vine-grower is Christ himself; he is also the "True Vine."

These are examples of grape motifs:



Grapes

The pysanky below have examples of the grapes motif. On the left and right are Pokuttian pysanky, in the center is one from the Kyiv region.



Grapes

These three pysanky are traditional designs from Sokal, Podillia and the Chernihiv region featuring grape motifs.





QUESTIONS?

Household Motifs

Scevomorphic



Sieve (Resheto)

Plowed fields, Protection



Sieve (Resheto)

Resheto is the Ukrainian word for a cross-hatched net design which resembles grating or a sieve. Such netting is an ancient design which dates back to the **Paleolithic Era** (Old Stone Age, through 8000 BC), and symbolized the goddess of the sky.



According to traditional Ukrainian beliefs, the resheto has the talismanic purpose of **protection from evil spirits**, so the sieve and the net are symbols of this. According to Selivachov, this explains why almost every design element contains crossed lines.

Sieve (Resheto)

Resheto is not generally a separate design element, but fills in other motifs on a pysanka: circles, squares, rhombuses, triangles. Resheto can sometimes be seen on pysanky from other parts of Ukraine, but is utilized most by the Hutsuls, the Bukovynians, and the Pokuttians. (Most regions outside of the Carpathians prefer to fill in shapes with stripes or solid colors instead of cross-hatching.)

These simple examples of resheto are from the Kyiv region (left and center) and the Boiko area of the Carpathians (right):



Sieve (Resheto)

These examples of resheto are from the ethnographic Hutsul areas of northern Bukovyna:



Sieve (Resheto)

These are examples of Hutsul pysanky with resheto:



Sieve (Resheto)

Examples of Pokuttian pysanky with a plethora of resheto, from the Easter market in Zabolotiv:



Rakes, Combs

Cloud motifs; rain, water



Rakes

Rakes are an agricultural symbol, but not because they are farming implements. Ukrainian rakes were made of wood, and looked like this:



Rake symbols (sometimes called “combs”) are very simple motifs, sometimes just a crossbar with fringe, other times a triangle with a fringe. The symbols shown here are of this type:



Rakes

The first two symbols in this row are of the triangle type of rake:



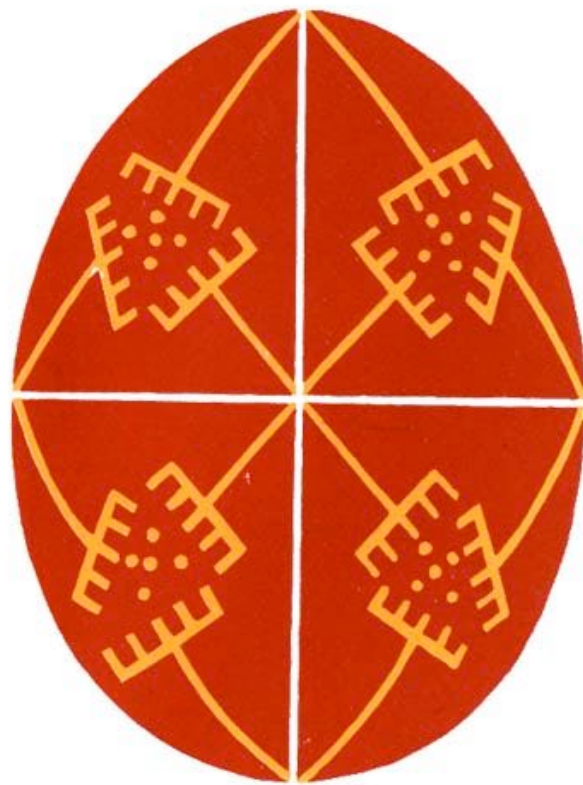
And some versions were more complex, with the base being faceted, circular or irregular:



Rakes

Rakes / combs are actually *water symbols*, and represent **clouds and rain**. They often are shaped like triangles, with the dashed lines representing rain itself. Sometimes the triangles are surrounded by dots, or the rakes have dots in close proximity. These dots symbolize *seeds*, which are watered by the rain and then grow to yield a bountiful crop.

Rakes are a very common motif on Ukrainian pysanky. These are examples from Binyashevsky, from the regions of Voronezh, Volyn and Pidliashia:



Rakes

These are examples of pysanky from the Vinnytsia (western Podillia) region featuring rakes; the one on the left includes seed motifs:



Rakes

This pair of red pysanky from Zakarpattia, and a black one from the Donetsk region, exhibit simple rakes, with seeds and even flowers:



Rakes

These sorokoklyns have 24 rakes hidden in their intricate designs.



Windmill (Svarha)

Svarha: movement of the sun across the sky



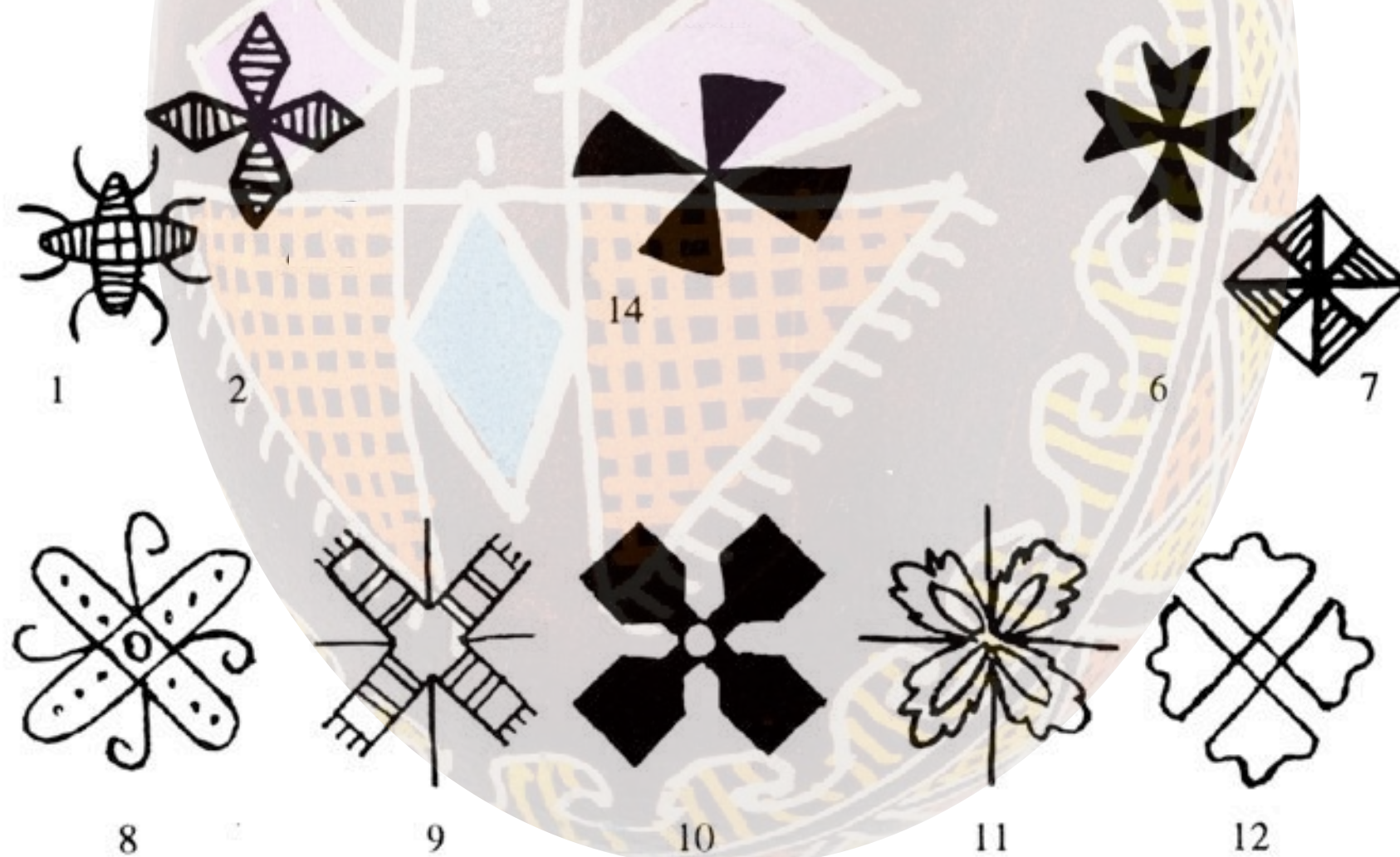
Windmill

A windmill (vitriak) is a cross.....in motion. It is a svarha (swastika), an ancient solar symbol. Svaroh, for who the symbol is named, was the god of the sky, the sun, and heavenly fire. The svarha depicts the **movement** of the sun across the sky. As Marusia Chaika notes, the swastika/svarha marked movement: good if following the sun, or evil if going against the sun. The windmill/svarha was depicted in different ways across Ukraine.



Windmills

In Podillia (1, 6, 7, 14), according to Selivachov, it was a rectangular design that resembled an actual windmill. In Bukovyna (8-12), Halychyna, Volyn (2) and Poltava “wedged” designs predominate, giving the whole sign the appearance of a Maltese cross. In Chernhihiv the vitriak is a stylized rosette with a notched contour.



