

FREE GIFT INSIDE: Artists' Papers & Clip Art Pages!

Somerset Studio®

THE ART OF PAPER AND MIXED-MEDIA

HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN

Artist Tape

pg. 14

Easier Than You Think:

ALTERED PHOTOS of Venice

pg. 28

DISCOVER THE ANCIENT ART OF

PYSANKY

pg. 72

Artist Profile

Traci Bautista

pg. 38

Display until 4/30/12

MAR/APR 2012 \$8.99 US • \$9.99 CAN



WWW.SOMERSETSTUDIO.COM

Pysanky Divine Perfection

A NEW TWIST ON AN ANCIENT ART FORM

ARTWORK BY STEVE SAXE
STORY BY LYNNE PERRELLA

One look at photos of Steve Saxe's hand-decorated eggs, and I wanted to know everything about the artist and his creations. Exactly how did Steve, a Pastor of a small Lutheran congregation in Greer, South Carolina, become such an expert at the ancient art of Pysanky?

Flashback to the 1990s, when Steve and his wife Janet made yearly visits during the Lenten season to The Old Broadway Market in downtown Buffalo, New York, eagerly looking forward to one of the seasonal vendor booths where literally thousands of the intricate, colorfully-decorated eggs were displayed. The couple enjoyed selecting an egg for their growing collection at home, followed by a delicious lunch of local ethnic food. When they later moved to South Carolina, Janet heard of a Pysanky workshop sponsored by a nearby Orthodox church and Steve made his first attempts to master the art form he had admired for so long. With strong encouragement from his instructor, Alexandra Denny of Westminster, South Carolina, he progressed from early disappointment with his "imperfect" outcomes to more proficient results using an electric Kistka (wax stylus) and an egg lathe. →





MÉLANGE



With Alexandra's reminder of "Only God is perfect" in mind, he gradually mastered the challenge of making straight lines on curved surfaces and "reasonably round" circular motifs. Nowadays, he creates amazingly-intricate and beautifully-designed eggs for relaxation, and as a way of quieting his self-described "noisy brain," as well as managing stress. His hobby, often combined with listening to books-on-tape or prayer, is both calming and creative. Plus, the groupings of eggs provide unique and colorful displays throughout the Saxe home, as well as ideal subject matter for Janet, a skilled photographer.

I was especially curious to learn what this modern-day master egg decorator knew about the history of Pysanky, and whether he felt bound by these traditions when he works. So let's flash back even further, to 2000 years ago, when Ukrainian tribes considered eggs to be fertility symbols, and decorated them as part of their Rites of Spring observances. With the advent of Christianity in that region in the 10th Century, colored eggs were symbolic of new life and resurrection (an early version of "Easter eggs"). Some Orthodox societies still consider the traditional act of decorating eggs to be a sacred art form and specific colors and symbols are used; and a resurgence of the art form emerged, following Ukrainian independence in 1991. I was fascinated to learn that the term Pysanky is derived from the Russian word "pysaty" ("to write"); and was reminded that Russian Icon makers/artists are also referred to as "Icon writers."



Steve approaches his designs with an appreciation and respect for past traditions and motifs (referring to himself as a “Pysanky purist”) as well as adding a unique design twist by creating nativity-themed eggs. He also departs from tradition with his etched brown and ivory eggs, using natural dark-hued eggs that he decorates with beeswax markings, and etches with muriatic acid. For his more vivid color combinations, he is often inspired by traditional color groupings (such as blue for Advent, purple for Lent), but is also receptive to his everyday surroundings for color/motif ideas — like the time he noticed a Williamsburg quilt in a magazine and thought “That would make a great Pysanky design!” Inspiration is everywhere. Reference books of traditional Ukrainian designs are kept close at hand, but Steve also enjoys adding his own border designs and ideas to the overall design, and he likes to experiment by using his water-based aniline dyes in unconventional ways. Many of his unique effects are achieved by over-dyeing, and often the order that the dyes are applied determines the final color outcome. For instance, dyeing from blue to red will give one shade; but, dyeing from red to blue may result in a totally different outcome. Each eggshell is a unique combination of chemical compounds, so each dye bath will produce unique and unexpected results. Plus, using natural-colored eggs adds to the variations as well. It’s endless!

How does he do it? Steve selects free-range chicken eggs that are uniformly smooth, without bumps, removes the inside by blowing, rinses the eggs with hot water and dishwashing liquid, and allows them to dry thoroughly. He uses a graphite lead pencil and divides the egg into equal portions (these markings will be removed later in the wax-melting process). An electric wax pen (called a Kistka) is used to apply molten beeswax on the surface of the eggshell in an even and consistent flow — after a lot of practice! (Remember Alexandra’s guidance about perfection?) After he applies the motifs that will form the white areas of the pattern, he gives the egg a white vinegar bath (this improves the dye-taking process). Working with his chosen colors, similar to batik, he creates his patterns. When the design preparation is complete, he holds the egg near a candle flame to melt the accumulated beeswax. Now the fun begins, as the brilliant colored patterns emerge. He gently wipes the wax away using a paper towel. Next, two or three coats of high-gloss polyurethane are added to set the colors, and provide a glossy finish. Voilà! →



MÉLANGE





After seeing Janet's photos of colorful groupings of Steve's eggs, I was convinced that he must approach his work as a specific series to achieve such beautiful harmonious cohesion — but he assures me that he works “one egg at a time” and places the completed eggs in baskets throughout their home. The beauty of the accumulated eggs are, indeed, serendipitous and random — and amazing. The rampant pattern-on-pattern array delights the eye, providing reminders of enduring ethnic patterns from all over the globe. My eye rests on a fish motif, then a geometric pinwheel, then a dainty plant form, then a contemporary graphic border design — all of it looks so wonderful together. A collective of pattern and color, prompted by ancient traditions — and also the outgrowth of curiosity, patience, fascination, and the amazing mind of Steve Saxe. †

Lynne Perrella is a mixed-media artist, author, and workshop instructor. She has written five books on mixed-media, and hosts creativity workshops throughout the United States and abroad. For more information and inspiration, visit lkperrella.com. Photography by Janet Merrill Saxe.

