

# Carpatho-Rusyn Pysanky - Color and Beauty at Eastertime

©1990 by: GCU Honorary Editor, Michael Roman K.S.G.G.

---

The Carpatho-Rusyns have continued for many centuries the impressive and colorful tradition of the priestly blessing of Easter baskets laden with delicious Paschal foods. In a prior article entitled "Easter Customs and Symbolisms", this writer presented a description of the Easter basket and the symbolic meanings of its contents.

The present article is dedicated to describing the meaning of the symbolic and thematic representations (motifs) applied on the Pysanky, the Rusyn name for the beautiful hand-decorated Easter eggs. It is not our intention to describe how the motifs - thematic representations - are applied to the white eggs. Such information can be found in books dealing with Pysanky.

The Pysanky, pronounced "pi-sun-ki" are, indeed, one of the most beautiful components of our traditional Easter baskets. The pysanky which symbolize a new life and resurrection, are significantly described in an Easter card containing the following verses:



*"The Easter Egg is a symbol  
of the miracle of birth  
And the beauty of creation  
as each Spring renews the earth  
But, even more, it represents  
Christ's rising from the dead  
And the message of new life and hope*

*His Resurrection spread....."*

---

## Easter Greetings

The Carpatho-Rusyn Greek Catholics in America and in Europe greet each other from the Feast Day of the Resurrection until Ascension Holy Day with the triumphant words: "**Christ is Risen**" - "*Christos Voskrese*". The response is "**Indeed, He is Risen**" - "*Voistinu Voskrese!*" During his lifetime this writer has seen the preceding triumphant greetings on the pysanky in English and in Rusyn, using the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet in Rusyn.

---

While the pisanka itself reminds us of a new life and resurrection, the beautifully decorated Easter eggs have on their shells many symbolic and thematic representations (motifs). A detailed description of these motifs can be found in a recently published book "Rusyn Easter Eggs from Eastern Slovakia," originally written by Pavlo Markovyc and translated by Maria Skorupsky.

As a result of reading, with the help of special magnifiers, the section on motifs, the writer has obtained newer and deeper appreciation of the artistry of our beautiful pysanky whether they are painted in Eastern Slovakia, Carpatho-Ruthenia, or here in America, and is taking the opportunity of sharing his appreciation with the readers of the "Greek Catholic Union Messenger."

---



TRIPLE BARRED CROSS

Before presenting brief descriptions of the basic motifs described in Markovyc's book, we start with the triple barred cross of which Byzantine (Greek) Catholics in America and Europe are proud. Two versions of the three barred cross appear on our pysanky. One has the lower bar slanting, while the other has the lower bar placed in a horizontal position.

According to the booklet, "Symbols of the Church," edited by Carroll E. Whitemore, "the upper horizontal arm (bar) represents the place of the inscription over the head of the crucified Jesus. The lower slanting arm (bar) represents His footrest, since the Eastern Catholic Church believes Jesus was crucified with his feet side by side and not crossed one over the other as usually pictured by the Western Church.

The following basic motifs are described by Markovyc in his colorful book:



SUN MOTIF

The Sun motif is the oldest used by man in decorating ornaments and Easter eggs. This motif, or thematic representation, was used also for decorating eggs for other purposes. From time immemorial, man believed in the mysterious power of the sun and until the coming of Christianity he worshipped it as a deity. As the author wrote, "The sun is a source of light and the symbol of power." This symbolic motif has the most widespread usage among the Rusyns and is used in many forms.



STAR MOTIF

The Star motif is not only widely used by the Rusyns in Eastern Slovakia, but also in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, now called Subcarpathian Ukraine, and likewise in America. Down through the centuries, the stars have played a prominent role among the Rusyn people. Before beginning their daily work in the fields, the early Rusyns first looked to the stars for assistance. It was believed by the ancients that each new birth a new star appeared in the sky and then disappeared when death of the individual occurred. There was also a superstition that if a star shone brightly at a person's birth he would live a long life.

In most instances, the star motifs were usually applied to the "tops" and "bottoms of the eggs and only on rare occasions to the oval parts of the eggs.



WATER MOTIF

We all know that water is very essential to the existence of human life and to the growth and progress of all peoples. Without water there cannot be any life. That is why people have always settled near sources of water such as streams, rivers, lakes and oceans. The Water motif has become an important part of Rusyn folk art such as paintings, ornaments, pottery, pysanky, etc. and it is represented by two or three parallel wavy lines or strokes, "according to Markovyc".

The holy water which is a symbol of purity has been used to bless churches, homes, newlyweds and for treatment of illnesses. There have also been other reasons for applying water motifs to our pysanky.



## TREE MOTIF

The Tree motif is considered by experts in pisanka artistry as one of the most beautiful when compared with other motifs which are used to decorate Easter eggs. This motif, as you will note, appears to have a human touch.

For the Rusyn ancestors the sun and stars were very far away, and the nearby trees were much closer to them. Thus, a close relationship was developed between the trees and the people. The trees were considered to have human qualities and characteristics. The sap which flowed from an injured tree was likened to blood by our Rusyn ancestors. They believed that the Linden tree, which they highly regarded and venerated, had medical-healing abilities. They applied the physical characteristics of the oak tree to a young healthy man, using the expression: "Strong as an oak tree" - "Sil ' nyj jak dub."