Windmills

These examples only begin to hint at the varieties of expression of this motif. They are from Volyn; the one on the left shows a geometric version of the svarha, while, on the right, you have a more curvilinear version. The latter design is called “Verba (Берѡа)” or willow, and the arms of the svarha have sprouted leaves.



Windmills

These two pysanky from Podillia are both quite interesting. The one on the left adds crowns to a simple svarha, turning it into a swirl of serpents. The one on the right transforms the svarha into a botanical motif, its center now a flower, and the arms leaves.



Windmills

The pysanka on the left is a simple one from Kuban, and a straightforward vitriak. On the right is are examples from the Chernihiv region and Pokuttia; the arms have become a rosette with notches.



Windmills

On the left is a simple windmill from Eastern Polissia; on the right is an example of a curvilinear design; although it is called “Magpies,” it is quite obviously a svarha.





QUESTIONS?

Religious Motifs

Ancient and Modern



Religious Motifs

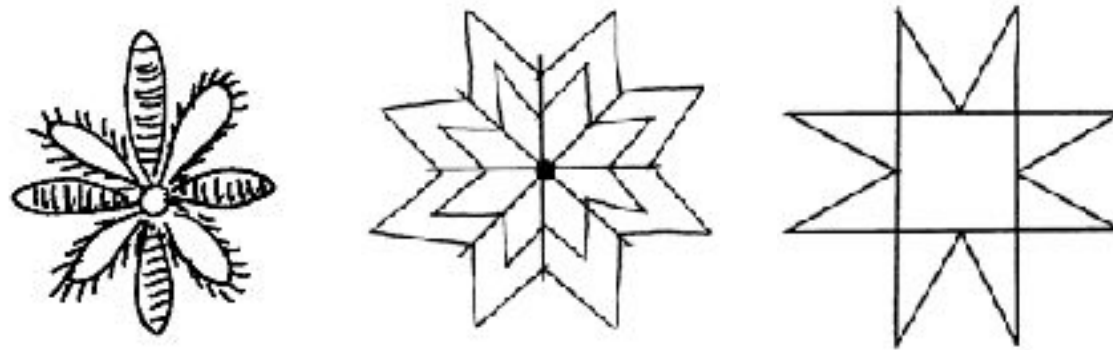
Religious motifs on pysanky are mostly ancient, **pre-christian** ones. Like other traditional motifs, they can be found across different media in Ukrainian folk art.

Christian motifs do exist, too, but they are generally either repurposed / renamed pre-christian motifs or recent (20th and 21st century) additions.



Ruzha (Mallow)

Sun symbol



Ruzha

One of the most popular motifs found on pysanky is the eight-pointed star, which is a sun symbol. It can be found in just about every region of Ukraine, and is a very common motif in most. (Below: Lviv, Volyn, Zhytomyr and Kuban regions)



Ruzha

A ruzha, often called a rozha, is actually a mallow flower (hollyhock family), although the term is applied, with modifiers, to many different flowers. The modifiers are botanical:



ruzha borova – geranium
ruzha rusalchana – peony
ruzha yapons'ka – camelia
ruzha poliova – poppy
ruzha vodna – water lily

Ruzha

Neither rozha nor ruzha refers to roses, as is often falsely assumed by diasporan Ukrainian speakers. The Ukrainian word for a rose (botanically speaking) is troianda (торянда).

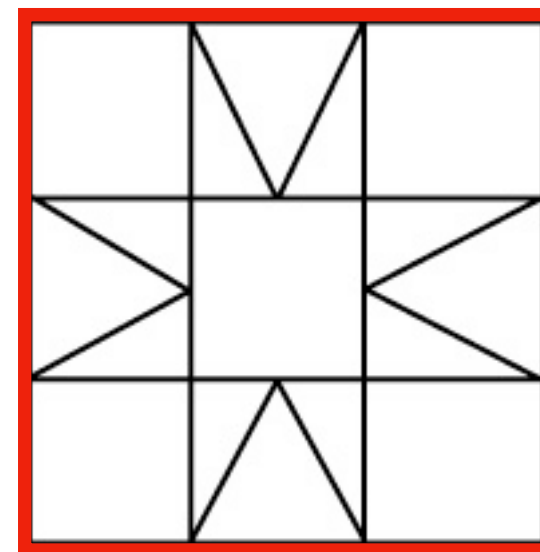
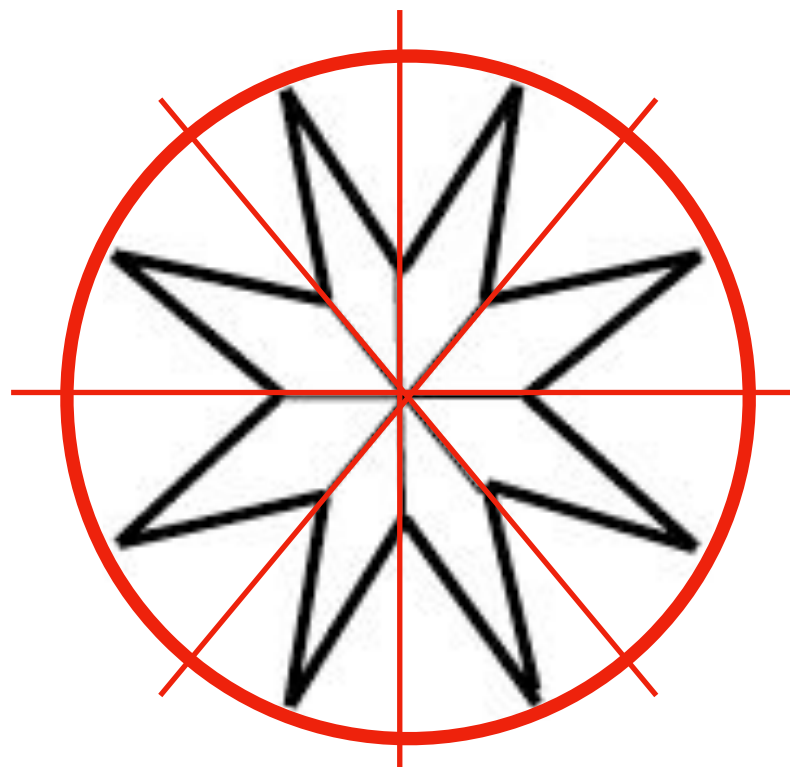
Binyashevsky, in his book, has renamed several old “ruzha” patterns as troiandy, but this is an incorrect modernization of the names. (Troiandy / roses are found primarily in Brocard-style cross stitch embroidery, which is a relatively recent addition to the Ukrainian folk art canon.)



Ruzha

The term rozha / ruzha is typically used for the large type of eight pointed star motif which is based on a circle, as opposed to the the smaller stars you often see in bands that are based on squares. The former more closely resembles a flower.

Marusia Chaika states that the ruzha / rozha is a **solar** symbol, especially when it is used as a large motif on two sides of an egg. When there are many small ruhzi on the surface of a pysanka, these may represent **stars**.



Bokova Ruzha

There are many modifiers used to describe the various types of ruzhas found on pysanky. The two primary modifiers refer to the **location** of the ruzha.

The pysanka on the left, from Volyn, is a simple, classic ruzha. It has eight points, and is the central motif of this pysanka. It is of the most common sort, is **Бокова/bokova** (side/lateral) ruzha, referring to those pysanky with ruzha motifs on the two sides (each face) of the egg. This is a pysanka with a longitudinal division.

The pysanka on the right is also a bokova ruzha; it is from Zakarpattia, and written using the drop-pull technique. It has many more points than eight, but is still considered a ruzha.



Bokova Ruzha

More examples of bokovi ruzhi from Volyn and the Lviv and regions:



Storchova Ruzha

The other locational modifier is **сторчова/storchova**, also called **сторцова/stortsova** and **сторчева/storcheva** (per Manko, examples in the book). This is when the two ruzhi are located on the top and bottom of the egg (an equatorial division of the pysanka). These examples are from Volyn, Kuban, and Podnistrovia (Bukovyna)



Povna Ruzha

Other modifiers refer to characteristics of the ruzha. **Повна/Povna** (full) ruzha is the most common; this refers to a compound ruzha (or a ruzha in a ruzha). It is sometimes used for irregular ruzhi with more than 8 points, too, when the points are on different levels. These pysanky are from Volyn and the Kholm and Poltava regions.



Polovynchasta Ruzha

Половинчаста/Polovynchasta is a half ruzha, literally. It usually has four points and looks like someone lopped the other half off. These first two are from Poltavshchyna, and the third is from Talne raion, Cherkasy oblast.



Klynchasta Ruzha

Клинчаста/Klynchasta is usually used, in pysankarstvo, when describing sorokoklyn ("40 triangles") type pysanky. I have seen it used occasionally to describe an ordinary povna ruzha (Manko 36-27). It means "wedgy." Although it Binyashevsky has labelled this ruzha from Zaporizhia "kosychata," it is a classic example of a "wedgy" ruzha.



