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ARTA ȘI SIMBOLISMUL
OUĂLOR ÎNCONDEIATE
DIN TRANSILVANIA

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Statement

In the charming Transylvania, under the Carpathian arch where the hills roll gently and the forests lock in centuries-old whispers, people are keeping traditions alive. In villages scattered along the foot of the mountains and into the foothills, local women still practice the craft of egg painting, one of the most mysterious and delicate of the traditional arts. During Lent, the smell of fresh oven-bread mingles with that of the warm wax the women carefully apply to the fragile eggshell, marking signs and symbols that tell stories older than themselves. The cross, the lost path, the ear of wheat, the rake, the rhombus of life, the fir leaf, the spring flowers, all mingle in a language of faith and hope meant to bring wealth, health, and joy.

In Transylvania, and across Romania, the custom of egg painting is not just a craft – it’s a celebration of the community. With the shell “written” with symbols inherited and learned from elders and matriarchs, each egg becomes a silent story, a small universe rendered in vivid colors of red, yellow, black, green, purple or blue, carrying the memory of those who have passed away and the faith of those yet to come.

The purpose of the ethnographic documentation project “From shell to story. The art and symbolism of painted eggs in Transylvania.” was to make this craft, its beauty, rich meanings, spiritual significance, variety of techniques, and geographical reach known to the public. Most people know little about Transylvanian painted eggs. We have often encountered surprise or even denial regarding the fact that there are communities in Transylvania where people paint Easter eggs. Unlike Bucovina, an area known for this art and an important center for this craft, the communities in Transylvania that keep this Easter custom going are only those that still live by rituals.



The rural Transylvanian environment is the living framework of these traditions: dusty roads, blossoming trees, and wooden churches with their pointed towers watch silently over simple but meaningful gestures. Here, in the quiet of the village, the art of egg painting becomes a shared language, a bridge between generations, proof that spiritual cultural heritage is not just a relic of the past, and is a way of living the present in a way that is open to the future.

Although the medium is ephemeral and fragile (chicken, duck, goose, and even ostrich eggs), the craft has survived down the years. The women and children in the household work on the eggs during Holy Week. In many villages, the memory of this custom has disappeared, and people no longer remember that their grandparents or the old women of the village used to make such eggs for Easter, although there is evidence of this in museums and academic research.

These are the reasons why we are seeking to bring to the public's attention a craft that is on the verge of disappearing in certain areas.

The cosmogonic egg from mythology to historical sources

“The sun is from an egg,” says an old saying from Bucovina, documented by Elena Niculiță-Voronca. “There was a man and he had an egg. He locked the egg in a box. Another man, who knew about the egg, waited for the man to leave home and then went and released it, and from that egg the sun appeared in the sky.” (Traditions and Beliefs of the Romanian People, vol. 1, p. 306)

The association of the egg yolk with the sun, and therefore the source of life, is found in many cultures. A universally mythological symbol, the cosmogonic egg is a recurrent motif in the myths of the world.



According to Persian mythology, Ahura Mazda created the world as an egg in which the white was the sky and the yolk was the earth. In the Mahabharata (Book I, Adiparva, Victor Kernbach, Essential Myths, pp. 56-57), the world first manifests itself as an impenetrable fog, in which appears, “as the first cause of creation, a giant egg, the eternal seed of all beings, called Mahadivya,” inside which dwells “the true light... the eternal brahma, sublime and unimaginable, ubiquitous, the hidden and imperceptible cause of the real and the unreal.”

Reliable historical and archaeological sources attest, many centuries before Christ, to the custom of giving colored eggs as gifts on major seasonal holidays, especially on New Year’s Day. During the spring celebrations, the ancient Persians gave each other eggs of different colors. Young Romans sent each other red painted eggs, along with other gifts, on the god Janus’ holiday, etc. Archaeological evidence shows us that eggs, whether ceramic or from birds, were used in funeral rites, as they have been found in graves in Sweden, Russia, Italy, Egypt, Germany, Hungary, and China.

