

In the Flow

THE ARTISTRY OF JENNY SANTA MARIA

by Jill Ocone

Certified high school art educator. Accomplished pysanky artist and teacher. Singer, songwriter, and musician. While the Jersey Shore is home to many who fall in each of these categories, it is rare for one person to embody them all. However, Brick native Jenny Santa Maria is that diamond in the haystack. With pysanky as her passion, she has instructed the therapeutic and meditative process to hundreds of people from New Hampshire to Delaware, and her dazzling creations capture the attention of collectors worldwide.



Jenny Santa Maria at her home-studio in Farmingdale.



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I babysat for her son, but without a daughter to pass down her pysanky tradition, she took me under her wing and taught me how to do it.”

Santa Maria knew immediately that she’d dedicate her life to the batik-process of drawing on eggs. “Most people learn the art of pysanky as a child, but I did not begin learning until I was twenty years old. It’s a challenge to reach mastery,” she said. “I find the artwork to be supremely beautiful in color and imagery.”

According to Slavic cultural and religious traditions, the egg is seen as a sign of protection. “Tradition that stems from Pagan times is to leave

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courtesy of Jenny Santa Maria

the egg whole because the egg has its own magic," she explained. "If the egg is blown out, the magic is lost." An egg's insides usually evaporate in about two years because it is porous. Santa Maria uses whole eggs as much as possible in her art to honor that tradition but will occasionally blow out eggs for display, exhibition, and commission.

The art of pysanky involves prayer rituals that also stem from Ukrainian tradition, and many of her workshop attendees are descendants of Ukrainian immigrants who want to learn the art. "It's an honor, a gift, and a privilege to give back to that community," she said. "There's a

thirst from people who want to connect with their culture and do something new."

Engaging in the art of pysanky is solitary but Santa Maria leads her workshops in a communal circle which makes the participants feel comfortable, encouraged, and empowered. "I'm enlightened when I hear the stories passed down by generations about the traditions of the eggs. Participants create heirlooms for their families that will live in their china cabinets for generations to come," she said. "People leave my workshops with a deeper understanding of the culture, the art, and themselves."

Historically speaking, many people do not realize that the art of pysanky was commonly done in secret. "Back in Ukraine, it was a religious practice, and at times, artists had to hide their work because they did not have religious freedoms like we have in America. When immigrants assimilated to American life, the art was lost. I try to bridge the gap and keep the tradition alive," she said.

Each spring, Santa Maria follows the modern tradition of burying an egg in front of her home at the beginning of the season. "It's my way of preserving the idea that these eggs have magic. Eggs were buried in fields, under coops, under beehives, and at the entrances of homes to transfer fecundity to the earth for good health of the family, livestock, and coops," she explained. While many associate pysanky with spring and look to the art as a way to celebrate the changes in seasons, she typically creates pysanky from late summer through May. "There's comfort in the dark months to settle into a space and do this for yourself. What more appropriate time than winter or a rainy spring day to create something beautiful?"

Engaging in pysanky art has many benefits, including its ability to be done in a small space, such as in an apartment or studio. "It incorporates techniques from painting, ceramics, and drawing, everything I love about mixed media in one form," she said. Another advantage of pysanky is that it can aid in reducing stress and anxiety. "This type of work is very meditative for me, and the flow state I experience when I'm creating pysanky is like nothing else I've ever experienced."

The main tool used in pysanky is a type of stylus called a "kistka" that features a metal cup with a very small hole on the bottom and a point to transfer the wax to the egg after it has been heated by a candle's flame. The wax functions as a sealer for the color of the dye underneath. While Santa Maria favors a traditional kistka, she will occasionally use an electric one to maintain the wax's consistency, particularly when using black wax.



courtesy of Jenny Santa Maria

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The flame's purpose is two-fold as it causes the design to be drawn on the egg then revealed at the end. "The technique requires an understanding of the language of back and forth," Santa Maria clarified. "Artists grow in mastery with the back-and-forth action with the kistka between the candle's flame and the egg."

The process of pysanky begins with selecting the right egg. "Eggs must be smooth and from healthy and happy farm chickens," she explained. "Store-bought eggs are not suitable for pysanky because the shells have evolved to be too thin." Santa Maria owns several types of chickens that produce eggs of various sizes and

colors, and the organic color of each shell creates a different canvas.

Santa Maria also has two beehives on the grounds of her Farmingdale home where she harvests wax to use in her art. "Everything I use is sustainable. I get the eggs from my chickens, the wax from my hives, and I use natural dyes." She works with three types of wax: beeswax, black wax, and white wax, which tends to work better on darker surfaces.