Kosychasta Ruzha

You'll sometimes see a **косичаста/kosychasta** ruzha - it is "awry" in some fashion. Often the ends of the star are curled, as though in motion (the way that a svarha is a moving cross). Variations of this can be called **закручена/zakruchena** (curled) or **кучер'ява/kucheriava** (curly). The first two examples below are Podillian, the third is from the Odesa region.



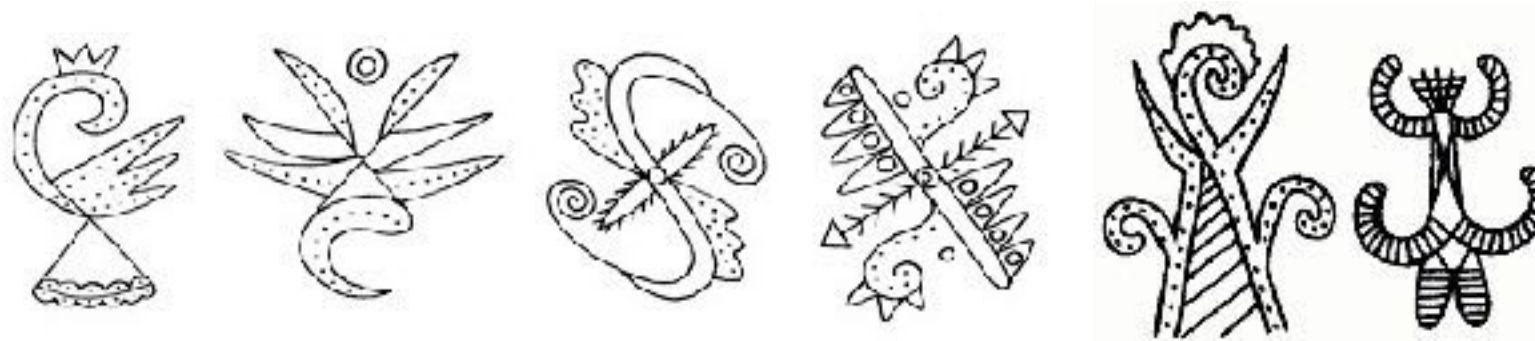
Pozdovzhna Ruzha

Another variation is a "stretched" version of a storchova ruzha; it is called **ПОЗДОВЖНА**/**pozdovzhna** or **ПОВДОЖА**/povdovzha. These patterns are from Kulzhynsky the Chernihiv region (Mutyn, povit Krolevetskyi), the Kamianets-Podilskyi region, and Kyiv region (Shuliavka).



Berehynia

The great goddess



Berehynia

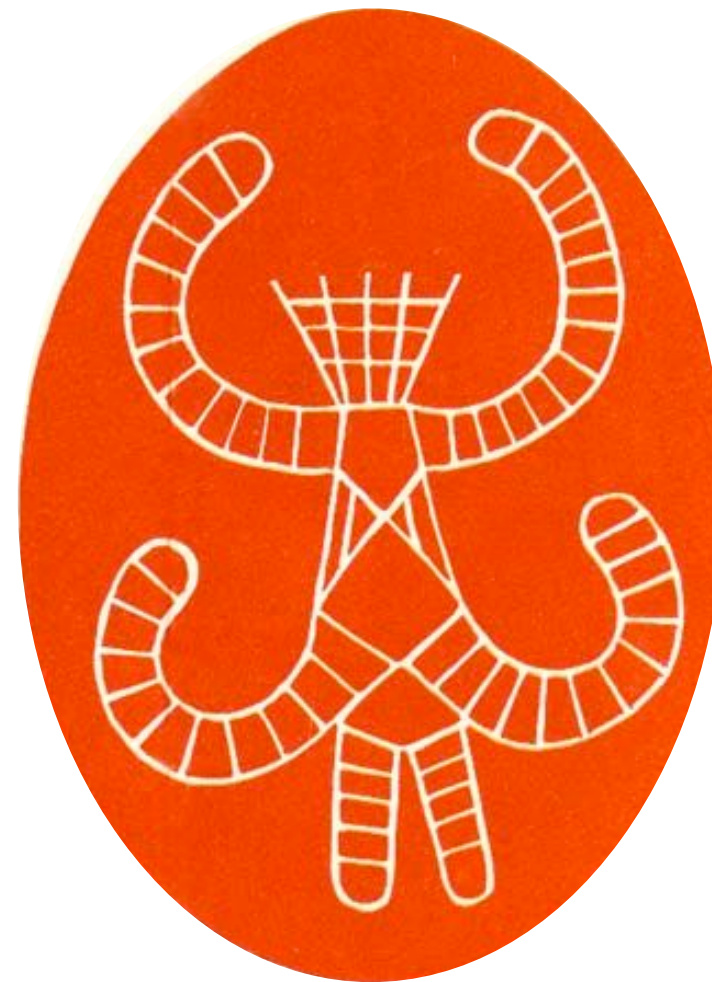
The goddess motif is an ancient one, and most commonly found in *pysanky* from Polissia, Bukovyna and Podillia. The *berehynia* was believed to be the source of life and death. On the one hand, she is a life giving mother, the creator of heaven and all living things, and the mistress of heavenly water (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.



Berehynia

This is similar to the appearance of the Christian Oranta, like this one in S. Sophia's cathedral in Kyiv:



Berehynia-Bohyn'ka

Pysanky with this motif were called “bohyn’ky” (богиньки, little goddesses) or “zhuchky” (жучки, beetles), the latter because they are similar in appearance to the Cyrillic letter Ж (zh). You can see examples of the oranta-style berehynia in these examples from (Podillia, Kyivshchyna, Pokuttia):



Berehynia

Traditional examples include these:



Berehynia

And these:



Berehynia

The last pysanka, from Kuban, only really reveals the berehynia when laid on its side:



Berehynia-Vazon

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.



Berehynia

This was discussed with the phytomorphic motifs, but here are a few more examples:



Berehynia

And are a few more examples:

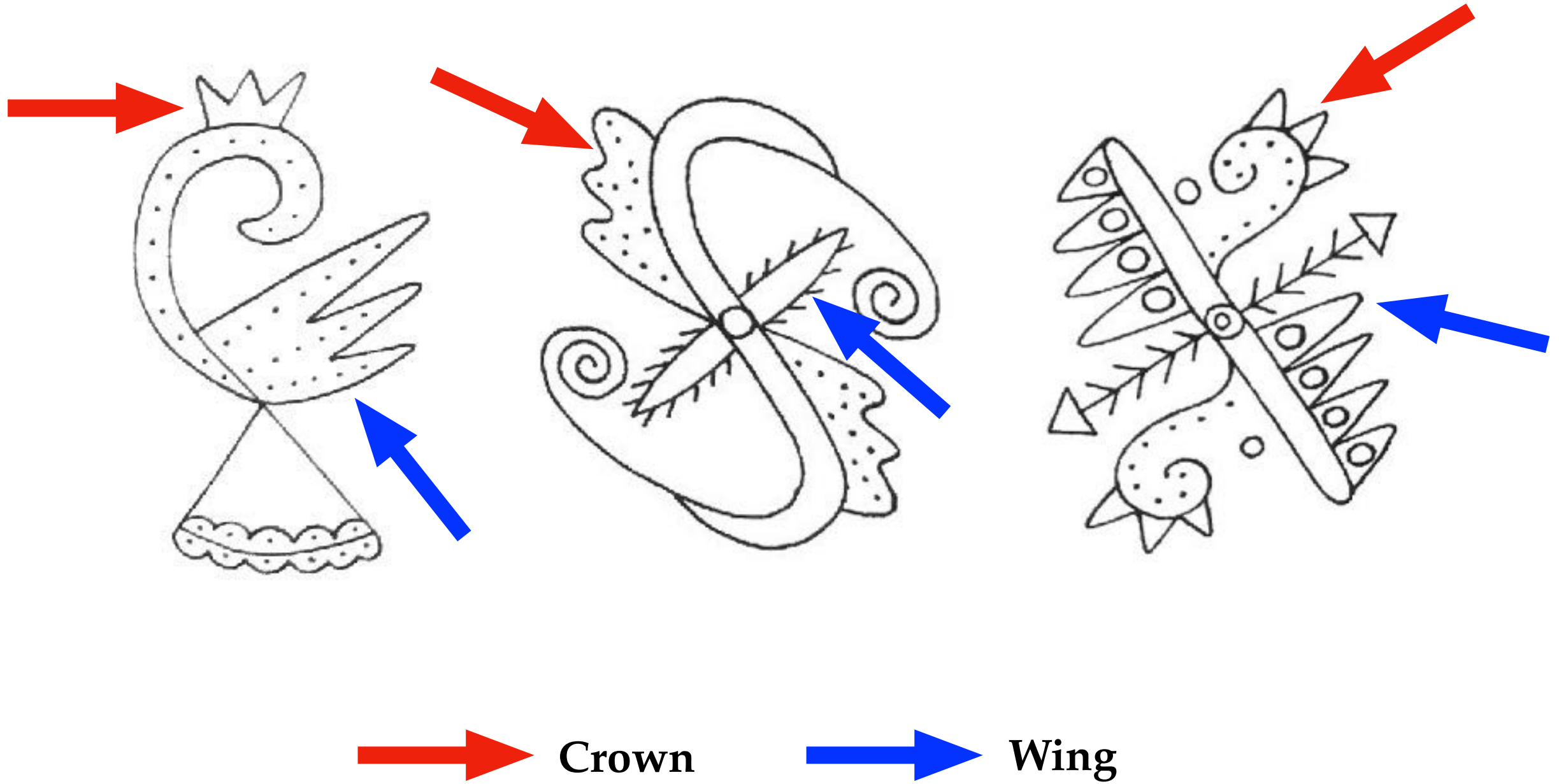


Berehynia-Kucher

The most common depiction of the great goddess is a composition containing “kucheri” (curls). The *berehynia* may be seen as a curl with wings. Sometimes one curl is mirror-imaged, giving an “S” shape with wings (right 2). 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.”