In Romania, eggs appear as offerings in several necropolises, e.g. at the settlement of Mihălășeni-Botoșani (4th century AD), where chicken eggshells were found in fourteen graves. “Two goose eggs were found at Izvoare-Neamț. Also dating from the 4th century AD is a chicken egg placed as an offering in a glass at the feet of the deceased in tomb 23 of the Lețcani-Iași necropolis.” (Ion H. Ciubotaru, Easter Eggs among Romanians, p. 52)

The first written reference (in the mid-17th century) to the Romanian custom of painting Easter eggs belongs to a Turk, Evlia Celebi who, speak of Oradea where he was until 1661, says that: “In this place, at the beginning of the year, 40 days before the red egg festival of the giaours, an annual bazaar is held...” (Foreign Travelers’ Tales from the Romanian Lands, 1976, pp. 664)

In the early 1700s, the Italian Antonio Maria Del Chiaro, private secretary of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, described the custom as follows: “The ladies, to whom those who are welcomed into their homes go to offer Easter greetings, usually give a kerchief and two eggs, strangely decorated with golden flowers. This is also customary among relatives and friends.” (Foreign Travelers’ Tales from the Romanian Lands, 1983, pp. 381-382)

A custom that dates back to the dawn of time, painted eggs still tell a story about the world we live in, about nature, about our soul and our faith.



“*But the devil keeps asking if eggs are still painted on Earth and if there are still carols in the village. When eggs are no longer painted and carols are no longer sung, then he too will come out.*”

(E. Niculiță- Voronca, p.308)

WHO paints the eggs?

More information:



Egg painting is mostly done by women. However, there are places in Transylvania where the tradition of egg painting has been taken up and practiced by men as well, such as the village of Budureasa in the County of Bihor.

Mrs. Anna Gödri (Săcele, Braşov) told us that she also learned the craft from her father: "...I have practiced this craft with my father since childhood. I was about 10 years old when my father encouraged me to take it up... We used nitric acid back then. We painted the egg red and used a pen dipped in nitric acid to draw on the pattern."

Paula Petruţiu (Dumbrăviţa de Codru, Bihor): "I was pretty much self-taught in egg painting, I looked for all kinds of information, I looked for old pictures."



Anna Gödri



Paula Petruţiu

"...my aunt used to paint eggs, and I would sit next to her to see how she did it, and I fell in love with it." (Maria Bene, Cămărzana, Satu Mare)

"...I think I was around four years old when I started painting with my sister. An old woman named Reta used to come to our house. She was a bit of an old battle-axe, and we would paint the eggs by the stove because the wax had to be warm." (Cornelia Opaîţ, Şercaia, Braşov)

"...my mother and grandmother knew how to do it, and I watched them to see how they did it. Then I asked my father to make me a pen too, and I started doing it myself. If it worked, I made more..." (Maria Dancea, Cămărzana, Satu Mare)

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"...I started painting eggs when I was little. There was a sister of my father's who knew how to do it and I learned from her. She taught me, she showed me how to do it, how to push the egg. And then I did it myself." (Eudochia Paul, Cămărzana, Satu Mare)

Most of the people practicing this craft nowadays learned it from someone in their family



Maria Bene



Iuliana Munteanu, Opaîţ, Cornelia, Sorina Boamfă, Anca Elena Sas



Nina Ghinea

“... we learned for fun, from each other. I pretended I was playing and, while playing, I actually succeeded. They used to make pens for children to play with.” (Ioan Nistor, Budureasa, Bihor)



Ioan Nistor



Florița Păiușan



Carmen Cojanu



Ileana Cociș

“... when I was a child and the weather was good at Easter, the women would go outside to paint eggs... the neighbors would gather outside, make a fire, and paint the eggs outside.” (Nana Piștoaie, Păiușeni, Arad)



Maria Bodnar



Cornelia Dorina Hanza



Maria Mașnița, Maria Mașnița, Hafia Mașnița



Roxana Preda

Maria Preda

Miruna Preda

Rituals and celebration

If you step into a house in a Transylvanian village around Easter time, the first thing that greets you is often the slightly sweet smell of melted wax, mixed with the fumes of paint along with the aroma of bread just taken out of the oven. Gathered around the table or on the bench next to the oven are the women of the house, from the wrinkly grannies down to young dimple-faced girls, quietly preparing for the ritual of egg painting. Grandmother adjusts her “chișița” (a traditional egg-painting tool), mother blows a thin shell from a carefully emptied egg, and the girl waits for her turn. And so, the story of painted eggs begins: meticulous work put into motion around the Easter holidays, with old symbols “told” through wax on the fragile shell.