The natural colors of the dyes she orders are more vibrant than dyes she is able to make on her own, and she will water the dye down when she desires a lighter or pastel shade. As a result of years of practice, Santa Maria can draw freehand on an egg with a kistka like she can draw on a piece of paper.



courtesy of Jenny Santa Maria

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After selecting an egg, Santa Maria will fill her kistka with wax and hold it above the flame until it melts as she decides upon a pattern or design. No matter how simple or how intricate and symmetrical, each egg she completes features vivid colors and numerous layers. "If you can write your name, you can do pysanky," she said. She will draw the beginning of the design on the egg with the kistka, then after completing the first design layer, she'll dip the egg into dye and

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Santa Maria and husband, Daimon, perform under the name Bone and Marrow.

wipe it off with a soft cloth or paper towel. She continues drawing on the egg, with her dominant hand doing the drawing and her opposite hand spinning and maneuvering the egg. “Both hands have a function,” she explained. “Drawing and moving or rotating the egg are equally essential.”

A common question asked during her workshops is what happens if someone makes a mistake and drops wax on the egg or if someone’s hand slips while drawing with the kistka. “Mistakes cannot be fixed once the wax is on the egg. Beginners can turn their mistakes into polka dots, but I will modify my design to compensate for the mistake,” she explained. “It’s a good lesson, to run with the mistakes. It’s rewarding to roll with the punches.”

She continues the process of dipping, then drawing, then dipping until she is ready to reveal the final design, which is done by using the flame to melt the last layer of wax off the egg and wiping it off with a soft cloth. “Sometimes the design I see at the beginning is not what I see at the end of the process,” she said. Santa Maria can complete one egg from start to finish in an average of forty minutes when creating in her studio, but the process takes her a bit longer when leading workshops.

Several clients over the years have commissioned Santa Maria to make eggs for them. “I’m honored to make

eggs for baptism gifts and to recreate designs done by great-grandparents on eggs, which can be difficult to do because it is such a methodical process.” She also creates a limited-edition design for each holiday season and sells her batik eggs to collectors.

As far as masterpieces go, Santa Maria humbly admits to creating only two of them thus far, with one as a commission. “A masterpiece is something I cannot make again or a design I cannot replicate,” she said. “I don’t want to believe in masterpieces

because then I cannot do it again.”

Santa Maria is an equally accomplished singer, songwriter, and musician as she is a batik egg artist. She has created music with her husband of eight years, Daimon, ever since the two met in high school. “We’ve both had music in our lives forever, both separately and together,” she said. The two frequently perform songs they have written under the name Bone and Marrow along the Jersey Shore, including at the Light of Day Winterfest 2022.

Santa Maria is also a full-time art teacher at the Oakwood School, a non-profit high school in Monmouth County that serves disadvantaged youth. “A lot of my students have been dealt difficult cards and lead difficult lives,” she said. “I see how important art can be as a therapy tool and encourage my students to share their pain through their art, because where there’s pain, there’s passion.” She also encourages her students to explore creative careers and how to think creatively in both school and in life.

Pysanky allows Santa Maria to give people a piece of the Earth. Her art is her legacy, and her light and passion shine through her generosity, leadership, and extraordinary creativity. ♦

For more information about Jenny Santa Maria and pysanky, visit www.flametipstudio.com.

JENNY SANTA MARIA 2022 PYSANKY WORKSHOPS

For updated listings, to register, or to propose a workshop, visit Jenny Santa Maria’s website at www.flametipstudio.com.

- 3-19, 3-27:** Calgo Gardens, 462 Adelphia Road, Farmingdale, 1:00 PM - 3:30 PM
- 3-20:** Monmouth County Art Alliance, 33 Monmouth Street, Red Bank, 3:00 PM - 5:30 PM
- 3-23:** Thompson Park Creative Arts Center, Filly Run, Lincroft, 5:00 PM - 7:30 PM
- 3-25:** Insectropolis, 1761 Route 9, Toms River, 5:30 PM - 8:00 PM
- 3-26:** Advanced and Experimental Pysanky, Pine Shores Art Association, 94 Stafford Avenue, Manahawkin, 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM
- 4-2:** Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 68 Elm Street, Summit, 1:00 PM - 3:30 PM
- 4-3:** Thompson Park Creative Arts Center, Filly Run, Lincroft, 12:00 PM - 2:30 PM and 3:00 PM - 5:30 PM
- 4-4:** Livingston Library, 10 Robert H. Harp Drive, Livingston, 7:00 PM - 8:30 PM
- 4-6:** Thompson Park Creative Arts Center, Filly Run, Lincroft, 5:00 PM - 7:30 PM
- 4-9:** Brattleboro Art Museum, Brattleboro, VT, 1:00 PM - 3:30 PM
- 4-12:** Hunterdon County Library, 314 State Route 12, Bldg. #3, Flemington, 6:00 PM - 8:30 PM