Berehynia



Berehynia

These are two examples from Western Podillia (Binyashevsky), single and mirrored:



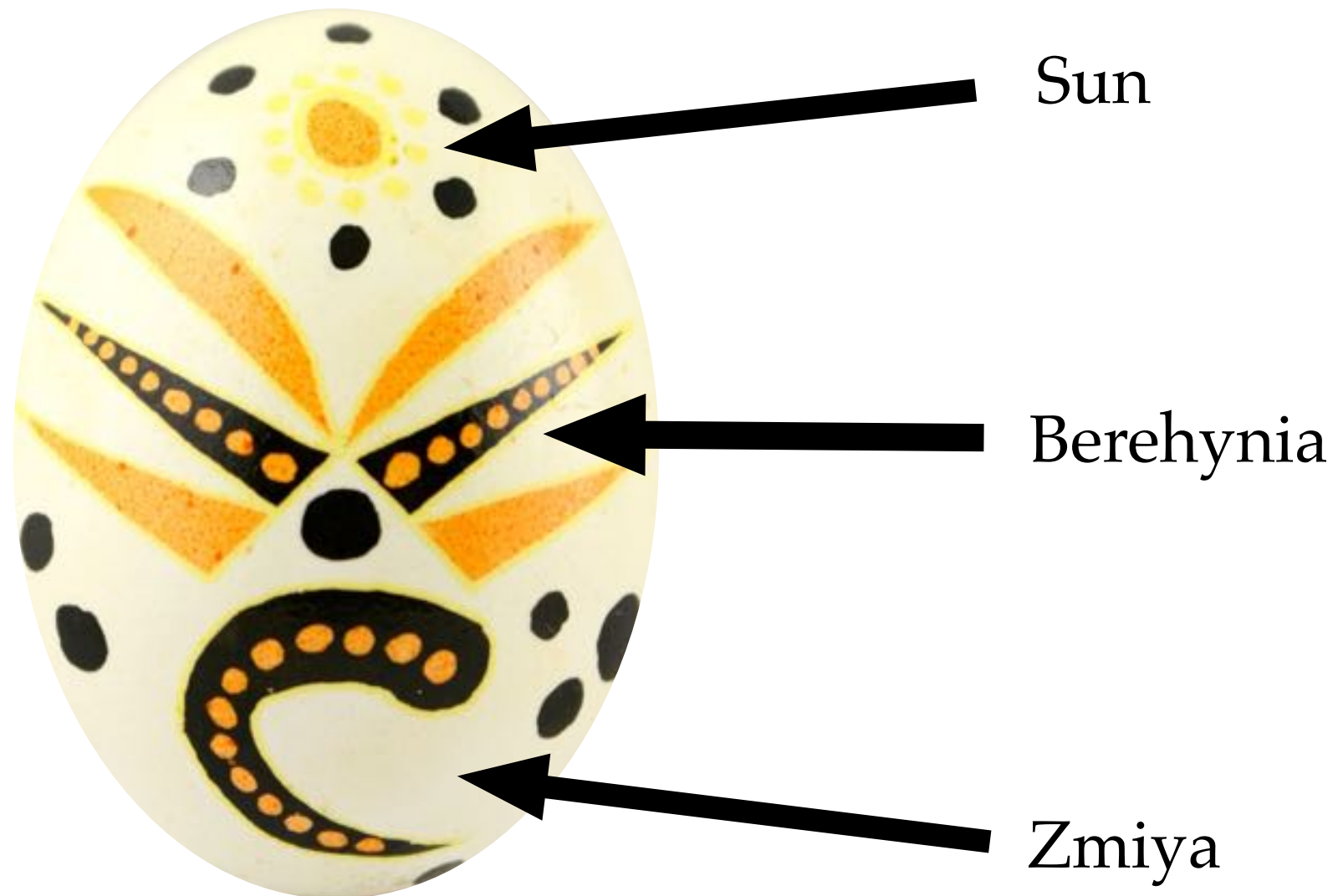
Berehynia

These berehynia pysanky are of the doubled curls (mirror-imaged) type. Note the “wings” between the top and bottom curls; this cross-piece differentiates between the zmiya symbol (a simple S) and the berehynia (a crossed S).



Berehynia

Lastly, this is an example of a berehynia perched upon the zmiya; you can see the traditional berehynia, with her six arms, and she is over a zmiya. She is a goddess of the heavens, and the zmiya is the god of the earth. Above them both is a sun:



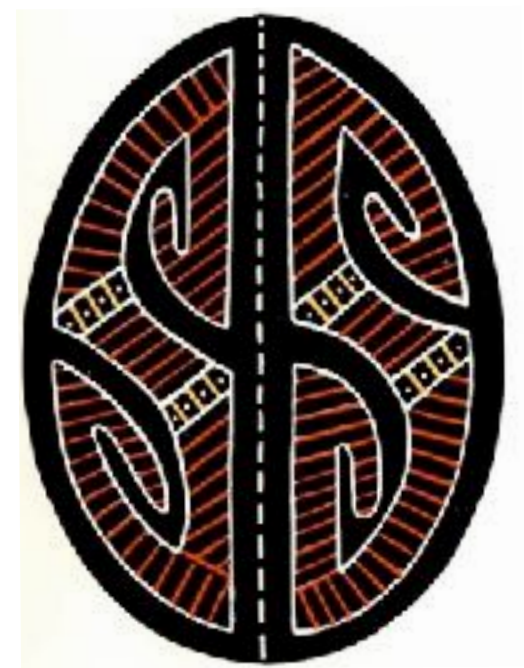
Berehynia

As Marusya Chaika notes, with the decline of the cult of the Berehynia, she devolved into countless characters of inferior demonology with much weaker powers, such as sprites and mermaids. However, her relatives remain on the steppes of Ukraine in the form of Scythian stone images.



Serpent (Zmiya)

Water god



Serpent (Zmiya)

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 things.

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, and curls (kucheri).



Sumha

Examples of the sumha (S shape) from eastern Podillia (2) and Bukovyna (Elyjiw).



Kucheri

Kucheri, simple curls, were also symbols of the zmiya. Sometimes the kucher has a crown, and sometimes it is found under the berehynia.



Wavy Lines

Examples of wavy lines from Cherkasy, Hrubeshiv.



Waves

Examples of waves from Eastern Podillia, Poltava, Kherson



Waves

More pysanky with waves / curls from Eastern Podillia.



Spirals

The spiral is a powerful motif, and is another 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.



Spirals

Examples of spirals from Boikivshchyna, Poltava, Prydniprovya, Pokuttia.



“Hand of God”

The "Hand of God" (Божа ручка) motif is sometimes called a "glove" (рукавичка) or "grandfather's fingers" (дідові пальці). This symbol comes down to us from the stone ages (Paleolithic era).

According to Marusia Chaiko, in ancient times the hand was a symbol of power/control. It could be the sign of the presence of god, and, as such, a protective talisman for people.



“Hand of God”

Such symbols usually have three or sometimes four fingers—but not usually five. This can be explained because to early people the god-sun was seen as a bird, and his handprint would thus be the print made by the feet/talons of a bird. Note the similarity of this motif to those called "chicken feet," "duck feet" or "magpie feet," or even to those called "bear paws."

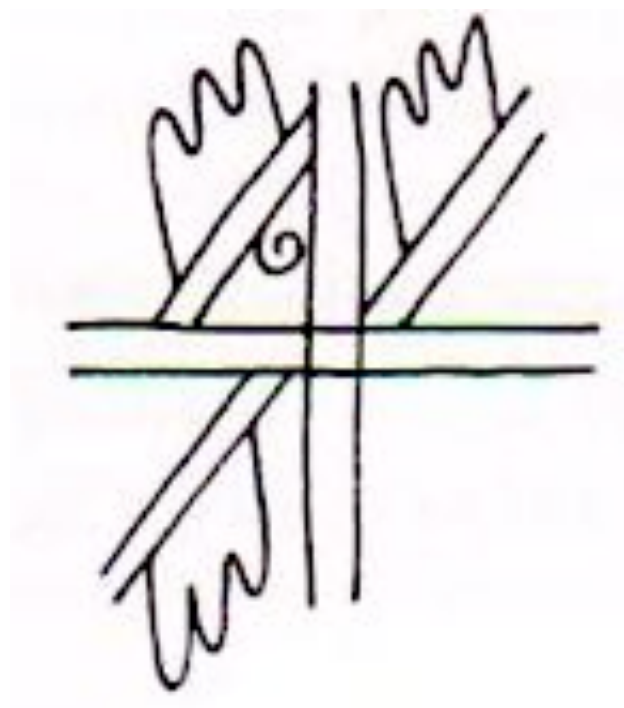


“Hand of God”

In the examples below, the two symbols on the left are usually identified as hands of god, while the two on the right are called bird's feet. Local names can vary a lot, as the old symbols have become forgotten and renamed over time....



