



Vera Samycia, Pysanka

Overview

Pysanka is the ancient art of decorating eggs. Often associated with Easter, the eggs use a variety of symbols and motifs that tell important stories to those who are a part of the culture and understand the “codes” and tradition found in the eggs.

Vera Samycia learned this art of egg decorating from her mother. Just as significantly, however, are the family stories that Vera has learned from her mother about her own country and Ukrainian culture that she left when she was only 14 years old. The family stories that can be collected in our classrooms, museums, and galleries help illuminate both larger cultural narratives and themes of our communities and regions, and shine a light on the things which help define and make unique our individual families.

Family Stories and History ~ Have you ever thought about how your own family stories intersect with national and international history? How do the stories of your parents, grandparents, and others before them help personalize the history that we see in texts, movies, and the news? Vera Samycia’s art is very much a part of her personal culture, but it also provides a window in to the events that were occurring in Europe and Ukraine during WWII and the decisions people faced in the war.

Suggested Objectives

- Hear a compelling story, situated in a specific historical context, and evaluate the speaker’s point of view.
- Plan and implement an oral history project, including creating focused questions, integrating information from multiple sources, and demonstrating knowledge of subject under investigation.
- Identify different ways in which stories and narratives can be communicated, including visually.
- Learn how to do primary source research, using the archives of the Library of Congress as well as local resources.
- Understand relationship of personal cultural identity and cultural expression.

Focus Standards

History/Social Studies

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

Writing

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2](#) Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7](#) Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Speaking/Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1](#) Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2](#) Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3](#) Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.



Immigration Stories and Art Worksheet and Discussion Questions



During WWII Vera Samycia's mother fled Ukraine and eventually immigrated to the United States. One of the few possessions she brought was her *kistka*, the primary tool used to make Pysanka, or decorated Easter Eggs. The *kistka* supplies thin lines of hot wax which resist coloring and are then removed at the end of the dye process. This photo shows her holding this *kistka* that her mother brought with her.

If you had to leave with only a small bag, what are the things that you would feel like you must have? Why?

Do your choices say something about your culture or values?

What does it suggest to you that Vera's mother brought this tool with her?



Family Stories and History

Worksheet and Discussion Questions

Listen to one of the stories that Vera related in her interview that she completed as a part of the exhibit preparation:

“My Mom always did the eggs as a youngster. She learned from her grandmother and some of the ladies in the village because her mother died very young. Mom always wanted me to learn, however, when we were in Belgium we were too busy. We had a long history. I was abandoned as a child in Ukraine because both of my parents, not being Jewish, were taken to a German work farm. My mother had to turn me over. My dad had signed up to work because in Ukraine, he had heard rumors that in Germany you could always work on the farm. You can always send things back home. My mother had gone with me and her two younger sisters to tell him goodbye. My dad was told by the soldiers, (now there were soldiers on the train, he didn’t expect that), he was told that if he didn’t have his wife with him they would shoot him. I was 8 months at the time. They said “no, she has to go, on the train, with you”. My mom turned around, and gave me to her 16 year old sister. And that is how I ended up staying in Ukraine.”

What does this historical context contribute to your understanding of why this tradition may be important?

What family stories do you know from your own family? Can you provide a personal story to help understand a significant historical event?

Consider your answers in light of this continued story:

“Here in the United States, the reason why this art form continued is because this was part of our identity. When communism was in Ukraine, we lost our identity. Ukraine ceased to exist. Yeah, there was the nation, but it was called The Ukraine, Nobody knew anything about our identity.”

~What traditions do you practice that could be considered a part of your cultural identity?

Other Sample Activities

You can practice the same techniques of “wax resist” in a variety of formats. Whenever you cover a part of your project (paper, egg, cloth, or otherwise) and color over it, you are practicing this technique. We would recommend thinking about symbols and codes as a part of this exercise.

~Create a symbols worksheet, appropriate for your age group of learners. There are a number of elements that you could include here, ranging from simple to more complex. A few ideas:

- Create a worksheet with four blank squares. You could label each if you want, for example: Symbol of something I enjoy, Symbol that represents something that only my friends and I know, Symbol of one of my most important beliefs, Symbol that represents where I live. (Or choose from a wide diversity of other things that could be “coded” in our life)
 - Using worksheet above, now ask for colors that best represent each of these ideas.
- Give students 3-5 post-it notes. Invite them to put one symbol or “code” that is meaningful to them on each post-it. Then create a collage of post-its on the wall. Invite each other to write what they think each code may mean on the back of the note. It becomes an activity that invites us to think about not only code, but meaning and deciphering as well.

~Have the students create a larger project, incorporating these codes and colors in to the product. It could be individual or representative of the group. If you want to include wax resist methods specifically, eggs are just one medium that would be appropriate. Some classrooms may want to do batik with cloth (a flour/water mixture can be applied to cloth using frosting-type applicators (i.e. baggie with corner cut off), after it dries apply dye, then scrape flour off. Masking tape on paper can also work.

Vera’s art form is beautiful and a significant tradition. However, it is also her family story that is compelling in this exhibit panel. One extended classroom activity that would be appropriate would include collecting family stories and oral histories. These stories could be worked with in a variety of ways, including written reports that situate the stories in a specific historical context; collections of the stories, and/or other creative projects.

Visit the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center (loc.gov/folklife). There are a number of special projects that have been initiated by this center to collect oral histories and document significant cultures from around the nation.

EDUCATORS: there are multiple resources for use in the classroom on this website that will help you develop an oral history project in your classroom. (see especially <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/index.html>) We encourage students to think about the stories that they can collect in their family—they may be stories of immigration, fortunes lost (or found), characters in their families, or just the story that everyone knows

and loves to tell when the group comes together. The LOC website provides sample release forms to have interviewed people sign, suggestions for developing questions, etc.

Additional Resources

The Ukrainian National Museum of Chicago has exhibits, and archive, and many activities. For more information: <http://www.ukrainsnationalmuseum.org//eng/index.html>

A Celebration of American Family Folklore (1982), is a text that includes family stories collected at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, as well as really useful and important “how to” sections on collecting family folklore. Although this book was first published in the early eighties, its usefulness is still very relevant in the classroom. Authors include Holly Baker, Amy Kotkin, and Steven Zeitlin.