

The Iconography of Rebirth:

XX

ASPECTS OF THE
POLISH-AMERICAN

EASTER CELEBRATION



Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery
of Niagara University

March 20 - April 12, 1988

Spring sneaks up on most of us now. But spring's arrival was marked by more than a date on the calendar for a world without heated houses and cars to take the sting out of winter's chill; without electric lights to brighten bleak days; without supermarkets full of food from winterless places. Spring had to come for the ancients. Its lengthening, warming days were cajoled and greeted with a profusion of signs and rituals celebrating the season of new life.

Fragments of the age-old celebration of springtime renewal survive in many cultures. The fact that these early traditions were often adapted to conform with newer Christian beliefs only adds to the resonance of their meaning. "The Iconography of Rebirth: Aspects of the Polish-American Easter Celebration", looks at one culture's representations of rebirth as expressed through traditional media, particularly symbolic Easter foods and decorative Easter eggs.

A photographic documentation of the *święconka* (*shveen—tsoon'—ka*) tradition, by Marion Faller, provides the exhibit's central component. The term *swienconka* (English spelling) refers to both blessed Easter foods and the meal at which they are eaten. The origins of the *swienconka* tradition are uncertain. Eggs, if not eaten, were used as an offering in pre-Christian spring rites among the Indo-Europeans. The Catholic hierarchy officially recognized the use of eggs as an Easter food during the 12th century, but scholars maintain that eggs were being blessed in Christian churches as early as the 4th century. Many of the Slavic Catholic peoples of Eastern Europe, including the Poles, partake of an entire meal of Easter foods which begins with the ritual sharing of a blessed egg. Several elements of the *swienconka* meal suggest a connection with the Hebrew Passover feast, itself a derivation of pre-Judaic "first fruits" celebration which occurred during the spring's vernal equinox.

The *swienconka* tradition travelled to Western New York with Polish immigrants at the turn of the century. Though it varies a great deal from one family to the next, the *swienconka* meal is always built around a group of foods with symbolic significance.

Colored eggs; pre-Christians credited the egg with life-giving powers. Christians later appropriated this ancient symbol of new life, linking Easter eggs with the tomb from which a reborn Christ emerged.

Butter lamb; represents Christ in the form of the paschal lamb, as prefigured in the sacrificial lamb of the Hebrew Passover. The red ribbon around its neck recalls the blood of the Crucifixion. The small flag between its shoulder blades signals Christ's victory through the Resurrection.

Easter bread; baked in a round loaf, its top marked with a cross. Represents Christ in the form of Communion bread, the bread of the Last Supper.

Polish-Americans bring baskets including these special foods to their parish churches during the afternoon on Holy Saturday. During a simple service, priests invoke an individual benediction for each food. The baskets are blessed with holy water and brought home. The blessed foods are the first thing eaten on Easter Sunday morning when families share the *swienconka* meal after returning from the Resurrection Mass.

Swienconka is, essentially, a folk communion which parallels the official Catholic ritual. Most families begin their meal by sharing a single Easter egg with all present. In doing so, they demonstrate their unity with each other and with Christ, who is symbolically present in the egg. While the sacrament of Communion is intended to promote the solidarity of a Christian community, *swienconka* provides the same benefit for the family. The Easter egg, like



the Communion host, is believed to impart a share of Christ's divine vitality to those who eat it. Multiple ingestions of Christ's body, in the shape of the blessed butter lamb, Easter bread, and Easter egg, give a seasonal boost to the Polish-American family's sense of spiritual and physical well-being.

The *swienconka* photographs are loosely organized in groups which highlight facets of the present-day tradition. The first group provides a visual catalogue of symbolic foods. A wonderful selection of Easter basket covers are surveyed in the second group. Two *swienconka* cloth traditions seem to have developed simultaneously in Poland during the 18th and 19th centuries. The earliest known *swienconka* cloths were either embroidered with traditional motifs or fashioned to resemble austere white church linens. A particular

family's *swienconka* cloth tradition was determined by the personal tastes of its matrons. Pre-Christian women wove and embroidered ceremonial cloths and clothing which were used during planting and harvest festivals as well as in marriage and burial rites. The embroidery motifs used to decorate early *swienconka* covers were taken from these older ceremonial textiles, and were inspired by a profound sense of intimacy with the natural world. The brilliant white linen cloths otherwise used to cover *swienconka* baskets, reflected the church's designation of the color as a sign of purity and joy. The traditional arts of weaving and embroidery did not prosper among Polish immigrants. While embroidered cloths still occasionally appear, beautifully crocheted basket covers (significantly, still white) surpassed both earlier types in popularity among Polish-Americans in Western New York sometime during the late 1920's. Many

of the crocheted cloths photographed are fifty or more years old. Other photographs show a more recent choice of basket covering: tinfoil.