“Hand of God”



“Hand of God”



Hand of God

The pysanky below from Podillia are given various names: *besahy* (saddlebags), *kryla* (wings), *holubka* (dove), *kosi rukavy* (oblique sleeves), *pavy* (peacocks), *bezkonnechnyk* (endless line). Some sources identify the motif as a ram, but this is actually the ancient hand of god symbol.



Hand of God

In eastern Podillia, the hand of god motif is often called a “holub” (dove).



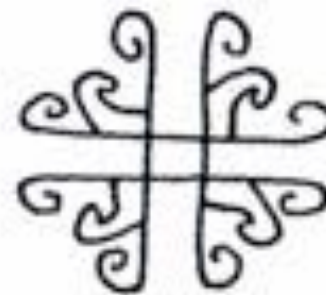
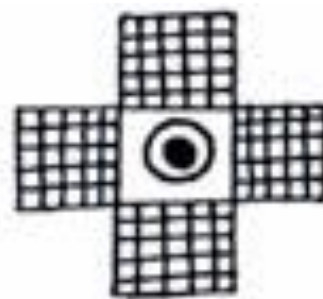
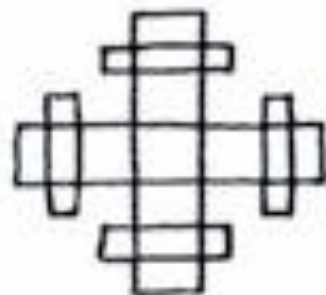
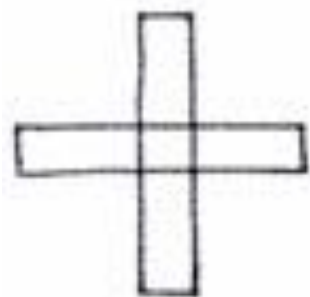
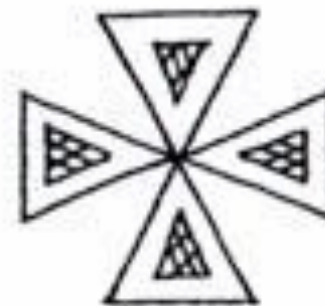
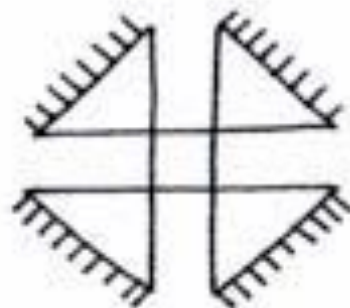
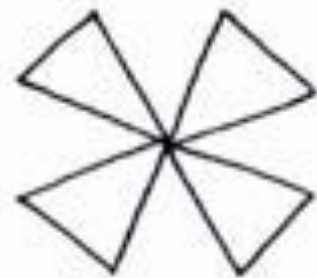
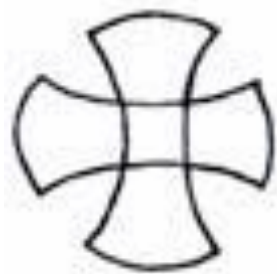
Cross

Sun Symbol



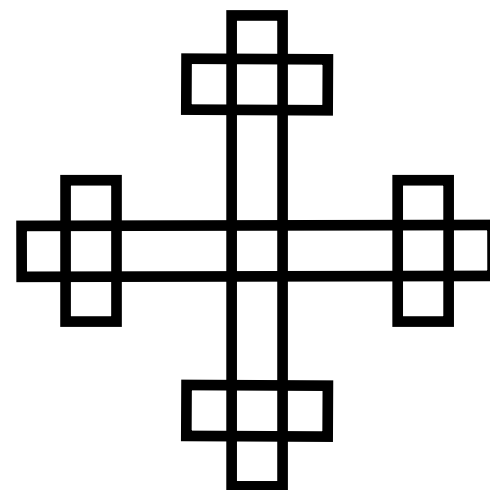
Cross

Crosses are a common and popular motif in Carpathian pysankarstvo. The cross, as a symbol, predates christianity in Ukraine, and had varied meaning in different periods of Ukrainian history. It is an ancient solar symbol, an abstraction of the sun as a bird with its wings outstretched. It was also, in later times, during the early agricultural period, a symbol of the god of the earth—the symbol divided the egg in fours, similar to the four cardinal directions.

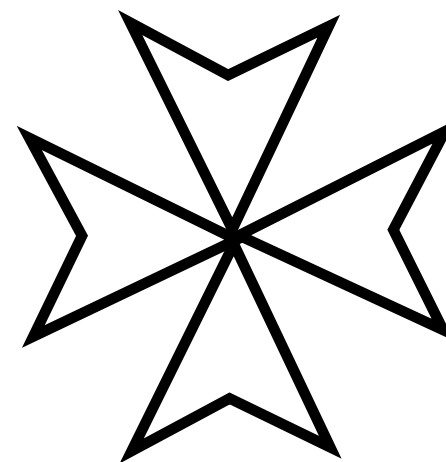


Cross

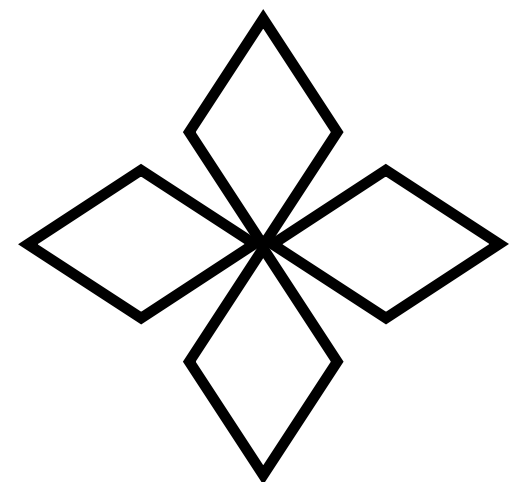
The crosses found on traditional pysanky were generally large, covering one whole side of a pysanka, and equilateral, with **all four arms of equal length**. In “Ukrainian Arts,” Yara Surmach gives three examples of this type of cross; she describes them as “the Greek cross with four equal arms, either straight with a small cross on each arm (crosslet cross), or in the form of triangles turned with their points to the center and the base broken by a wedge (Maltese cross). Sometimes the arms become rhombs, thus forming the ancient Byzantine cross.”



Crosslet



Maltese



Byzantine

Cross

Examples of each, from Hutsulshchyna, Pokuttia and Volyn.



Crosslet



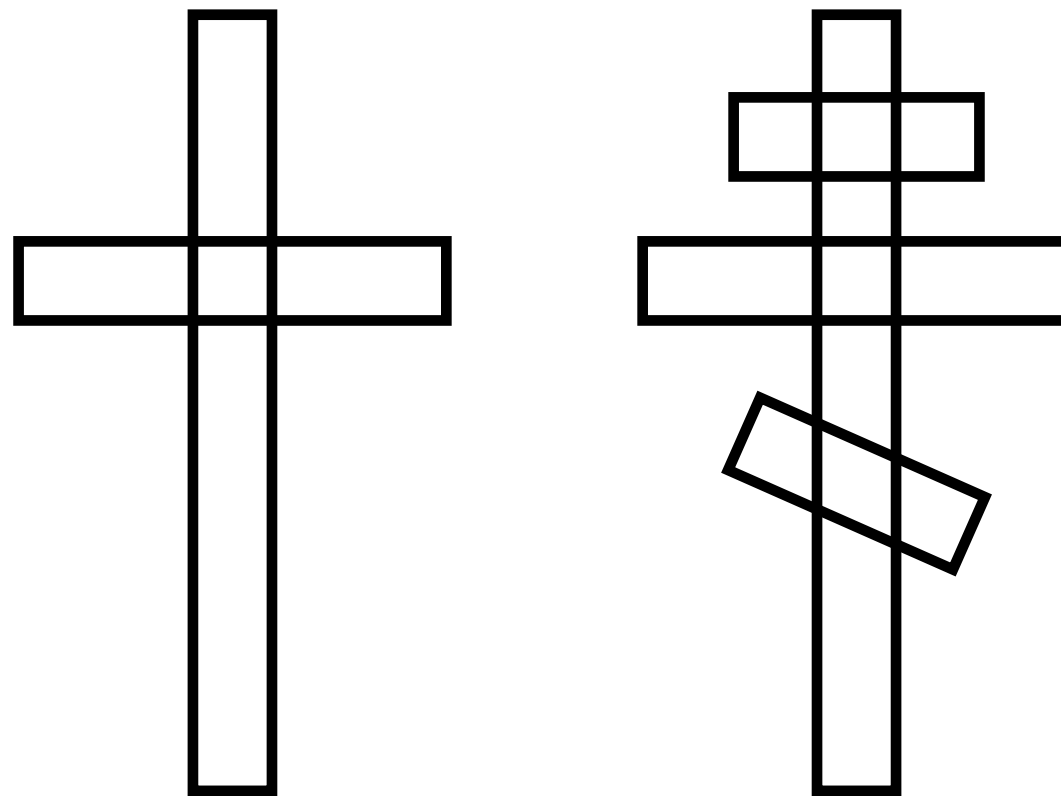
Maltese



Byzantine

Cross

Surmach also goes on to describe crosses with a “Latin” (Christian) influence, those with a prolonged lower arm, and gives the examples below. While both are truly christian crosses, the one on the left has is generally Roman Catholic/Protestant, while the one right is known as the Suppedaneum cross, and is an orthodox cross as well as a Ukrainian Catholic cross:



Cross

Latin style crosses have begun to appear in recent years on pysanky from the Hutsuls and Pokuttia, like these examples



Cross

Orthodox crosses are seen fairly often, as on these Pokuttian pysanka:



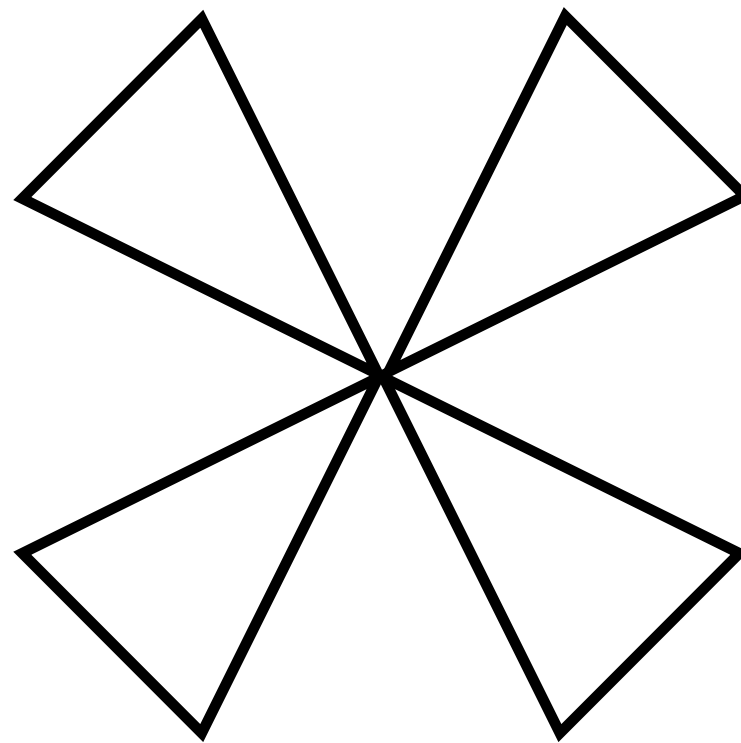
Cross

This is a particularly interesting version of the Latin cross, an actual crucifix, collected by Binyashevsky in Hutsulshchyna.



Cross

While both these crosses can be seen on pysanky, they are relatively rare, and seen more often on modern folk pysanky than on older ones. Another “Latin” influence, according to Surmach, is the St. Andrew’s cross, an **oblique** cross with the arms treated as triangles:



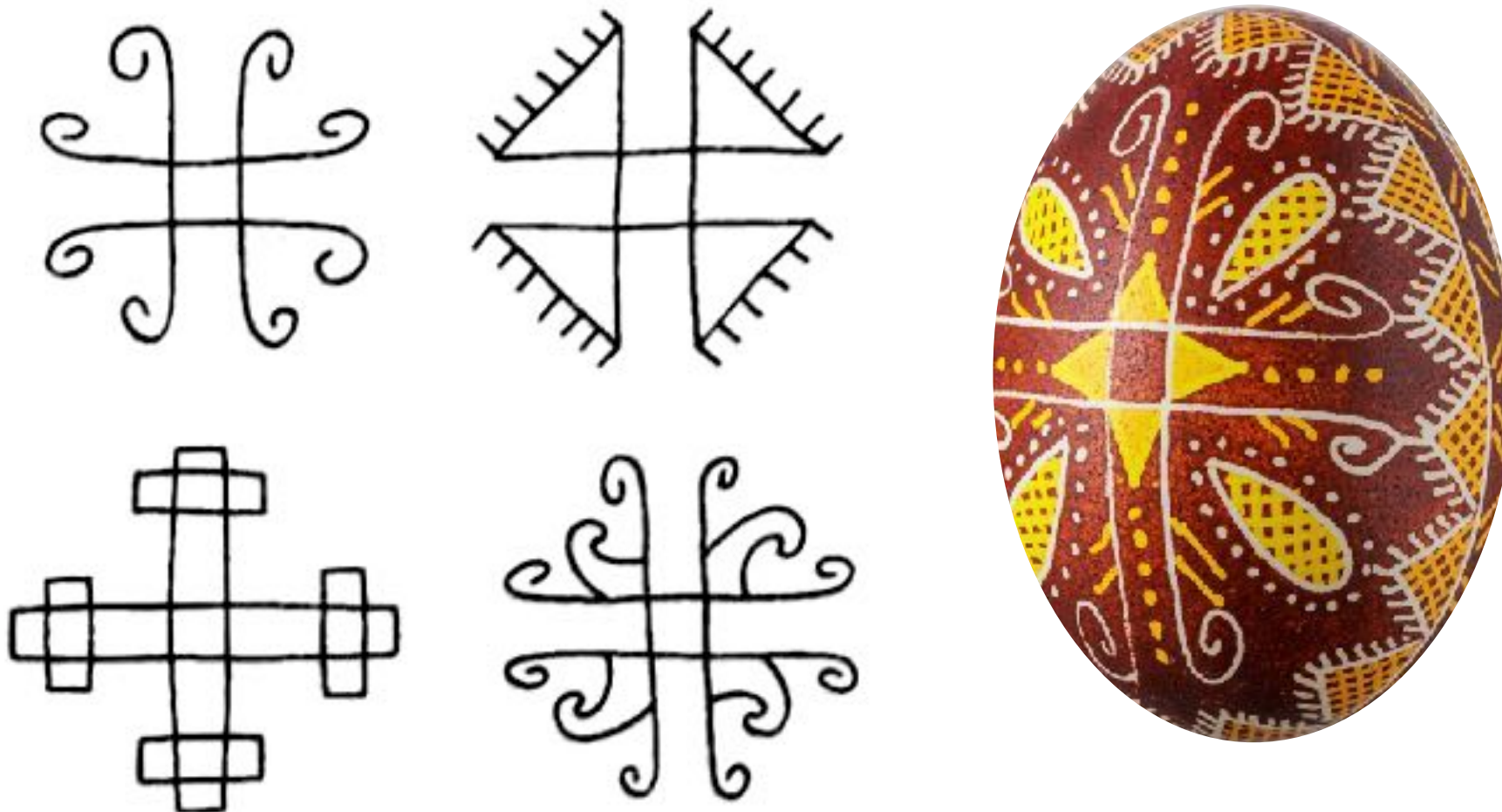
Cross

While oblique crosses are not uncommon on pysanky, they probably take their roots not from St. Andrew, but from Svaroh, the ancient Slavic god of the sky (from the Sanskrit *swarga* 'sky'), the sun, and heavenly fire (thunder). The svarha (swastika), was a tilted cross, and represented the motion of the sun through the sky.



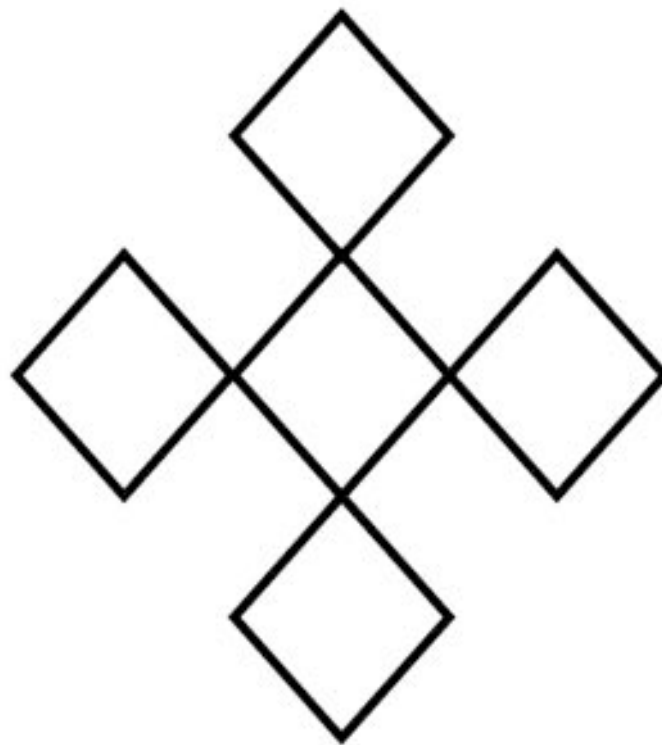
Cross

As Vira Manko notes, crosses of the “agricultural” sort were widely divided; the arms might be opened or closed, but they divided space into four. The cross on the bottom right is an example of a cross with a superimposed svarha.



