

Traditions

● Czech Egg Decorating





Cover photograph: Kepka Belton of Ellsworth is inspired by her Czech heritage to keep the tradition of kraslice alive. She shares her skills through festivals, workshops and apprenticeships.

Back photograph: Judy Cochran, Oberlin, shows her daughter Shayla the technique used to remove wax from a Czech decorated egg.



Kepka Belton is known for her beautifully decorated Czech eggs. She has been referred to as the "egg lady" of Kansas.

CZECHS IN KANSAS

Kansas is home to a fairly large Czech population. Most of the current population that identify themselves as Czech come from Bohemian or Moravian ancestry. The Czech influence in the state can be seen in such counties as Decatur, Ellsworth, Lincoln, Marion, Marshall, Rawlins, Republic, Rush, Russell, Shawnee, Sumner, Trego, and Washington.

Perhaps the best known of the Czech settlements in Kansas is in Ellsworth county. The first Bohemian settler in Wilson was Francis J. Swehla who arrived on May 16, 1874, with *Ceska' Osada* (meaning *Czech Settlement*) painted on the side of his wagon. He wrote to various Bohemian newspapers in the U.S. advertising his *Czech Settlement*. He praised the climate, good soil, plentiful water, building stone, and the fact that land was inexpensive. Organizations and interested individuals responded, and from 1875 to 1910 Czech immigrants settled in and around Wilson.

The largest party of Bohemians seeking homes in Ellsworth County came in 1876 from Chicago. Most of the first Bohemian settlers to central Kansas moved from larger cities in the eastern part of the United States. In 1877 the first group of settlers coming directly from Europe arrived, settling primarily in Lincoln County. A large portion of the Czech settlers were Catholic. Although many settlers retained their native Czech language, many spoke German. Historically, many Germans had settled in Bohemia.

Many of the early Czech settlers were mechanics and merchants by trade. However, many also became successful farmers. Fraternal organizations such as the Bohemian Slavonic Benevolent Union, and athletic organizations such as the *Sokol*, were formed by the early settlers. Education was highly valued within the communities. Like other ethnic groups in Kansas the Czechs worked hard to preserve their unique cultural heritage.

THE EGG IN FOLKLORE

The egg is a popular symbol in many cultures. This ancient symbol is often associated with rebirth or fertility and new life. Legends involving the egg exist in almost every

culture. Many of these stories focus on the egg as an instrument for the creation of the earth. In ancient Egypt a story was told about the creation of the universe from an enormous egg. Hindu mythology believes that a golden world-egg was formed before time and the universe began. The *Kalevala*, a well-known Finnish epic, attributes the creation of the world to the broken eggs of a duck. Hawaiians once believed that the bursting of an egg laid by a large bird led to the formation of their largest island.

Among many people the egg symbolized fertility. Because of this belief eggs were used in rituals related to agriculture. Germans and Slovenians, in order to guarantee a good harvest, smeared an egg mixture on their plows on Maundy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter). On St. George's Day, which is celebrated in early spring, Ukrainians rolled dyed eggs in green oats. The eggs were then buried so that they would bring a rich harvest.

It was also a common belief that eggs possessed healing and protective powers. It was believed by some in the Ukraine that it was possible to cure blood poisoning by touching an egg to the infected part of the body. If an egg was laid on Good Friday, the Pennsylvania Dutch believed the egg could prevent sores in a baby's mouth. In Bombay, Indians placed eggs in the foundations of buildings because of their belief in the protective nature of the eggs.

Persians, who in ancient times believed the world was hatched from an enormous egg, were among the first to make use of colored eggs as gifts. In China dyed eggs were included as traditional offerings made to the god and goddess of the bed. Early in German history people made egg trees to celebrate spring.

