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# Painted eggs in the Muslim and Christian traditions

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## Abstract

Eggs are a symbol of life, reproduction and restoration of nature for many nationalities. The oldest egg decoration ceremonies are known to have taken place among Zoroastrians, whose historical heartland lies in Azerbaijan, India and Iran. The ancient tradition of decorating eggs connects the culture of historical Persia to contemporary Europe. In many Eastern European countries, including Poland, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine, these practices persist up to the present where painted eggs serve as national symbols. While the patterns on the eggs and the style of painting may differ (Iran's Nowruz holiday eggs are different from European Easter Eggs), there are similarities in the decorative techniques used by the Slavic peoples of Ukraine, Poland and Romania who have preserved the tradition of treating the egg as a sacred source and repository of nascent life which has a protective power.

## Keywords

decorated eggs, Easter, Mary Magdalene, Persia, *pisanki*, Ukraine

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## Introduction

During the Achaemenid Empire, decorated eggs were an important component in the practice of Zoroastrianism, the main religion of ancient Persia. Between the sixth and fourth centuries BC, Scythian clans inhabited the ceremonial capital of Persepolis, where the tradition of egg decoration was established. Over time, some of these clans migrated to the territories of present-day Ukraine, where they continued to practice the tradition (Janjalia, 2020). This explains the presence of the tradition of painted eggs in Slavic culture. Today, this custom is also featured in the Iranian or Persian New Year, Nowruz, an Islamic holiday. It is also known that on this day the legendary hero from Iranian mythology Siyavush died. In Zoroastrianism, it is customary to commemorate the spirits of the dead forefathers on this day by making purgatorial campfires for people to jump over (*sobótka* is the tradition of fire-making on midsummer's night in Poland). In the pagan tradition of the Slavs, this ritual of jumping over fires is a reflection of the period of influence of Zoroastrianism which can still be seen on the Ukrainian holiday of Ivan Kupala, which is celebrated on the 6th and 7th of July. There is a similar tradition in Azerbaijan, where young people sing a song called 'Godukhan' in a chorus, before dawn, before the sun rises (Mazikina, 2018; Piwko, 2020). Such ritual meetings are rooted in Zoroastrianism and are called the 'Meeting of the Sun'. They resemble the meeting of the Descent of the Holy Fire in Christianity. It is during this celebration that the High Priest stands in the 'Edicule' Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the chapel over the tomb of Jesus Christ, built on the historic site of the crucifixion on Golgotha. The Priest waits for flashes, sparks and candles which are sent at noon as a sign of God's support for humanity. The flame is then shared with all those present, holding bundles of 40 candles in their hands, symbolizing the 40 days before the ascension of the Lord. The flame is then transported to Zion with the Blessed Fire, and from there, it is spread throughout the world. This sacrament fascinates believers and non-believers from all over the world because it shows humanity a miracle – the emergence of an unburned fire surfacing from nowhere, that is from the Almighty (Kalmar, 2019).

The Zoroastrian priests of Iran, Azerbaijan and other places where these rituals are still carried out also keep their sacred fire in approximately similar ways (Asuna and Wataru, 2020). These rituals remain as a pivotal symbol of a miracle sent to illuminate the life path of humanity. The candles used in both religions signify a call to preserve divine warmth, a part of the highest grace and a sign of the day to come. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the chapels belongs to the Syrian Church, who are descendants of the legendary Assyrians from Mesopotamia, and the celebration of this holiday can be traced to the fire-worshippers in Babylon in the sixth century BC, where the celebration lasted for 12 days (Chung, 1995). Even then, the arrival of the spring sun was perceived as a spiritually significant beginning, a triumph of joy over sorrow and good over evil. This became the reason why people rejoiced and conducted rites and ceremonies.