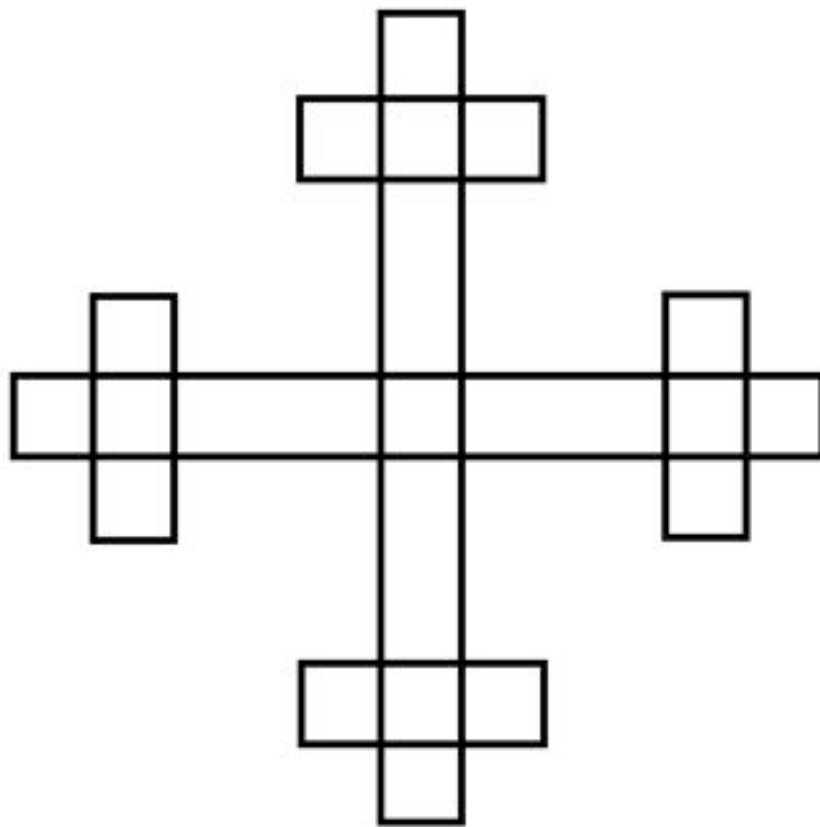
Cross

A variation on the “open” crosses is the diamond cross; it is an upright cross formed from five diamonds. The diamonds are usually filled with decorative elements; these are not infrequently found on Pokuttian and Bukovynian pysanky:



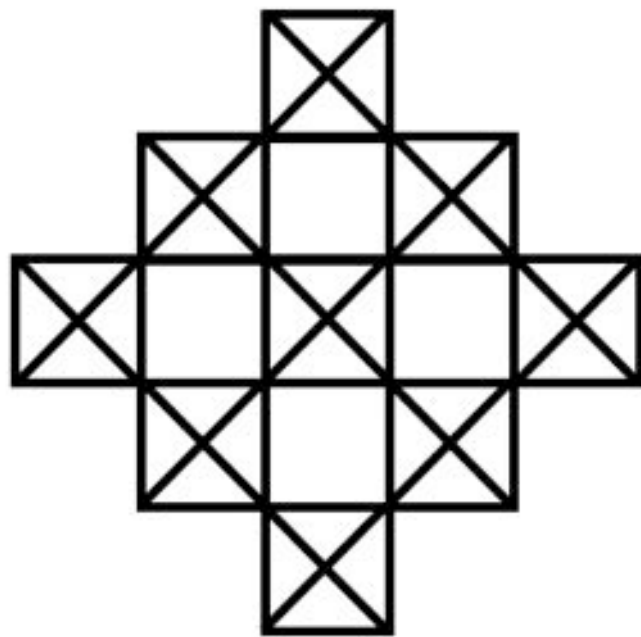
Cross

On Carpathian pysanky, you will often see a crosslet cross—a cross with each arm crossed, a variation of the Greek cross, as mentioned above:



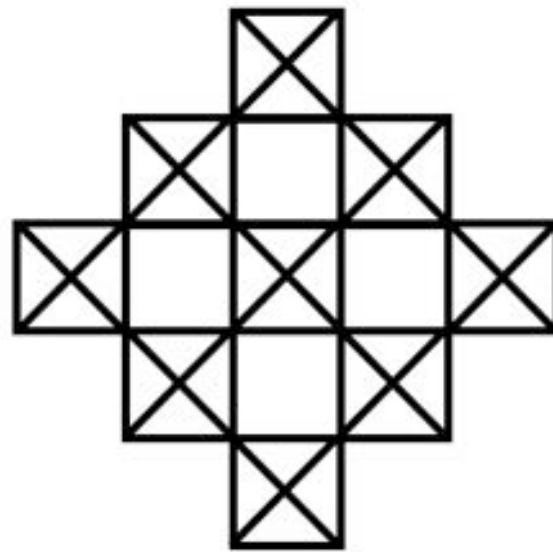
Cross

Sometimes this type of cross is fairly straightforward, as in the line drawing shown. At other times they may be much more complex, and instead contain lots of piled up squares, some with Xs through them. Small versions, like the cross below, are often seen:



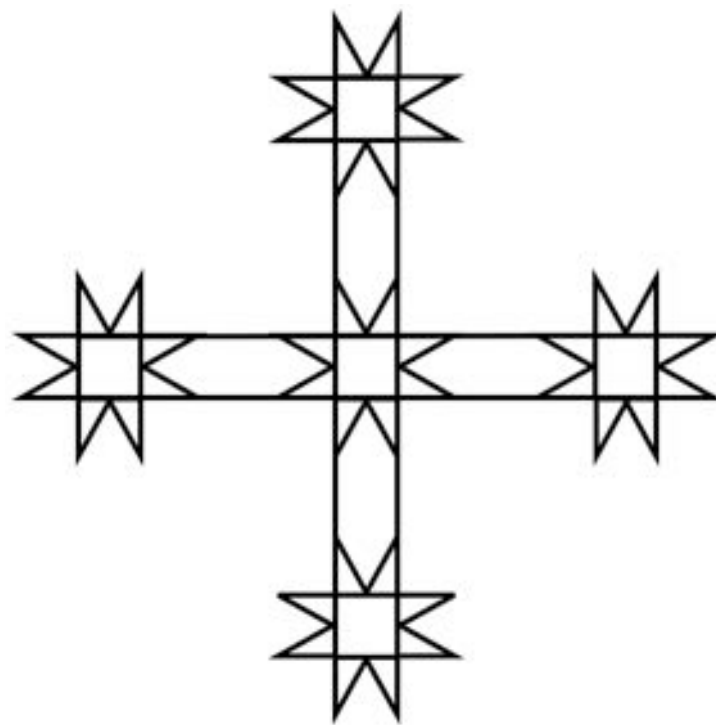
Cross

The classic compound cross, however, is a much larger version, will have four or five such components, arranged like the small bars on the cross crosslet. You can see two examples in the photo below:



Cross

The cross is often combined with the ruzha (another star symbol) to create a complex hybrid symbol. Sometimes the ruzha is simply the central motif of the cross; other times small ruzhy are arranged on the arms as the bars are on a cross crosslet:



Cross

Other combinations of motifs can occur, creating crosses with diamonds on their tips and other interesting forms.



Cross

More interesting crosses with combinations of motifs:



Cross

In some recent Hutsul and Pokuttian pysanky, crosses have begun to appear within compositions replacing previous motifs....as in these:



Churches



Churches

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

Churches can be highly abstracted or fairly realistic. They can be quite simple or be highly complex. They may be big central motifs, or they may be small motifs on the margins. And not only are churches expressed on pysanky, one can also find the *dzvinytsia*, or bell-tower, there.



Churches

One characteristic common to most church motifs is the number **three**. Churches usually things in threes: three towers, three domes, three levels, three crosses. It is by this trinitarian symmetry that we recognize them as christian khramy.



Simple Churches

Simple church motifs are very common on older pysanky, and are very abstracted depictions of wooden Hutsul and Bukovynian churches, like the one below (which has been covered with shiny metal plate).



Simple Churches

The motifs are composed of simple geometric figures, often a series of triangles or quadrangles piled one atop the other, sometimes with a simple cross on top. Often the roof tiles are represented by resheto.



Simple Churches

The pysanky below contain examples of these traditional, simple, abstracted church motifs.



“Realistic” Churches

More recent folk *pysanky* have included larger and more intricate churches. These generally have three towers, sometimes with onion domes, and each tower has a cross at the top.

The woodwork is sometimes shown in detail, and there are usually windows and central doors. You can often see steps leading up to a church.

This type of church motif is quite realistic, and it is obvious what is being portrayed.



“Realistic” Churches

Below are a few examples of church motifs, taken from actual Hutsul pysanky (drawn by Arnie Klein):



“Realistic” Churches

Here are several examples of pysanky with more “realistic” (i.e. less abstracted) churches, all from Bukovyna; these pysanky are in the collection of artist Ivan Balan (Chernivtsi).