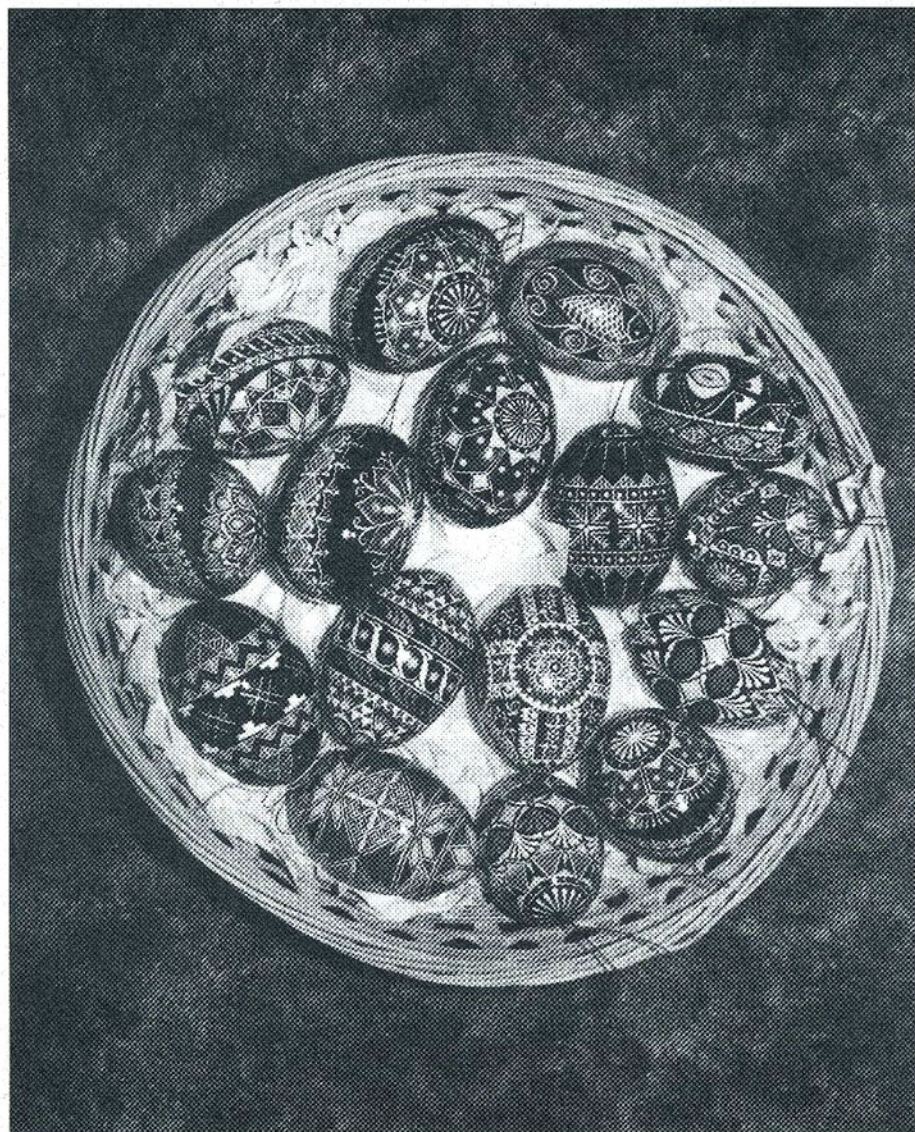
As Christianity became more widely accepted, the egg continued as an important symbol. In particular, Christians that practiced the Eastern Orthodox faith would exchange colored eggs on the morning of the Resurrection to symbolize a renewal of life. As early as the fourth century, Catholics brought eggs to services to be blessed. By the twelfth century eggs were officially sanctioned by the Catholic church for special use on the holy days of Easter. Interestingly, the use of eggs in church services was not adopted by the Protestant faiths.

Although it is not known exactly when or how the tradition of coloring eggs at Easter began, it is known that in many cultures red eggs were thought to hold particular powers. It can be speculated that red-dyed eggs are one of the earliest examples of decorated eggs. An ancient Roman tale associates the birth of Emperor Alexander Severus with a hen laying a red egg. Red eggs were used to guarantee a good crop. In China the birth of a boy was celebrated with red eggs. In many Christian cultures, eggs were dyed red to represent the blood of Christ.