The beautiful, pen-decorated Easter eggs have different names depending on the area: “împistrite” in Maramureș, Țara Oașului, and Țara Beiușului, “muncite” in Bran, “închistrite” in Șercaia and Veneția de Sus, and “încondeiate” in Dumbrăvița and Măgura Branului.



For Romanians, red eggs and these painted eggs are an important element in the Easter celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. Time is set aside for the ritual of dyeing eggs. In many homes, eggs are dyed during Holy Week (especially on Maundy Thursday) following a process that ethnographers have recorded for posterity: first the “base” red, then the other colors. Where wax is used for “writing,” the order of the dyes follows the logic of light to dark. Academic research in the field, from Artur Gorovei’s classic research (“Easter Eggs. A Study of Folklore”) to Ion Ghinoiu’s syntheses on the Easter cycle, records these practices, noting also the belief that the red egg “does not go bad” if it is made at the right time. In other places, eggs are reddened and painted on Good Friday, most often because there is no baking on this day, and women have more time to spare. For women known in their villages as skilled egg-painters, the activity begins as early as two weeks before Easter. A woman can paint up to 200 eggs for her family, but also for other women in the village who do not know the craft or do not have the patience to do it. In Transylvanian villages, eggs are not just decorations. They are a sign of connection between people, time, and purpose. In Țara Oașului, they also make eggs to be sent abroad to families celebrating Easter in churches in the diaspora. They prepare them baskets of food and like to have some beautifully painted eggs too. The baskets contain ham (bacon), sausages, lamb and cakes and are taken to church on Easter Sunday for a blessing.

In the past, people did not crack the painted eggs and instead cut them in half with a knife removed and ate the yolk and placed the shells in the trees in the garden to make them bear fruit. Eggshells were also placed in trees in Sângiorgi (Sf. Gheorghe). Nothing that had been blessed was ever thrown away; it was passed on and put into animal feed.



...in Budureasa, eggshells from which chicks had hatched were put on a stick in the garden and placed between the plant beds to keep the guzu (mole) away. And in Păiușeni (Arad County), eggs were cut in half and kept on the wall inside the house.

...in Botiza, Maramureș, the shells from blessed eggs were placed in onion beds to prevent the mole cricket from eating them.

...in Dumbrăvița de Codru, eggshells were placed among the plants in the garden to prevent them from being eaten by pests, while others would nail a painted egg to the wall.

Tradition dictates that people who crack eggs on Easter Day will meet again in the afterlife. In Transylvania, there was a custom for the father of the family to take a blessed egg, cut it into as many pieces as there were members of the family, and then give each one a piece. It was believed that if anyone in the family ever got lost or couldn't find their way, just thinking about who they shared the Easter egg with would open their eyes and help them find their way.

The custom is to give beautifully painted eggs to relatives, godparents, neighbors and especially children.



In Șercaia (Brașov County), there was a custom at Easter for boys to go and sprinkle perfume on girls, and each would receive a painted egg in return. Here, too, the eggs were kept in the house throughout the year, thus protecting the house from evil and spells, the blessed eggs acting as guardians of the house and the people who lived there.

In the Bran area, boys who went to the ball at the local hall on Easter Monday all received eggs.

In Poienile de sub Munte (historical Maramureș), the women of the Ukrainian community also made "pysanky," a word that comes from the verb "pysaty" (to write, in Ukrainian). The eggs were written from Thursday to Saturday. People went to church on Monday for the blessing of the food when eggs and bagels were given to relatives and neighbors as alms for grandparents and great-grandparents.