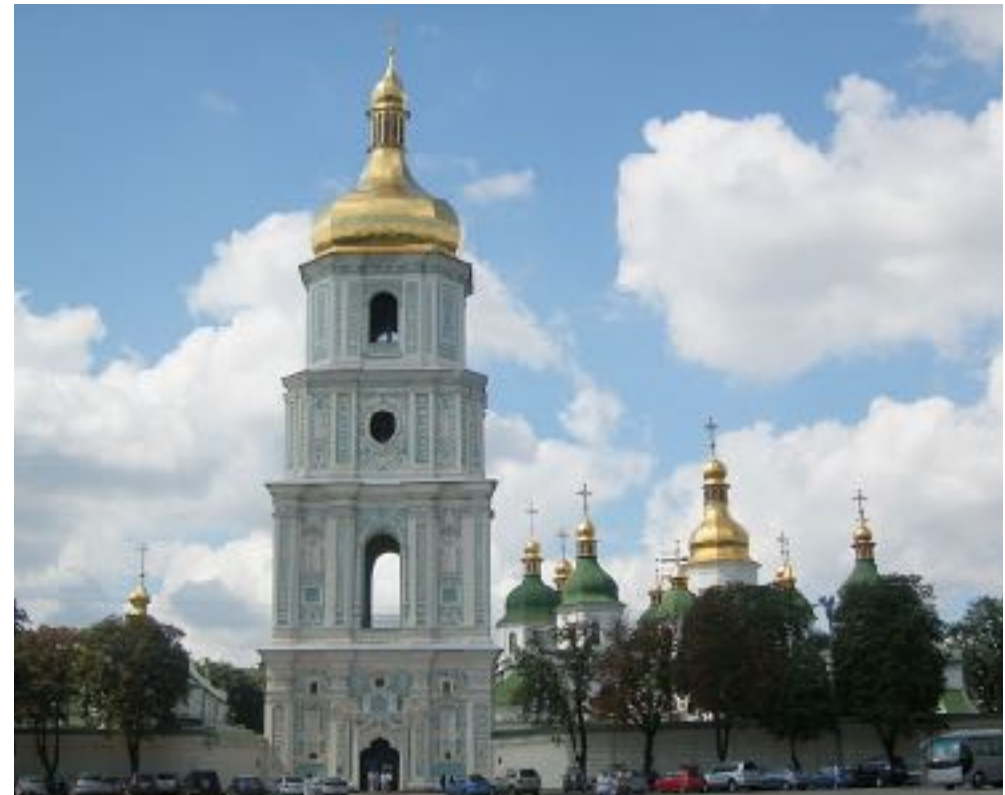
“Realistic” Churches

Hutsul and Pokuttian depictions of churches can get quite intricate, as in these examples. This is especially true of more recent pysanky.



Bell Towers (Дзвіниці)

Another common church-related motif is the bell tower. In Ukraine, this was usually a smaller building next to the church, and it was called a «ДЗВІНИЦЯ» (dzvinytsia). A country church might have a small wooden or stucco dzvinytsia, while a city church might have an elaborate, multistory (and multi-bell) structure of brick and stucco with a golden dome.



Bell Towers (Дзвіниці)

A dzvinytsia on a pysanka, though, is of a simple sort, and is represented by a three-cornered motif of this sort:



Bell Towers (Дзвіниці)

You can see these sorts of towers in the pysanky shown below; all are from Bukovyna. A bell tower motif might have a “window” in the middle, as in the pysanky on the right.



Tiny Churches and Bell Towers

While churches, when present, are usually the main motif on a pysanka, they can also be small, secondary motifs. If you carefully at some pysanky, you may find small churches incorporated into larger motifs. An example is this small, three-domed church: It has all the hallmarks of a church: domes, crosses, central door. And it has three domes, three crosses.



Even more minimalist representations can be found: the dzvinytsia is stripped to its essentials, gives us a triangle (usually cross-hatched) with a simple cross on top. An example is this tiny bell tower:



Tiny Churches and Bell Towers

Can you find the small churches or bell towers in these pysanky?



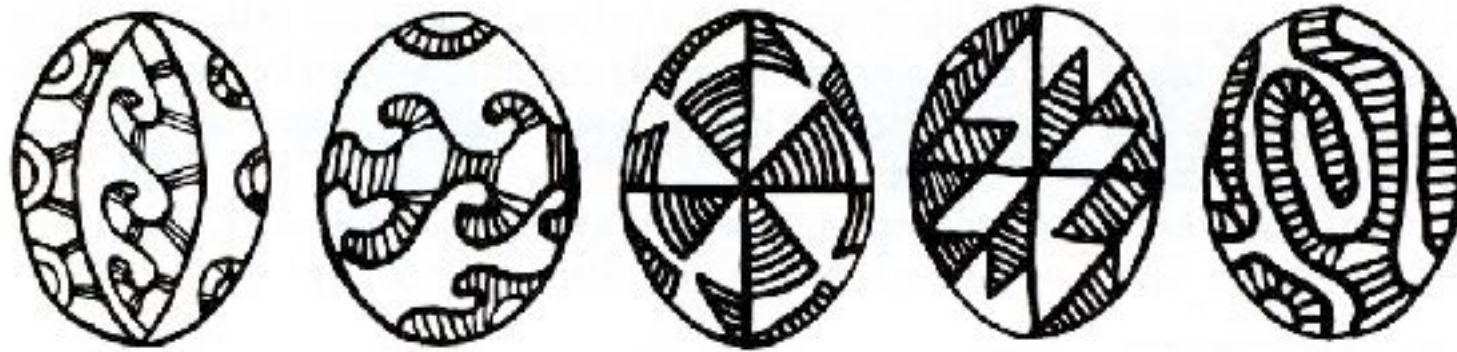
Churches

Below are three interesting examples of Hutsul church motif pysanky collected by Olena Kulchytska. They are older (pre-WWII) and more abstracted depictions.



Meander (Bezkonechny)

Eternity



Bezkoniecznyk

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



Bezگونهchnyk

Waves, though, are considered water symbols, so the wave-like versions of the bezگونهchnyk can also be considered Zmiya (Serpent) symbols.



Bezkoniecznyk

In most of Ukraine, the *bezkoniecznyk* is a prominent motif, consisting of large waves which encompass the entire *pysanka*.



Bezkoniecznyk

Examples from eastern Podillia, Kherson, Poltava.



Bezkoniecznyk

More examples of bezkoniecznyk pysanky.



Bezkonechnyk

Even more examples of bezkonechnyk pysanky.



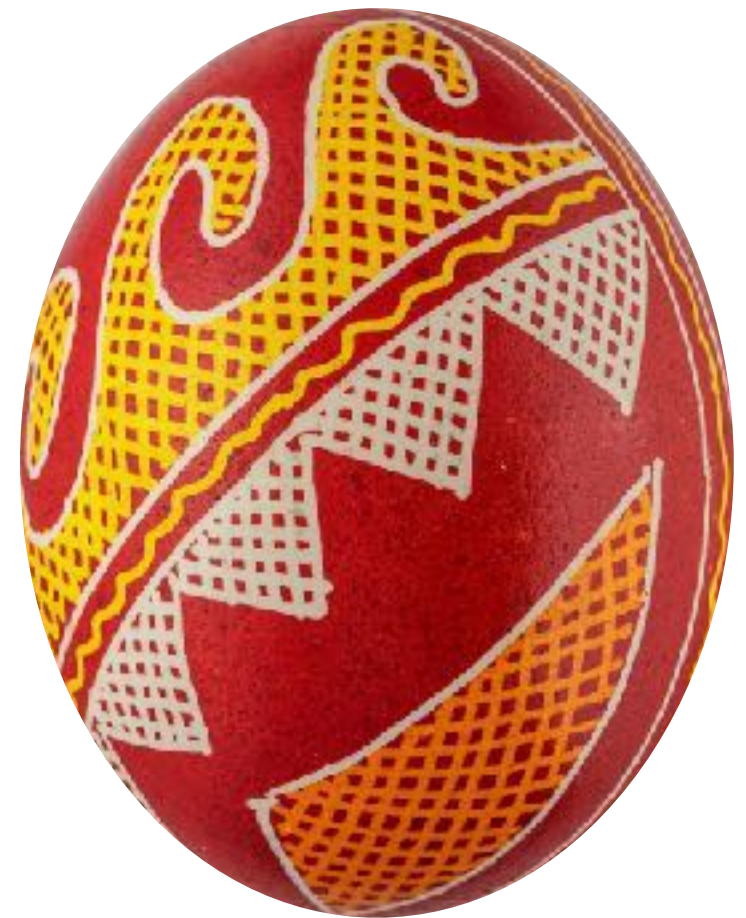
Bezkonechnyk

In Hutsulshchyna, Pokuttia and Bukovyna, the *bezkonechnyk* is usually **less prominent**, and often serves merely as a **border** for the primary design on the egg.



Bezkoniecznyk

In Hutsulshchyna, Pokuttia and Bukovyna, the *bezkoniecznyk* is usually less prominent, and often serves merely as a border for the primary design on the egg.





QUESTIONS?



For more information, go to
pysanky.info