EASTER EGGS

Colored eggs have been a significant part of the Easter celebration since at least the fifteenth century. Some references cite colored eggs at Easter in existence as early as the thirteenth century. Early records give credit to the Macedonians for being the first Christians to use eggs in connection with Easter. It is thought that children brought dyed eggs to the marketplace to be sold.

In England eggs have played an important role in the Easter celebration since the time of King Edward I, who died in 1307. Eggs, which were stained or covered with gold leaf, were a custom at Easter among royalty. Later, Pope Paul V began a ritual of blessing Easter eggs in England, Scotland, and Ireland. In the sixteenth century when the Church of England became Protestant, this ritual was discontinued. In spite of all this, egg decorating continued to be practiced in England. In the early 1800s a method called scratch-carving was used to decorate Easter eggs. Using a needle, a design was scratched out on the shell of a dyed egg. Scratch-carving was a technique also used in America by the Pennsylvania Dutch and Moravians.



Czech eggs are decorated using a special waxing and dyeing technique. These eggs by Judy Cochran are embellished with traditional Czech designs.

During the same period eggs dyed in fabric were popular in the United States. Eggs would be wrapped in fabric that was not colorfast and boiled. When the fabric was removed a pattern remained. This custom is similar to *pace-egging* practiced by some English people. Fresh flowers and plants are placed around the egg, which is then wrapped in fabric. The eggs are boiled and when the fabric is removed the impression of the flowers and plants remains. A similar tradition can be found in Austria.

In Scotland hardboiled eggs were painted so that children could roll them down hills on Easter morning. A similar custom was practiced in the Netherlands. Sassy eggs, much like the English *pace* eggs, were used during egg rolling. A unique Dutch practice was the *palmpass*, a palm branch decorated with eggshells, chocolate, paper flags, and fruit, which was carried by children on Palm Sunday. In parts of Ireland on Palm Sunday, children build nests from stones to hold eggs collected during Holy Week. On Easter Sunday the eggs are given away as gifts.

Many Easter egg customs have been part of German culture. It was once customary to give away three dyed eggs accompanied by a traditional poem. Satin eggs are sometimes given at Easter. These eggs are filled with sweets and small toys and are used in a game where they are struck together until broken. Easter egg trees were also popular in both Germany and Switzerland. During the 1890s the German Easter egg tree and the Christmas tree were very similar. For Easter, an evergreen tree was placed on a table in the living room and decorated with blown, dyed eggs. The eggs were often filled with candy. Gifts were placed under the Easter tree. Easter eggs have always had particular religious significance in Russia. Today members of the Eastern Orthodox faith decorate eggs and take them to church on the eve of Easter to be blessed by the priest. Easter eggs were so important in Russia that a fair called the *Verba*, held from Palm Sunday through Holy Week, contained booths that sold Easter eggs. White china eggs with views of the city painted on them and eggs made of glass containing scenes of the Resurrection were examples of what was sold.

Some of the most intricate Easter eggs in the world originate in the Slavic nations. In the Ukraine, Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries of Central Europe, there are two kinds of Easter eggs. One is a solid colored, hardboiled egg that may be eaten. The Ukrainians call these *krashanky* from the word meaning *color*. These eggs are often dyed red in honor. The second kind of Easter egg is intricately designed and given as gifts. The Ukrainian word for these eggs is *pysanky*. In Czechoslovakia they are called *kraslice*.