## FLOWER MOTIF

Flowers, as we all know or have experienced, bring a touch of happiness and joy to their recipients either celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, special occasions or if they are sick and disabled. The Rusyns also use flowers for the above reasons or for decorating purposes. That is why the flower motifs are so widely used on Rusyn ornaments or Easter eggs. Any one or more of the following were used as flower motifs: grasses, clover, branches, hollyhocks, spikes, guelder-rose, gentian, berries, rosemary, flax, hemp, violet, grapes, red rose and so forth.



## SWALLOW MOTIF

Here in America we annually hear or read about the swallows returning to San Juan Capistrano at the beginning of Spring. The swallow has always been regarded as a harbinger of spring, and the Rusyns of the Laborec Valley in Slovakia can also boast about their swallows returning each spring. To show this pride, they widely use the Swallow motif on their pysanky.

"The swallow, a much loved bird", writes Markovyc in his book. He mentions that the Rusyns consider it to be a sin to kill a swallow, the symbol of Spring, abundant harvest and happiness. The Rusyns also believe that a house without a swallow is considered an unlucky abode.



## BEE MOTIF

Beekeeping is one of the principle occupations of the Rusyns in Eastern Slovakia and the Rusyn name for beekeeper is "Pcolar". For many centuries the bees have been held in such high esteem by the people who firmly believed that the bees should not be killed under any circumstances.

Bees and honey have been used in Rusyn folk medicine for many centuries to heal various illnesses. The great Rusyn esteem and love for the bees brought about the Bee motifs which are applied on Easter eggs and other ornaments.



SHEAF MOTIF

The Sheaf ("snopy" in Rusyn), which symbolizes fertility, an abundant harvest, and a hope for a huge supply of bread in the New Year, is also used as a motif to decorate Easter eggs. During New Year festivities and at family gatherings such as christenings, wedding dinners and anniversary celebrations the place of honor is reserved for the best sheaf in the center of the table. The sheaf is usually used as the central motif of the pisanka and is widely used in the Presov region of central Slovakia. The sheaf motif is often applied in an ornamental band, running horizontally or vertically.



FISH MOTIF

Despite its present Christian symbolic meaning, the Fish motif on Slavic ornaments made its appearance long before the coming of Christianity. The appearance of the Fish motif is not exclusively of a religious origin. The fish symbol signifies that the pre-Christian Slavs when fishing for their food. From this pursuit of fishing folk tales and folk art about fish emerged.



SPIDER MOTIF

The spiders, like the bees, were held in high esteem and regarded by the Rusyns through many centuries. This high esteem demanded that no one kill them at random. Parents warned their children not to kill spiders because such deaths would bring ill fortune to their bodies.

Some people claimed the spiders were under the protection of the Blessed Virgin and therefore they should not be killed. The author Markovyc quotes an individual about this protection in the following words, "M. Kotyk, a peasant woman from the village of Svetlice (in Eastern Slovakia), gave us the following reason why the spiders were held in high esteem and were not to be killed: "When the Blessed Virgin Mary was fleeing with Christ, a spider spun up their tracks behind them. For this the Blessed Virgin marked him with a cross. That is why spiders are not to be killed."

For centuries the Rusyns have considered the spiders to be lucky omens, to be weather forecasters, and to have healing value in their folk medicine.

It is no wonder that the Spider motif in various forms has been so widely used on the Rusyn pysanky in Eastern Slovakia.



## CIRCLE MOTIF

The Circle motif, also call the "Magic Circle", appears on Rusyn pysanky from the Presov Area villages in Slovakia. Earlier the Rusyns believed that the circle had magical meanings, but that belief has by now disappeared. However, until recent times the ancient significance did play a prominent role in the lives of Rusyn peasants. In the book "Rusyn Easter Eggs in Eastern Slovakia", the making of a circle is described thusly: "Peasants used to make circles of twigs plaited to resemble a chain. Circles were drawn with ashes or sand, marked with water, and painted with whitewash, charcoal or chalk on stable doors. Poles or stakes were planted into the ground in a circle. In all these practices, the purpose of the circle was to protect man and property from evil.

Most frequent use of the circle was made in the fields where animals grazed and harvests were reaped. It was used during a storm against lightning. It also served as protection for human beings and animals against blood-sucking vampires.

Although the circle (magical circle) has lost its ancient significance, it is still used as a motif on the Rusyn Pysanky.

---

## CONCLUSION

The above descriptions of basic motifs covers just a small portion of the thematic representations which are applied on Rusyn Easter eggs. There are many varieties and versions of the motifs already described. For example, under the basic Tree motif, the following versions can be found: oak tree, fir, tree, pine tree, oak sapling, linden tree, pine sapling, branches, twigs, etc. It has been estimated that there are at least 200 motifs used on Rusyn Easter eggs in Slovakia.

As a result of so many motifs on them, Rusyn Pysanky and ornaments certainly give us an artistic portrayal of the life, environment, superstitions, beliefs and religion of the Carpatho-Rusyn people from primitive times until the present period.

***"Christos Voskrese"  
Voistinu Voskrese!"***