The third group of photographs notes the use of Easter greens. Because the ancient peoples of Europe believed that the first plant life to reappear after winter possessed a special potency, pre-Christian rites of spring often included new greens. Switching a woman with new growth imparted the budding vegetation's fertility to her. New greens, decorated and carried in procession, transferred their virility to fields and homes. In Poland, the pussywillow has long figured as the most popular new green. After the introduction of Christianity, the pussywillow was incorporated in Palm Sunday services as a sign of the palms used to hail Christ during His entry into Jerusalem. Pussywillows included in Polish-American *swienconka*

baskets serve both as a reminder of seasonal renewal and as a harbinger of Christ's triumphant rebirth. A single blessed pussywillow bud, sometimes eaten during the *swienconka* meal, though more usually on Palm Sunday, is believed to insure good health for the coming year. Some contemporary Polish-Americans credit blessed parsley with the same health-providing benefits.

A final group of photographs documents current adaptations of the *swienconka* tradition. Faller's insightful photographs capture the intricacies of a living tradition: the strength in an old woman's hand as she tips her spare, carefully composed basket forward to show it better; a jar of babyfood tucked into a basket so that no one in the family is left out of the special Easter morning meal; a man's tattooed arm holding a basket covered with delicate lace; droplets of holy water on a pair of chocolate lips.



While the photographs often feature the seemingly incongruous pairings of the very old with the very new, it is these hybridizations which insure the *swienconka* tradition's continued vigor. Curiously, people frequently seem dressed to match their baskets, or vice versa. Easter clothes are an outward sign of a tradition which transforms participants as they transform it.

Swienconka baskets are works of art created with skills passed on by generations of Polish-Americans. The details of their arrangement are as different as the personalities of their owners. Eggs in one basket are peeled to avoid the problematic disposal of blessed shells. In the next, eggs sport Mickey Mouse appliques. While it's true that no two baskets are alike, this diversity is ultimately contained within the context of the *swienconka* ritual. Everyone interprets the tradition a bit differently, but participates nonetheless. *Swienconka* prevails as the Polish-American community's most popular Easter tradition.

In addition to its work as a religious folk ritual, *swienconka* functions as a yearly affirmation of Polish-American ethnic identity. Business at the Broadway Market, centrally located in Buffalo's oldest Polish-American neighborhood, peaks annually during Holy Week when *swienconka* foods are customarily purchased. An estimated 100,000 people pass through the market daily during Holy Week as compared to the usual 10,000 weekly visitors. At Easter, the market beckons Polish-Americans throughout Western New York and beyond, many of them "fallen away" ethnics who are rarely aware of their "Polishness" at other times. They make their yearly pilgrimage back to the "the old neighborhood" (many never lived there) to buy foods which, when eaten, somehow make one Polish. Faller's photographs convey a good sense of the enthusiasm and joyousness with which Polish-Americans, fallen away or not, declare their ethnicity through the *swienconka* tradition.

Decorative eggs, meant to be "read" rather than eaten, make up the exhibit's second component. Eggs at Easter recall a still unsolved mystery; where did life first come from? Because of its unusual ability to produce life

from its seemingly inanimate self, the egg became one of mankind's earliest known religious objects. The creation myths of many cultures record the fact that the world itself was hatched from a primordial egg. In Poland, and throughout the pre-Christian world, eggs played an important role in the ceremonial life of early farming communities. Eggs were used as a cure for infertility, buried to increase the productivity of fields, and bartered for desirable marriage partners. After the introduction of Christianity, eggs became a symbol of Christ's tomb. Consequently, the egg serves as a reminder of man's spiritual, as well as physical, rebirth.