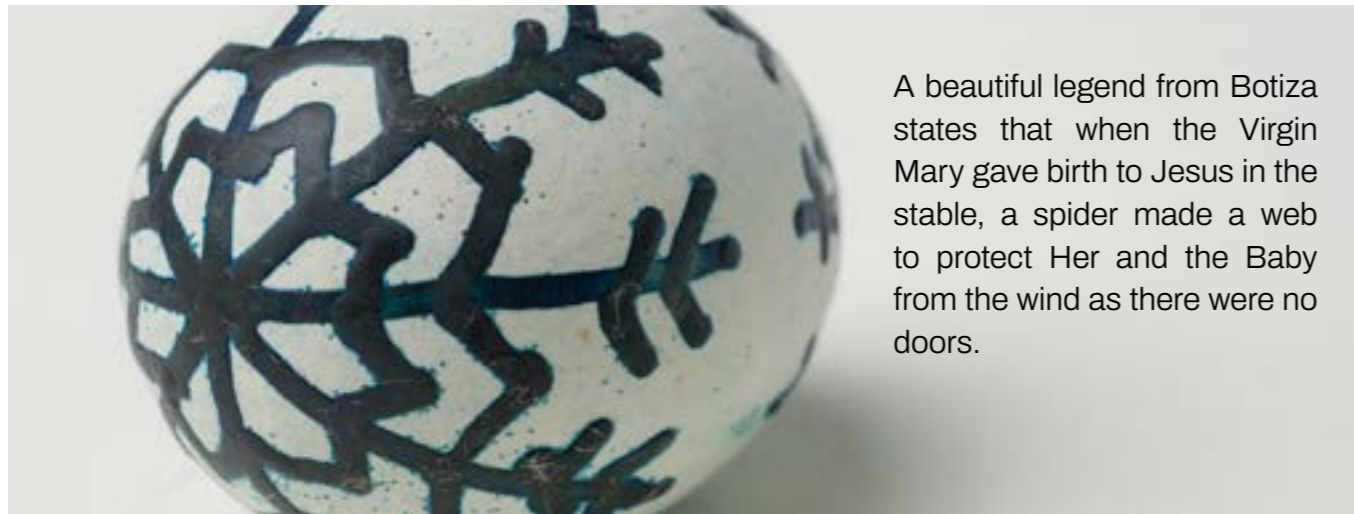


In the Csango community in Săcele, eggs were painted on Good Friday because it was believed that they would not go bad if painted then. People first gave eggs to the priest and the village teacher, then to relatives. On the second day of Easter, the girls waited for the boys to come with the holy water and gave them painted eggs. Anna Gödri writes: "...depending on the pattern he received, the boy knew whether or not his meetings with the girl would continue. If he received an egg decorated with an oak leaf pattern, the girl thought of him as a hard-working and strong boy. If he received an egg decorated with a snail, it meant that she did not appreciate him very much at all."

Motifs and symbols

In Transylvania, the painted egg is more than just an Easter object: it is a living testimony to the way in which rural communities have managed to combine art, faith, and the order of time. Passed down from generation to generation, this craft preserves the symbolic language of the traditional village and continues to be practiced in households, museums, and school workshops. Ethnographic studies and museum collections confirm the regional variety of ornamentation and techniques, from simple geometric shapes to complex painting compositions, each area leaving its own mark on the fragile shell.

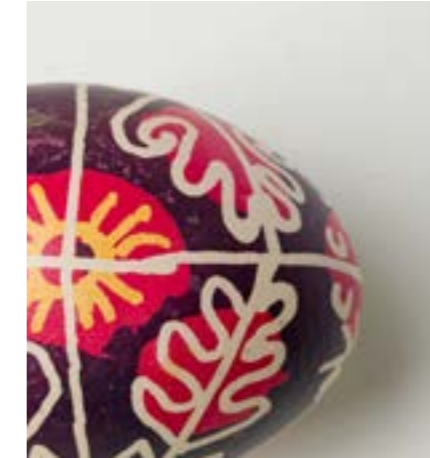
There are numerous motifs used to decorate eggs. The ornamentation covers the entire surface of the egg, which is carefully chosen according to the pattern the maker wants to achieve. A small egg will not be suitable for a very rich and complicated pattern, nor will a simple pattern be made on a large egg. Depending on the pattern, the surface of the egg will be divided into ornamental fields (2, 4, 8, or none at all).