To this day, for many, the egg has a special connection with birds. Indeed, almost all cosmogonies of the world have ornitho-morphic motifs (Adelchanov et al., 2016). For example, in India, birds that lay eggs are considered 'twice-born' because they are reborn to give birth. Pagan beliefs were significant in this regard (Thuillier, 2011) as special magical properties were attributed to eggs in Kyivan Rus. The eggs were used to chase

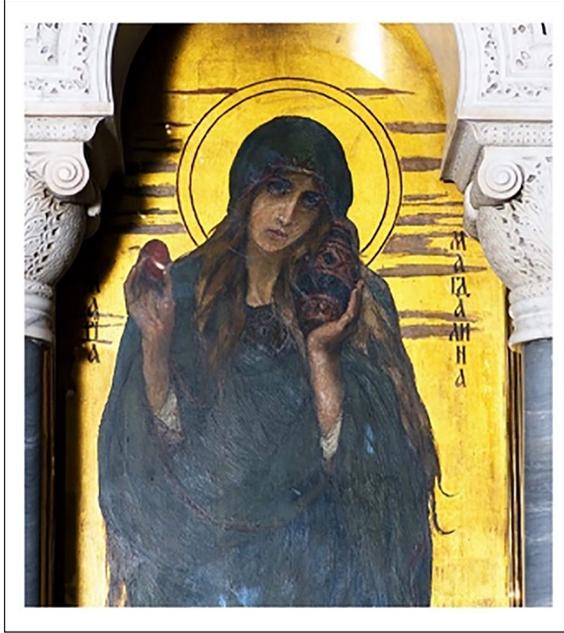
away diseases in people and in livestock. In traditional agricultural communities, there was also a belief that burying eggs in the earth near fruit trees would enhance their yield. In addition, water used to boil the eggs was considered to possess magical properties (Hodorowicz Knab, 1996). To maintain health and beauty, eggs were also rolled and rubbed on the face for a rosy and beautiful complexion, a tradition that has been preserved in present-day Romania. In Kyivan Rus and later in Ukraine, crumbs and shells from eggs, as well as Easter cakes, were mixed with grains and spread over the graves of deceased relatives after the first meal following fasting during Lent. Even today in Ukrainian villages, these crumbs are not thrown away but are fed to birds to prevent the house from becoming impoverished (Žeňuch, 2020).

Since the period of medieval Kyivan Rus, swan, chicken, duck, goose, pigeons and sometimes robin eggs were painted. Here *krashanky* and *pysanky* were made not only from natural eggs but also from wooden ovoid blanks, cut out of bone or stone or blown out of glass. According to one legend, drops of blood from the crucified Jesus fell to the ground in the form of eggs and hardened (Kim, 2021). According to another, the Virgin's tears covered the red eggs with strange patterns. In the eighteenth century, they began to make blanks of glass, porcelain, precious metals with semi-precious stones, enamel and gold to be painted later. Gradually, a culture of making eggs decorated with sewing, beads and braiding developed (Jovanović, 2018).

The cultural overlap between Eastern Europe and Western Asia has existed for centuries, and one of the ways in which it is exemplified is through the tradition of egg painting. Egg decoration has been practised in various forms and with different significance across the wide geographical area that encompasses both Eastern Europe and Western Asia (Komilova et al., 2021). This overlap is interesting because it speaks to the way that cultural practices and traditions can transcend national borders and ethnic divides and shows how they can be adapted and reinterpreted over time (Yasakova et al., 2019). It also highlights the importance of studying and understanding the history and cultural heritage of a region in order to fully appreciate the diversity and richness of human experience. In addition, the fact that egg painting has survived and evolved over centuries is a testament to the resilience and creativity of human beings in preserving and celebrating their cultural traditions.

## Painted eggs in the Christian world

The custom of painting eggs started in the early centuries of the Common Era, spread by the Greeks and later Byzantines into their territories, as well as among the surrounding peoples with whom they came in contact. They carefully studied the Biblical apocryphal texts, and as preachers and theologians carried this information to their homes and their rulers (Prutskova, 2018). Thus, in Greece, the tradition recorded by the Church historian Nikephoros Kallistratos (c. 1256 to c. 1335) has been preserved. According to this legend, after the ascension of Jesus on the feast of Pentecost, Mary Magdalene, Equal of the Apostles, who according to the Apocrypha was the Saviour's wife and the mother of his two sons, visited Rome. Here she said, holding out an egg to the Emperor Tiberius: 'Christ is Risen!' In response, the Emperor questioned the possibility of such a reincarnation after death and said that he could no more believe it than he could believe that a

