



Fire and colour

The fine art of Ukrainian Easter eggs is a study in the power of beautiful things in difficult times, **Jana G. Pruden** writes

On a sunny afternoon, in what seems like another world, I went to my friend Candace Cook's house to make Ukrainian Easter eggs. It was a time when you could still visit a friend, though even then there were things to worry about, including reports of an infectious new virus, far away but steadily moving closer.

It feels odd to think about Easter eggs right now. With everything going on, why would someone spend time decorating an egg? But the art of Ukrainian Easter eggs was not born out of comfort or luxury. As is often the case, the beauty came out of times when it was needed most.

"There's this whole renewal, rebirth aspect," Candace says. "It's kind of hopeful in this time we're in. It gives you hope that you can emerge from this."

The Ukrainian tradition of decorated eggs dates back thousands of years. They are *pysanky* (plural), or *pysanka* (singular). The word comes from the verb *pysaty*, which means "to write."

Joan Brander, a *pysanky* maker, author and owner of Baba's Beeswax, a *pysanky* supply store based in B.C., says the eggs began as a way to mark the return of the sun god and later became part of the Christian tradition of Easter. *Pysanky* are a celebration of life over death, a prayer for love and protection. "The legend goes that an ancient vicious monster lives chained to a cliff and as long as *pysanky* are made in the world, the chains tighten, tighten and the monster can't escape," Brander says. "As long as *pysanky* are made, evil shall not prevail over good in the world."

Pysanky are an important part of Ukrainian heritage, and Prairie culture more broadly. A 9.4-metre *pysanka* remains one of Alberta's most iconic roadside attractions and the intricate eggs are sold at farmers markets' and craft sales throughout the Prairies.

I grew up with my Ukrainian grandmother making them, arranging them in the Easter basket to be blessed at church. Over holiday dinner, my grandfather always offered the same, single



Top: Candace Cook shows her collection of Ukrainian Easter eggs, or *pysanky*, at home in Edmonton. Above: Cook, who is currently undergoing chemotherapy, says the tradition of the eggs comes out of the idea of renewal and rebirth. She has taught her 11-year-old son, Nathan, how to make his own *pysanky*. PHOTOS BY AMBER BRACKEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

prayer: That we would all be alive the next year.

Pysanky are made with wax resist. Designs and symbols are written onto the egg with wax, using a tool heated over the flame of a candle. The egg is dipped in progressively darker shades of dye, the colours of the design created in layers. Traditional patterns repeat familiar images: stars, circles, interlocking mazes. There are fish and crosses and sheaves of wheat, symbols invoking the blessings of body and soul.

At the end, the finished egg is held over the fire, the wax melted and wiped away. It is careful, delicate work. A simple mistake or a

moment of carelessness can destroy hours of work.

Candace was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer 5½ years ago and has been fighting ever since to keep the illness at bay. She was hospitalized with severe pneumonia in December and is currently receiving chemo two out of every three weeks.

She's already been told that if she gets the virus, she will not be treated. "Basically, the message was, I'd be put in isolation to die," she told me, when we spoke by phone this week. "There would be no ventilator with my name on it. That would go to people with a fighting chance."

The plans she had – more trav-

el, time with friends and relatives – have, of course, been cancelled, with no idea when or if such things will be possible again. "We're basically just isolated here and life is kind of on hold," she says. "And yet, I feel like I don't have time for my life to be on hold."

The last time we could sit together in person, she showed me how to make *pysanky* the way her mother taught her, drawing lines and circles without end. The afternoon dissolved into the smell of beeswax and coffee, into the magic alchemy of fire and colour and patterns passed down through generations.

If you are careful, *pysanky* can

last forever. My grandmother died in 1984 and my aunt still has some of her eggs, written with messages from long ago.

At Baba's Beeswax, Joan Brander is still mailing out *pysanky* kits and has begun offering her *pysanky*-making classes online. Her newest egg is black, decorated with images of the coronavirus and its spikes and crowns. Someone online said it was morbid, and for a moment, she wondered if it was. But she thinks of it as an expression of what is going on in the world, a record of this time for her and others. A testament to what is happening now and a prayer for the seasons to come.