KRASLICE

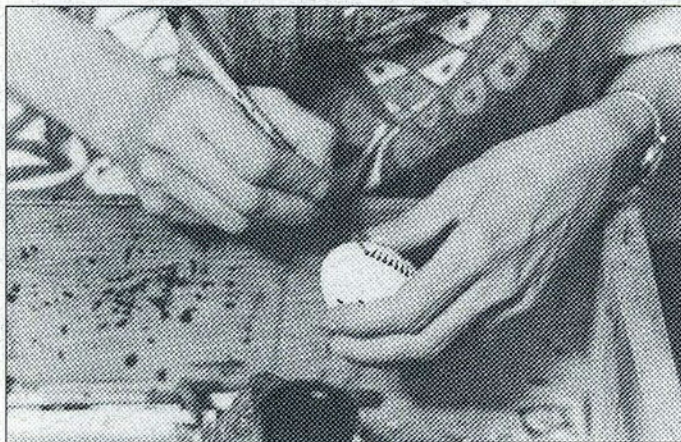
Easter is a joyous holiday in Czechoslovakia. For this reason many Easter customs have continued to be practiced among Czech families who have left the Old Country and come to America. One of the most prominent traditions is the art of *kraslice*, which means beautiful or embellished egg. This technique of egg decorating originated well before the beginning of Christianity.

In Czechoslovakia eggs were exchanged by everyone for a new beginning, a symbol of love, friendship, and good things to come. Children would give their most beautiful eggs to their special best-loved friend. During Easter, friends exchange eggs with the greeting "Christ is risen." The reply is "He is risen indeed."

At times eggs were even given as pre-engagement gifts. One story tells of a young man who decorated an egg tree below the window of his loved one. She awoke to find it on Easter morning.

Switching was a custom where young men braided green willow branches and decorated them with ribbons and flowers. These switches were called *dynvaska*. When the young girl gave the boy her *kraslice*, she received a switching.





Designs are drawn on the egg using a stylus dipped in melted wax.

KRASLICE TECHNIQUES

Before they are decorated, eggs are divided into sections or fields, with the basic lines running lengthwise and/or crosswise around the egg. Motifs are placed within these sections. Designs are drawn on the egg with a special stylus dipped in melted beeswax. Beeswax is used because it has a high melting point, gives better coverage, and has a greater resistance to dyes. The process is closely related to batik.

Originally, eggs were colored using natural dyes. Several basic colors could be obtained from various vegetables and plants. Prominent colors depended on the ease of obtaining the dyes. Since the finished *kraslíce* has several layers of dyes, it is best to start with lighter colors and gradually go to darker colors.

Cooked eggs are never used for *kraslíce*. When the design is complete, eggs are blown by making a hole in each end of the egg, stirring the contents to break the yoke, and blowing it through one end. Traditionally, the contents were usually not wasted; they were used in baking or cooking. However, some dyes used today are toxic, and the eggs should not be eaten.

In areas where the art of *kraslíce* is practiced, each region has its own rituals, symbols, and dye formulas for the eggs. These have been carefully preserved and passed along from one generation to the next.

SYMBOLISM OF KRASLICE MOTIFS AND COLORS

One of the most popular Czech symbols is the eight-pointed star. It was believed that with every birth, a star is born so that each person has his or her own star. The star is believed to be a person's guardian and fate. Stars found in Czech folk art have an even number of points. An odd number was believed to symbolize death. For protection, stars were often placed on house gables.

The butterfly is another symbol used in *kraslíce*. It can represent the idea of reincarnation. It was once believed that good souls would become birds, small beasts, and butterflies. At one time in Moravia it was thought that seeing a butterfly with eyes in its wings meant happiness. With the belief in Christianity, the meaning of Christ's resurrection became associated with the butterfly.

Many other motifs or symbols are traditionally found on *kraslice*. The heart could symbolize love and compassion. The wheel found on decorated eggs was associated with the bride's traditional wedding cart. When wavy and curved lines as well as dots were used on decorated eggs, it represented a new year or new beginning. A radiating design such as the sun or a daisy could mean good fortune.