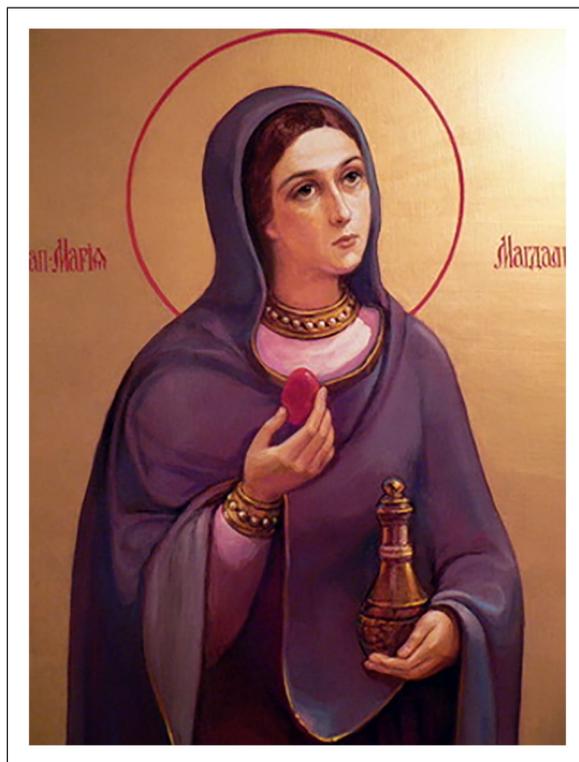


**Figure 1.** Vasnetsov V. Mary Magdalene – pious woman (with a vessel of fragrant oil and a painted egg); fragment of a painting in the Vladimir Cathedral in Kyiv (1896).  
Source: Tkachenko (2021).

white egg could turn red. As Tiberius was saying this, the white egg began to turn bright red. Henceforth, the simple gesture of offering eggs acquired an acroamatic significance, symbolizing the blood sacrifice of Christ for humanity and his rebirth in a new life (Kreinath, 2018).

In parallel to this tradition, the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine and Russia have an iconographic image of Mary Magdalene with a painted egg (see Figures 1 and 2). Similar images are found in other countries where Christianity is prevalent. Mary Magdalene is sometimes depicted holding an egg in her left hand and a cross in her right, signifying her special mission of salvation and spiritual rebirth (Chung et al., 2021). Mary Magdalene herself was an embodiment of the new faith as she had been a prostitute and was purged of the seven deadly sins and accepted a new mission.

During the lives of Christ and Mary Magdalene, there was also a legend that when the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius was born, one of his mother's hens laid an egg with red dots. Since then, this was considered a happy omen, and the Romans had a tradition of passing coloured eggs to each other by way of symbolic greeting (Brudnaya et al., 1996). Since the Renaissance in Catholicism, and later in Orthodoxy, eggs have come to be understood as a receptacle of the Holy Spirit and a symbol of sacrifice. Instead of a dove, this symbol is depicted in the work of Piero Della Francesca (Figure 3). Here the egg was still white.

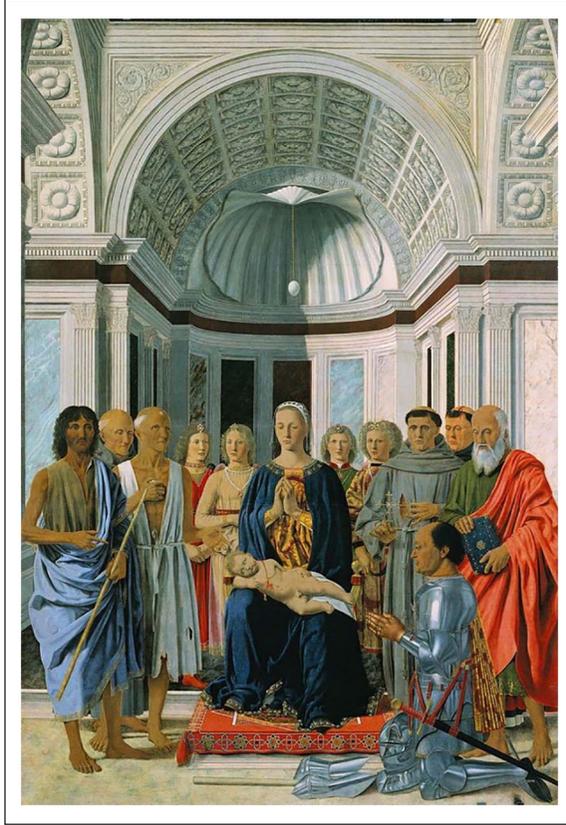


**Figure 2.** Mary Magdalene, icon of an unknown artist of the early twentieth century.  
Source: Tkachenko (2021).

Then began the practice of hanging eggs made of Delft ware along with lamps in churches in the territory of Ukraine, in front of and over the holy pictures. The Delft ware was manufactured at the Kuznetsov Porcelain Factory, which was established in Russia in 1818 and operated until the early twentieth century, and the Kiev-Mezhigorsk faience factory (Figure 4).