There are several predominant motifs that appear in all the places we researched: the sun, the star and the cross. However, each community has a motif with symbolic value:



Botiza – the spider’s web



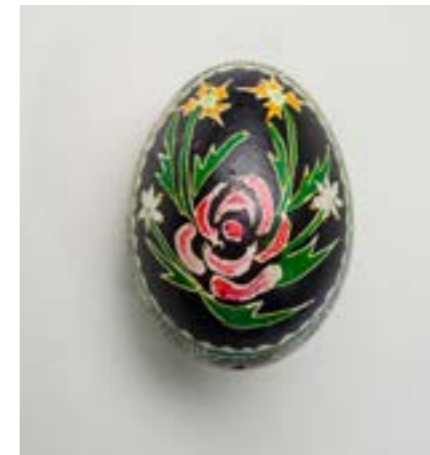
Dumbrăvița – the sun



Cămărzana – the ladder



Drăgoteni – the bridle



Șercaia – the daffodil



The motifs

can be divided into six categories:

phytomorphic (flowers and leaves)
cosmomorphic (suns and stars)
skeuomorphic (tools)
zoomorphic (animals)
anthropomorphic (people)
religious

Motifs found in the villages we studied:

Bran

cross, four- or six-pointed star, oak leaf, Easter flower, cuckoo on a branch, cuckoo on a flower, hora dance, wedding in Bran.

Botiza

cross, small fir tree, spider web.

Drăgoteni

lost path, a staff without the end, star, cross, bridle, rake, claws, leaves, grape, prosphora, staff with two ears of wheat, fir tree.

More information:



Budureasa

bridle, small table, ladder.

Cămărzana

ladder, rooster, rake, flowers, fir branch, goose foot.

Dumbrăvița

sun, ram's horns, star, oak leaves with suns and stars.

Dumbravița de Codru

prosphora, fern, cross, oak leaf, rake, pitchfork.

Păiușeni

carnation, rose, strawberry, grape, apple.

Poienile de sub Munte

rake, basket, rose, flowers.

Veneția de Sus

the lost path, nest with flowers, Easter flower, snowdrops, oak leaf.

Săcele

flowers, leaves, sun, rake, pitchfork, lost path, skirt, tulip.

Șercaia

daffodil, snowdrop, lily of the valley, clover, tulip, rake, plow iron, wheat ear, oak leaf, peony, small prosphora, ram's horns, table of Heaven, lost path, poppy.

Meanings

In Cămărzana, we encountered a classic symbol of ascension: the bars of the ladder that divide the egg in two are joined by rungs so that man can climb higher and higher. A poppy drawn on an egg represents the sacrifice made by the mother for her child. The lost path is “a trail tangled in all sorts of ways, it’s skillfully done but you can’t figure it out, no matter how hard you try.” (Simion Hârnea, Our Customs and Traditions at Easter)



In Drăgoteni: “...the star represents the birth of Christ, the lost path shows us that people fall and get back up again and again, the rake reminds us of health, the fir tree represents stability, the grape urges us to take Communion, and the staff with two ears of wheat is a very common motif, including on traditional clothing in the area.” (Dorina Hanza)



In Șercaia: “...most eggs are decorated with a band. Just as a woman has a cinched in waist that is accentuated when she dresses, the egg, which is like a mini (Mother) Earth, is given a belt. We have the earth which, with the help of the sun and agricultural tools, bears fruit. Each egg has a story.” and “...the daffodil has always been associated with the oak tree, because we used to have hectares of oak forest.” (Cornelia Opaț)



In Țara Bârsei (the Bran area and the Seven Villages area), the craft is notable for its diversity of patterns and subtle shades, with an elaborate ornamental composition. Cosmic symbols and cuckoo motifs, mingled with Christian symbols, reflect the Transylvanian connection between man, nature, and heaven.





The rigor with which people preserve these motifs and symbols blends harmoniously with their creativity. While some craftsmen decorate eggs exactly as they have always been decorated, or make very few changes to them, others add or even invent patterns and motifs that reflect the specificity of that place and integrate them in a balanced way into established designs.