As with motifs, colors traditionally had meanings as well. The Czechs always considered red to be an important color. At one time Bohemians referred to Easter as the *red holiday*. This color is easily obtained from nature which is probably one of the reasons early decorated eggs were red. Red can symbolize health, strength, and beauty. This color was believed to protect against evil and therefore played a part in popular ceremonies of the family.

Blue was not a popular color in *kraslice* for several reasons. The dye was difficult to obtain, and in folklore blue often symbolized death and suffering. Moravian and Slovakian men wore red ribbons on their shirts, but widowers wore blue ribbons. With the Protestant Reformation and the Hussite movement, the color blue began to be seen as a heavenly color. Around the sixteenth century indigo was imported, and the use of blue increased in popularity.

Green, as the color of trees, could symbolize growth. It was believed that the strength of a tree was a safeguard against sickness. In folklore the apple tree was associated with the woman's role in the family ceremonies. Apple twigs were often put into house foundations to protect the health of the inhabitants. During the nineteenth century in Moravia and Slovakia, brides wore green skirts or bodices and caps embroidered in green. Green came to symbolize weddings.

Because yellow is the color of ripening grain and gold, it is considered a symbol of good fortune. White was originally a mourning color. However, after the acceptance of Christianity, white stood for purity. In some areas black was seen as a ceremonial color.

CONCLUSION

Despite cultural differences and geographic distances, the custom of decorating eggs is widespread. Since the United States is made up of people from many cultural backgrounds, holiday traditions tend to exhibit similarities and variations of customs from many areas. Easter egg customs are no exception.

When the Czechs arrived in Kansas they brought with them many traditions, one of them being the beautiful art of *kraslice*. Czech Americans in Kansas are proud of their heritage. Several communities annually celebrate their Czech traditions with festivals featuring traditional foods, music, customs, and crafts.

In 1967 Wilson was proclaimed by the state as the *Czech Capital of Kansas*. Every July the *After Harvest Czech Festival* shares the cultural heritage of the Czech Americans with parades, dances, traditional foods, and of course the art of *kraslice*.

FURTHER READINGS

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DIRECTIONS FOR KRASLICE

Materials Needed:

Eggs	Potato
Spoon	Candle
Beeswax	Crayon (dark color)
Pencil	Straight Pin
Aluminum Foil	

Instructions:

1. Wash eggs in warm water and vinegar mixture (2 tablespoons to 1 quart water). Do not use soap. Carefully pat eggs dry.
2. With a pencil, draw two vertical lines and one horizontal line lightly on your egg. This will divide the egg into eight sections (See Fig. 1). These lines will help create your designs.
3. Bend spoon and place handle in potato. Put small amount of beeswax and crayon in spoon. Position candle flame under spoon and let melt (See Fig. 2). The crayon colors the wax so it is easily seen on the egg surface. If the wax begins to smoke, turn the flame slightly away from spoon.
4. Stick a straight pin in the eraser end of your pencil. This will be your tool for decorating your egg.
5. To decorate the egg, hold pin head in candle flame for a count of 1-2-3 (See Fig. 3). Then put the tool into the melted wax to a count of 4-5-6 (See Fig. 4). Touch the tool to the egg surface and draw your first stroke. Repeat these steps for each stroke made.
6. When finished decorating the egg with wax, place the egg into dye for a few minutes. If you plan to use more than one layer of dye, begin with lighter colors and proceed to darker dyes. Remove the egg and pat dry with paper towel.
7. If you are using more than one layer of dye, repeat steps #5 and #6 until desired design is accomplished.
8. To remove wax from the egg, hold the egg over candle flame and wipe small areas with paper towel as wax melts. Your design will appear!
9. Traditionally, Czech eggs were blown. To do this, take a large pin or nail and poke a hole at both ends of your egg. Using wire or paper clip, stir up contents of the egg to break the yolk. Blow the egg out.
10. Traditionally, eggs were shined by rubbing with butter. Eggs may also be varnished by rubbing varnish on with your finger, or using spray varnish.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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THE ARTS

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