## Decorated eggs in Ukrainian and Polish culture

During the nineteenth century, various types of egg decoration emerged in Ukrainian and Polish cultures, which gave rise to different names, such as *pysanky*, *krashanky*, *malevanky* and *dryapanky* in both countries, and in Poland, additional types like *nalepanki*. *Pysanka* typically refers to eggs decorated in the wax-resist technique, while painted eggs are tinted in one or more colours. *Malevanky* are eggs that are hand-painted with intricate designs. *Nalepanki*, on the contrary, are eggs decorated with straw, paper and cardboard ornaments. Good examples of the latter two types can be found in the Polish Historical Museum in Katowice.



**Figure 3.** Piero Della Francesca Montefeltro Altarpiece (1472–1474), Milan, Pinacoteca Brera.  
Source: Tkachenko (2021).



**Figure 4.** Porcelain lamp of the end of the nineteenth century produced by the Partnership of M.S. Kuznetsov, Private collection.  
Source: Tkachenko (2021).



**Figure 5.** Polish traditional eggs.

Source: How Easter eggs are decorated around the world (2018).

In general, Polish decorated eggs of this kind look more handmade using a technique close to a planar collage, using three-dimensional details or individual objects arranged in the form of a graphic-spatial composition, tending to an oval-ovoid. This technique involves adding the paint with photo printing and transferring pictures, as well as fabric, lace, wood with carvings, papier-mâché, metal, ropes, ribbons, bows, beads (*paciorkis*), sequins, pearls and other materials.

Often these are given in Poland as wedding gifts and were made in the same style as the frames of wedding albums. They may have removable or non-removable bows, garlands and false flowers, such as antique buttonholes on wedding coats or wreaths (Figure 5). These details bear a striking resemblance to the artificial flowers that Slavic people bring to the graves of their deceased loved ones during the memorial week of *Radunitsa*. Oddly enough, the closest to Polish egg crafts are French eggs, which are also often made as interior decor in the style of battered, aged or ‘shabby chic’, a fairly young direction in design that emerged in the late 1980s with the help of English designer Rachel Ashwell (Baque, 1986).

They often have the form of appliqué work eggs, with elements of various threads, canvas, cross-stitch canvas, papier-mâché, photo printing and transfer pictures, additional strings and beads of light and dark pearls, connected with small crosses. All these various materials used are based on superstitions. They are, however, also made to be visually pleasing to cater towards the gift-giving market. Therefore, often the design of these products in Poland appears feminine, catering towards the kitchen-dining space. These radiate the atmosphere of quiet, provincial and slow-paced life, partly in the tradition of the German-Austrian heritage of the bourgeois Biedermeier style, which has remained unchanged over time. This style emerged about 1815–1848 and emphasized sentimental details of the life of the average middle-class man – the so-called Philistine, who liked small things and small formats. Occasionally, these bore the imprint of Provence, with its love of country light white-pink and white-beige flower-bird compositions.

The similarity between Polish and French tastes in relation to Easter eggs can be explained by the period when certain Polish territories belonged to France. The Duchy of