The remains of Easter *pisanski*, multicolored eggs made by applying protective wax designs which are added as the eggs are dipped into successive dyes, dating from the 11th century have been found in Poland. *Kraszanki*, solid colored eggs dyed with plant materials, were probably made much earlier. *Skrobanki* or *rysowanki*, solid colored eggs with a design scratched onto their surface, are also thought to pre-date *pisanski*. Scholars suggest that traditional embroidery designs provided the inspiration for the motifs first used to decorate *pisanski*. *Pisanski* commemorate nature's power in stylized images of the sun and the elemental forces of fire and water. The fecundity and beauty of the natural world are confirmed through a multitude of plant and animal motifs. Geographic regions in Poland developed *pisanski* styles specific to their location which are still recognizable today.

Poles traditionally worked on *pisanski* throughout the Lenten season. *Pisanski* presented to family, friends, and lovers at Easter conveyed messages written in intricate patterns of symbols and colors. Evergreen trees or branches, long a sign of eternal youth, wished the recipient good health; a stag, prosperity; and birds, much happiness. The color red indicated both love and the blood of the Crucifixion; white, purity; and rose, success. The *pisanski's* work as an emissary of springtime goodwill is remembered in the present day custom of sharing a blessed egg and good wishes for the coming year with family members at the start of the *swienconka* meal.

Three additional Easter egg techniques were developed in Poland during the 19th and 20th centuries: *wyklejanki*, decorated with glued on bullrush pith and yarn; *nalepianki*, to which straw or paper cutouts are glued; and *malowanki*, hand-painted eggs.

Polish immigrants brought the thousand year old art of Easter egg making with them to Western New York during the late 19th century. Somewhat surprisingly, an art intimately connected with the lives of rural peasants survives in Polish-American urban communities to this day. While few can now "read" the ancient symbols of fertility and rebirth used to decorate them, eggs still have a potent ability to enhance the Polish-American Easter celebration. Easter eggs are small, bright tokens of Polish ancestors and their half-remembered way of life. They encapsulate a shared past which continues to inform Polish-American group identity.

The exhibit features the work of Polish-American Easter egg artists from Buffalo, West Seneca, Niagara Falls, Hamburg, and Gownada, New York. Included are: *pisanki* dyed with onion skins by Henja Makowski; *pisanki* by Fr. Jim Czerwinski, Fr. Chester Krysa, Dick Makowski, Eva Ziarek and the late Theresa Zielinski; *nalepianki* by Judy Krauza; and *malowanki* by Sr. Theresa Blachowski and Alice Bak. The work of these talented folk artists indicates the Polish-American Easter egg making tradition's ongoing presence and diversity in Western New York.

"The Iconography of Rebirth..." is conceived as a first step towards a more complete documentation of the multi-faceted Polish-American Easter celebration. The exhibit invites a close look at the traditional iconography which inspires holiday activity. It's the many varied symbolic expressions of rebirth which enable the Polish-American community to truly experience the deep felt freshness of Easter renewal, and to endure.

Kate Koperski

Clockwise from top: *malowanki*, *pisanki* dyed with onion skins, *nalepianki* and *wyklejanki*. Center: *pisanki*.



KATE KOPERSKI, guest curator

Photographs by MARION FALLER:
Selections from the "Swienconka" series;
Buffalo, New York; Spring 1987

Workshops by folk artist ALICE BAK:
Traditional butter lamb making;
Saturday March 26, 2pm.
Traditional Easter egg decorating techniques;
Sunday March 27, 2pm.

This exhibit was partially funded by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts' Folk Arts Program. Our thanks to the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society for their loan of eggs by Fr. Krysa; to Shirley Botek Melston, the Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery's Curator of Education; and to the Polish Community Center of Buffalo's Geraldine Berezuik for her help in locating Easter egg artists. Many thanks also to Judy Krauza for her invaluable assistance with the exhibit's Easter egg component. Lauren Tent's helpful role in preparing the photographs for exhibition is sincerely appreciated.

A portion of the Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery of Niagara University's general operating funds for this fiscal year has been made available through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency.

Photographs © Marion Faller 1988