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American Indian Easter Eggs

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Photography by Brian Cumming

During the summer of 1995, I had a chance encounter with a little girl selling ceramic wares door to door in Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico. Her basket contained several small multi-colored ceramic pieces, all recently made by her grandmother. Among them was an egg, and being a collector of ethnic Easter eggs, I purchased it, which piqued my curiosity and launched my effort to collect and learn about Easter eggs by Native American artists.

During the next 16 years, I inquired, intermittently, about these miniature art pieces among residents in Laguna Pueblo and other Rio Grande pueblos in New Mexico and Texas. I also expanded my search to include other Indian artists and merchants interested in Native American miniature artworks. I learned that making and selling fine-art Easter eggs is a rare preoccupation for the artists who do so. Typically, this work is an extension of larger home-based art businesses within their native communities. This allows their families to participate in traditional cultural activities that support their community and its cultural identity, which thereby nurture their unique artistic styles. Most make eggs for use by family and friends or sell them directly from their homes or via E-bay, Facebook, or websites. Consequently, finding them by trial and error, word-of-mouth and on the internet became a challenging Easter egg hunt of its own, which like many hunts, included a few wrong turns and misperceptions.

Among Southwest tribes, Lenten and Easter traditions began under Spanish Catholic influence, which by the 18th century, included the introduction of brightly colored confetti among trade goods from the Far East. With confetti, the people created piñatas, confetti flowers, and confetti eggs (cascarones) for celebrating festive events. Confetti eggs were hollowed-out chicken eggs adorned with confetti that became popular for breaking over the heads of friends during the pre-Lenten Carnival (Mardi Gras)



The author's collection displayed in a black ash "porcupine" basket made by Ho Chunk Indians in Wisconsin. Larger view on cover.

held 48 days before Easter Sunday, and at birthdays and other celebrations. Among Yaqui Indians, confetti flowers and confetti eggs symbolized flowers, which serve as metaphors of spiritual powers that dramatize Jesus' triumph over evil in their ceremonies held on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday.



Confetti egg (right) by Marilyn Carlos, San Xavier (Tohono O'odham) Indian Reservation, Arizona, 2011.

Confetti egg (left) from Old Pascua (Yaqui), near Tucson, Arizona, 1999.



By the 20th century, Anglo-Yankee influence stimulated Native American interest in Easter eggs across North America. Many parents want their children to experience Easter egg hunts, as part of their quest to make their children more familiar with Anglo culture and thereby enable them to better succeed in the outside world. Consequently, schools, social agencies and churches in native communities have sponsored Easter egg hunts for the children that now feature the ubiquitous colorful baskets and plastic eggs filled with candy. In Southwestern Pueblo tribes, Kachinas became involved with these activities as well, and in Alaska, Easter egg hunts have been compared to the springtime traditional subsistence harvests of wild bird and fish eggs.

Among the Southwestern Pueblo tribes, Anglo-Yankee market demand also stimulated the revival of traditional

pottery-making. In so doing, a few artists began to make occasional ceramic art eggs along with ceramic bowls and figurines. Unlike storytellers and nativity sets, production and demand for eggs has been slight. However, eBay has featured two highly collectable ceramic Easter eggs by Kim Vallo, an Acoma artist, and a clown Kachina doll holding and painting an Easter egg by Neil David, Sr., a Hopi artist.

In West Central Mexico, the Huichol Indians have a long tradition of adorning objects with beads. Glass beads were introduced in the early 20th century, and with increasing outside demands to purchase their art, the Huichol have developed more complex color and design patterns, which they apply to new and traditional items. Some items, such as quail-size egg shapes, are now produced in inexpensive mass quantities and marketed as Christmas, not Easter, ornaments for tourists.

In Alaska, Easter traditions began in the 18th century under Russian Orthodox influence. No doubt the lack of domestic fowl limited the development of egg art. Yet a few artists of native heritage have practiced “pysanky”, a Russian egg-art form that uses a wax-resist method to apply colors and designs to egg shells. Simone Carter-Martin, a self-taught artist of Russian-Yupic heritage, has used this method to decorate home-raised chicken and goose eggs with Athabaskan colors and designs. But only rarely has she created these works for sale.

Selected Sources

This article represents extensive travel and research with crafts people and published writings, which I have sandwiched in with my work for Marquette University. Nowhere have I ever encountered anybody to ever seek to collect American Indian Easter eggs beyond their own tribe or community and I have not found any related published writings of any sort – not a book or article. The closest I’ve found has been a few newspaper articles on hunts for candy-filled plastic eggs and e-Bay notices about art eggs by Native American artists. I really believe that this is a pioneering article.

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Yaqui ceremonies on Palm Sunday, 1921, featuring the enemies of Jesus—a “Fariseo” [Pharisee] (left) and two “Chapayekas”, the solders of the Fariseos. Faithful Christians defeat them on Holy Saturday by throwing a barrage of confetti flowers and confetti eggs.

Courtesy Marquette University, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records; published in *The Indian Sentinel*, 2:7 (July, 1921).



Eskimo girls and a nun with recently collected wild gull eggs, Akulurak, Alaska, undated (ca. 1900-1920).

Courtesy Marquette University, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection.

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