“...we try to follow traditional patterns, but we also invent new ones, sometimes when inspiration strikes, though we mainly stick to the old patterns. I also created a pattern that I called pafta, inspired by the jewelry worn around the neck and on traditional costumes.” (Anna Gödri)



Techniques, colors and tools

Preparing the eggs

A few weeks before Easter, the women of the household have to carefully calculate the number of eggs needed for all the dishes at the Easter meal, including the eggs to be painted. An indispensable food for this holiday, eggs are traditionally used for baking bagels, cozonac, pască, cakes, lichiu, various doughs, and for the dyed red eggs. Because they need so many eggs, women would start collecting and selecting ahead of time. The whitest eggs are reserved for painting and reddening so that there is as much contrast as possible between the natural color of the egg and the dye. If there are not enough white eggs, browner eggs are placed in a mixture of water and vinegar for a few hours, which causes the first layer of the eggshell to peel off and become whiter.

The eggs used for painting are chicken, duck, and goose eggs. The women wash them thoroughly, boil them and keep them on the stove to stay warm because the tool glides more easily over the egg if it is warm. In most areas, the eggs are painted whole, and people prepare them as gifts to be eaten at Easter. In the Oaş region, if someone wants to keep the eggs for the rest of the year, they make a small hole and carefully remove the boiled contents.

The custom of emptying eggs first and then decorating them only appeared once they began being sold and people saw them as decorative objects.

Tool



The tool used to paint eggs has different names. In Botiza, Săcele, Șercaia, Veneția de Sus, and Dumbrăvița, people call it a “condei” or “Íróka” (Hungarian), in Drăgoteni and Dumbrăvița de Codru a “bizarcă,” in Cămărzana a “câscă,” and in Păiușeni “chișiță.” The tool can be made from:

“...sapwood, sheet metal or scraps of thin sheet metal and shaped on a needle. The sheet metal was wrapped around the needle so that it could be round.” (Cămărzana)



“...from pieces of wood and a cylinder that is placed inside, made from a piece of metal, cut, then rolled on a needle.” (Botiza)

“...2-3 strands of boar hair or horsehair bent and mounted onto a wooden stick.” (Veneția de Sus)
People also used goose feathers or straw to decorate eggs. In the past, natural beeswax was the raw material used to write patterns on the shell.



“...this was quite precious, because people didn't really have beehives, there were very few people who knew how to raise bees and how to work with them. That's why they scraped the wax off the eggs with a knife to use it the following year.” (Dumbrăvița de Codru)



Technique

In Șercaia, women paint eggs using successive color baths. This is the most common technique in Transylvania, called the “wax resist” method. This classic pattern has been described both in ethnographic documents and in the collections of the Transylvanian museums.

Preparation:

the eggs are emptied or boiled (depending on their intended use) and cleaned. The tools are prepared (chișiță/condei, wax, dyes).

Marking out the compartments:

Initially, lines are drawn with wax to divide the surface of the egg into 2, 4, 6, 8, or more ornamental sections.

First color bath:

Usually **yellow** —the egg is dipped in yellow dye and then removed to dry.

Writing other motifs:

Motifs are “written” with wax on the colored surfaces.

Second bath:

Red follows, frequently used as a symbolic color for Easter.

Final accents:

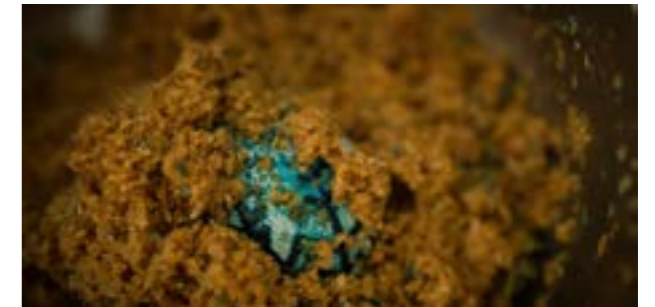
Details are added in **black** or another dark color for contrast and contour.