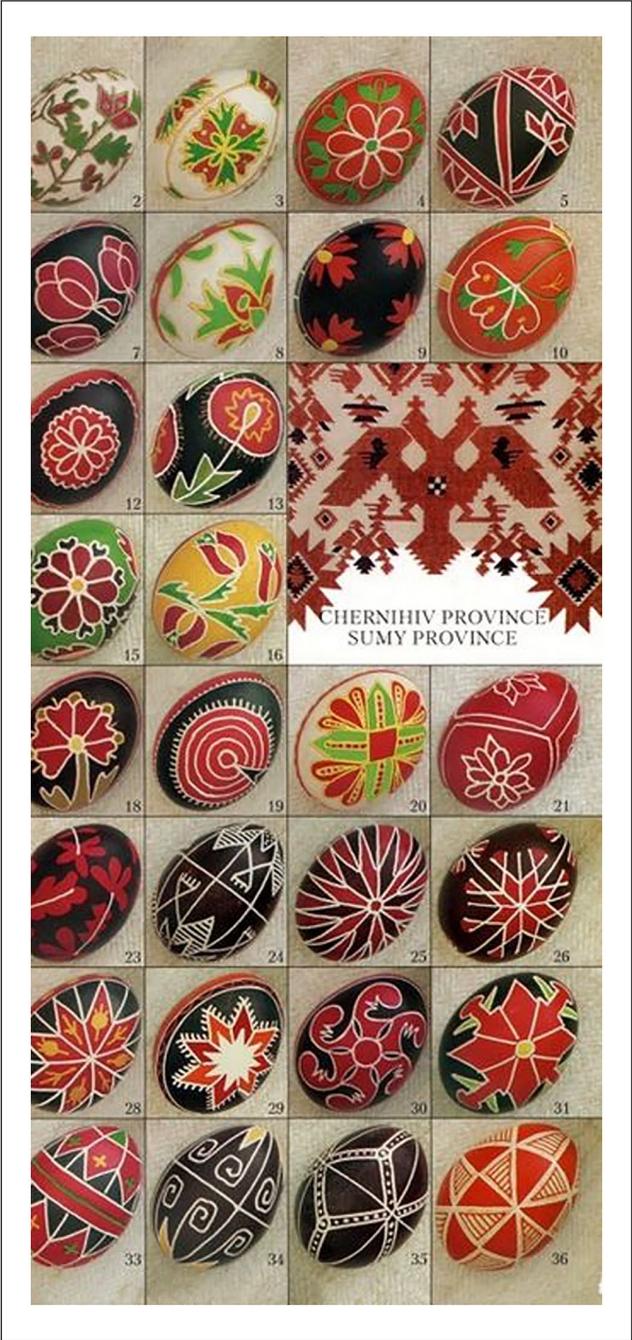
Warsaw (1807–1813/1815) found itself under the protectorate of Napoleon Bonaparte, for example. Almost a decade under the same crown and the joint military against Russia created new conditions for the development of traditions. Thus, the so-called tavern plates of Poland, France and England acquired similar features at that time.

In Ukraine, although there are common characteristics, each region has its own unique, nuanced tradition of decorating eggs. Some drawings on eggs are close to the motifs common in neighbouring countries, Hungary, Romania, Poland and Belarus (Figures 6 and 7). However, Ukrainian *pysanky* have a special colour, resembling medieval stained glass, where each colour element of the glass is limited by the contour of the metal partition made of bronze or tin. Archaeological excavations in the Chernihiv and Sumy regions of Ukraine brought the discovery of eggs that contain patterns and colours which are still characteristic of these regions. The analysis of these artefacts shows that Ukrainian Easter eggs have a system of coded geometric and plant symbols that originated in pagan times and are related to totemic symbols. For example, there are often images of a horse, a deer and a ram. These archaeological finds testify to the centuries-old tradition of Ukrainian *pysankarstva* and its connection with ancient cult symbols (Kissová and Krčová, 2020; Navrátilová, 2004).

Such items were given since ancient times as a talisman for the home and a particular person, and their main purpose was to ward off evil spirits. Many of them keep the features of the authentic Ukrainian Baroque style from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That is why mallows and bells are common traditional symbols of Ukrainian Easter eggs and are seen as the wish to have children; a viburnum leaf is a symbol of endurance and strength, the so-called ‘humps’, ‘scallops’ and ‘rosettes’ reflect parts of the plant structure responsible for reproduction (Olianina, 2023). At times, they bear visual echoes of Eastern art. For example, motifs such as apple flowers, bindweed runners and other designs are frequent. These influences may be associated with the ornamental traditions of non-dominant ethnic groups within Ukraine’s territory. Moreover, in Ukraine, there are territories where the customs of celebrating Nowruz for Muslims overlap with the traditions of celebrating Easter for Orthodox and Catholics and Pesach or Passover for Jews. Eggs on the Nowruz table are viewed as food that can be bestowed to the spirits of the dead family members (Hodorowicz Knab, 1996).

## Different ways to decorate eggs across countries

The methods used to dye eggs vary according to the traditions of various peoples. For instance, in Azerbaijan, Nowruz eggs are coloured in various hues and utilized in a jockey challenge to test their quality, similar to that in Slavic Easter customs. Prior to the Slavic adoption of Christianity, it was common to celebrate the start of a new year in the spring, around the vernal equinox, which is an ancient tradition found in many parts of the world, particularly in Europe and Asia, can be considered ancient. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, they do not typically paint eggs but rather dye them a uniform colour. While Georgian eggs are frequently dark red or ocher-red, in Azerbaijan they see red as the shade of fire, since the Zoroastrian custom persists here to light purgatorial campfires and hop over them (Huseynov, 2004).



**Figure 6.** Ukrainian *pysanka* of Chernihiv and Sumy regions with colours and patterns typical of this area.  
Source: Manko (2005).



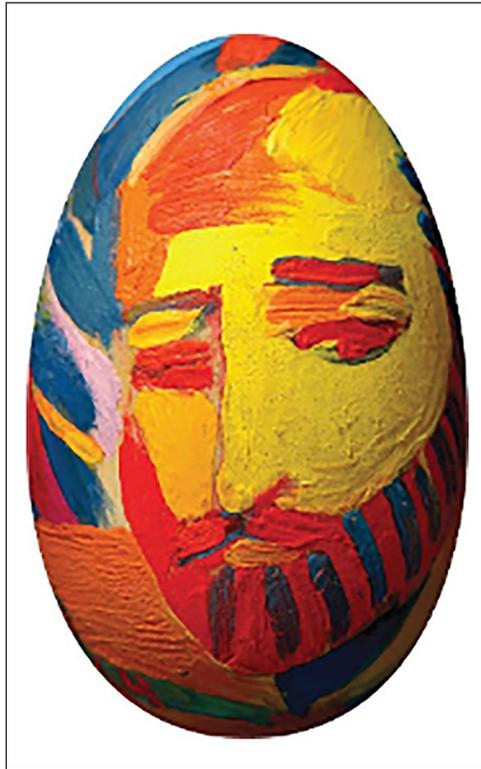
**Figure 7.** Sample drawing of traditional Romanian Easter eggs (Village Museum, Bucharest, Romania).

Source: How Easter eggs are decorated around the world (2018).

It was in Iran that the custom of shading morphed into embellishing eggs with compositions, which over time obtained specific importance since Iranian craftsmen are celebrated for their imaginative miniatures. Just as eggs on the Nowruz table are viewed as food for the dead, across Eastern Europe eggs are painted for *Radunitsa*, the week after Easter dedicated to the remembrance of the dead. For example, Romania's Easter tradition includes cake, salt, lard, sugar, coloured eggs, pies and money. Easter eggs painted red symbolize the blood of Jesus Christ shed during the crucifixion (Figure 7). In some regions of Romania, it is customary to decorate low trees or shrubs with painted eggs, like a Christmas tree (*pasha*).

In Romania and Ukraine, believers consecrate the Easter basket, where they put both a set of edible foods and drinks for the living and supplies for regaling the deceased members of the family. At *Radunitsa*, it is customary for families to visit the cemetery and create an atmosphere of Ascension for the departed. This is also done in Belarus and Russia where Easter offerings are laid out near graves and painted eggs of various sorts along with cakes are assigned a special role. However, for countries such as Georgia, the dead are recalled on the day after Easter Sunday, and not over a whole week like in Ukraine. Such examples demonstrate how Ukraine's traditions can both coincide and contrast with those in neighbouring countries.