Wax removal:

After the final drying stage, the egg is gently heated and the wax is removed, revealing the colored pattern. It can then be wiped and polished with animal or vegetable fat for shine (lard/oil).



In Cămărzana, the technique is different. The eggs are dyed with extremely resistant textile dyes (sometimes diluted with plum brandy) in strong colors such as pink, pinkish red, purple, and green. After the dye dries, the desired pattern is drawn on. Lastly, the color is wiped off with a cloth dipped in water and vinegar, and the beeswax remains on the egg.



In Botiza, we found both techniques, with the difference that the paint was wiped off the eggs with a mixture of bran and sauerkraut juice.

In Drăgoteni, Budureasa, Săcele, and Dumbrăvița de Codru, the eggs are painted and decorated only in red.

In Păiușeni, Nana Piștoaie (Florița Păiușan) has a unique technique for coloring eggs. After they are boiled, they are coated with wax and colored with textile dyes using a quill pen. After coloring, they are covered with wax to preserve the color, and the procedure is repeated with the next color. For the complete coloring, the eggs are passed through “chemicals” (indigo color obtained from a chemical pencil mixed with vinegar). Lastly, after the wax is heated (over a candle, oil lamp, or embers from the stove), it is wiped off the egg with a cloth.



Then the eggs are coated with lard to give them a nice shine.



Color

The first colors used to dye eggs were vegetable-based, such as yellow or red onion skins, beetroot peel, rosehips, walnut leaves, alder bark, or even tinder. However, the way synthetic dyes looked and the fact that they were used in factories or even in households for dyeing wool led people to try these colors on eggs as well. And it worked. The eggs were dyed with more vivid and a wider range of colors, and the color lasted longer. Galus is a well-known textile dye used in dyeing wool, cotton, and other types of fabric and has become a popular dye used for eggs as well.



Conclusions

The painted eggs of Transylvania constitute a unique part of Romania's spiritual and cultural heritage.

Each region we studied (Satu Mare, Maramureș, Bihor, Arad and Brașov) has added a specific touch: from geometric simplicity to pictorial richness, from the order of the friezes to the intercultural ornamental dialogue. Museum collections, such as those of the Țara Crișurilor Museum, the Satu Mare County Museum, and the Brașov Museum of Ethnography, document this heritage, while ethnographic research interprets it in a historical and symbolic context. Still practiced in villages and brought back to the public's attention through exhibitions and workshops, the craft of egg painting remains a bridge between tradition and present, between the memory of rural communities and the cultural identity of the entire region of Transylvania. Nowadays, egg painting remains alive in the privacy of rural villages and in public spaces within communities such as workshops, gatherings and museum exhibitions.

After traveling over 3,000 kilometers to research the craft of egg painting in Transylvania, we certainly did not reach everyone who is continuing and handing on this tradition. Our research was not exhaustive, but we wanted to visit important places considered to be focal points of this craft.

The future of this custom is closely linked to the willingness of young people to learn the technique and practice this craft during the Easter ritual.

Although craftsmen participate in various workshops in schools during the Easter period to show students how to make painted eggs, the process often remains at the stage of curiosity and demonstration because although the initial enthusiasm is impressive, the activity is not then continued in the family. However, there are also areas where children compete in egg painting contests and situations where adults become curious at an older age and learn this craft.

We will conclude our endeavor on an optimistic note, believing that each of the cultural spaces will find divine intervention at the most opportune moment to revive and carry on this ancient craft so that it may be passed on as a gift to future generations.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the people who welcomed us into their homes and shared their knowledge and craftsmanship with such kindness and willingness.

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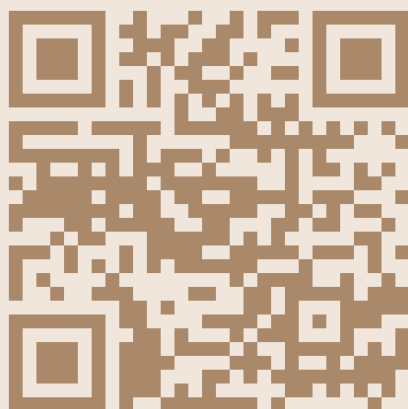
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