The Georgians inherited certain features in egg decoration from Armenia, which was part of the Byzantine Empire in the first centuries of the Common Era. As Armenians are skilled painters, their tradition developed a type of '*malevanka*', which is an egg decorated with ordinary hand painting without the use of wax reserves (Figure 8). The significant highlight of Iranian eggs is a distinctive style, referencing pictures from Persian books and patterns from traditional carpets where hunting scenes are depicted (Figure 9). Likewise, a particular Iranian theme for embellishing eggs is termed 'Turkish cucumbers'. In Turkey, eggs are painted in the Iznik style (Figure 10), with contrasting colours



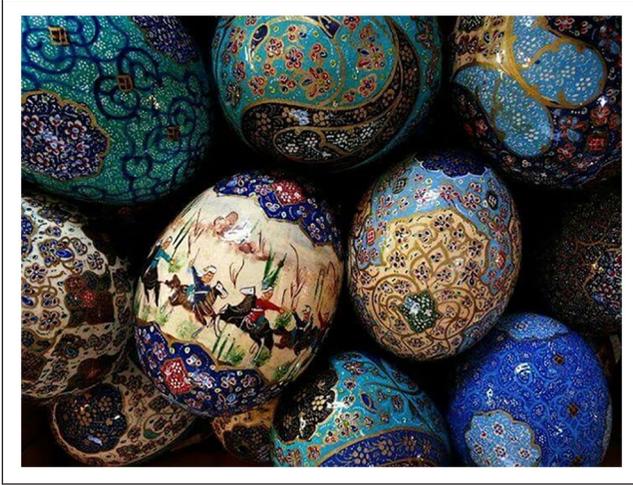
**Figure 8.** Armenian painted egg by Aleksandr Grigoryan, from the collection of the honoured teacher of the Republic of Armenia Yakov Zargaryan, the Armenian Museum of Moscow and Culture of Nations.

Source: How Easter eggs are decorated around the world (2018).

and the stylistic layout of Armenian clay-painted eggs, and with the Easter egg of the Crimean Tatars (Figure 11). These groups on the whole do not paint miniatures on eggshells.

## Conclusion

The tradition of painting eggs is associated with an ancient pre-Islamic custom established in the culture of Achaemenid Iran. Persian painted eggs gained particular significance with the spread of the Nowruz holiday, during which an egg, as a symbol of life, gained sacred and ritual significance, linking it to the spirits of ancestors and signifying a new beginning. After the arrival of Islam in Iran and Azerbaijan, painted eggs continued to be associated with Novruz. The Slavic peoples in Ukraine, Poland and Romania have also preserved the tradition of treating the egg as a sacred source and repository of nascent life that possesses protective powers. This is revealed through similarities in approaches to decoration.

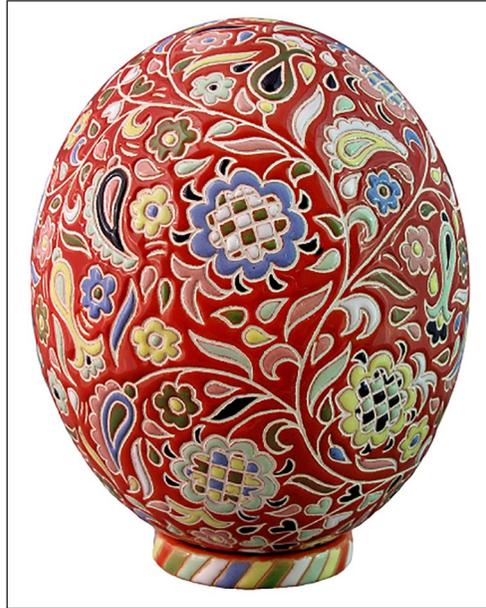


**Figure 9.** Iranian painted eggs. Miniature painting, Isfahan.  
*Source:* How Easter eggs are decorated around the world (2018).



**Figure 10.** Iznik eggs.  
*Source:* Turkish Cultural Foundation (2023).

A significant difference lies in the decoration techniques. In Western Asia, the usual technique is painting in separate colours by segments. In Eastern Europe, especially in Ukraine and Romania, the tradition has retained features of the ancient wax encaustic technique, which prevents the colours from fading as well as accentuating individual patterns. In the traditional Ukrainian and Romanian technique of pysanka-making, the



**Figure 11.** Painted eggs of Crimean Tatars by Rustem Skibin.

Source: How Easter eggs are decorated around the world (2018).

relief outlines are created using a tool called a ‘Kistka’, which has a heated metal tip to apply melted beeswax onto the eggshell. Additional layers of wax are added to build up a relief effect, giving the design a three-dimensional appearance. In contrast, the Polish tradition of decorating eggs has a cultural affinity with French handmade decorating options using decoupage, collage and assemblage techniques.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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