

Sanding Eggs and Egg Dust: What Pysanky Artists Need To Know

Marjorie Verleun

So Why Sand Eggs?

Sanding eggs, primarily goose and ostrich eggs for pysanky is a relatively new trend among egg artists. Goose eggs, although they have a beautiful thick shell and impressive size, are rougher in texture than most other eggs. Ostrich eggs have “pores” and a hard coating impervious to accepting dyes. Sanding a goose egg, with practice, will take about 8 minutes, longer than it takes to empty one. Sanding an ostrich egg can take several hours. *So why sand?* Waxing these eggs without sanding is like trying to draw a fine line on watercolour paper... possible, but not easy. It is hard on the kitsky, and over time, can actually wear it down. Sanding transforms a rough egg into a smooth surface that rivals or exceeds the surface of other “non-sanding” eggs such as chicken, turkey and others. It allows dyes to accept more easily and vibrantly. In short, it produces a better result.

For the sake of brevity I will not go into the process of sanding, there are several good articles out there, here is a link to the sanding process I posted a while back:

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-artful-goose/egg-preparation/583266372101870/>

What's the Deal With Egg Dust?

Because sanding is relatively new in pysanky circles, pysanky artists who decide to try sanding their eggs often start without the proper preparation as most are unaware of what egg carvers have known for some time - egg dust is extremely dangerous in not one but two ways. The first issue is that dust can and will accumulate in the lungs, clogging the alveoli and creating pulmonary issues that are irreversible. Egg dust particles are fine enough to bypass the body's first line of defence (mucus and cilia within the respiratory tract) and the dust created by sanding overwhelms the body's ability to dispose of them. Over time, the lungs lose their capacity to breath, resulting in conditions like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Byssinosis, Pneumoconiosis and Extrinsic Allergic Alveolitis, this last condition is what I suffer from, acquired when I was an inexperienced egg carver, ignorant of the health risk.

The second consideration is that egg shell is porous, (the reason it takes dye so well), but because of this, bacteria and pathogens can adhere themselves to the egg shell easily. These are impossible to remove, regardless of how fastidious your cleaning process. The dust becomes an airborne transport agent when sanding and is easily inhaled. One does not need

to inhale much dust to be affected adversely, one bacteria-laden dust particle is all that is needed to make the individual quite ill. An unthinking brush of the nose or rub of the eye with a dust contaminated finger can easily introduce these bacterium and or pathogens into your system. These can make you ill on their own or affect your immune system enough that it becomes compromised in fighting other infections.

What should I use to protect myself?

The best way to protect your health is a proper dust mask. Dust masks are designed for different environments and particulates and choosing the right dust mask is important.

Using the wrong dust mask not only gives a false sense of security, but may also put your health at risk.

Avoid disposable masks, medical masks, hobby and painting masks. Most of these operate on a two string system above and below the ear and are often ill-fitting. A mask with a gap in it is useless. I recommend a reusable respirator. These respirators that come with different types of filters to depending on the level of protection that you need, the pink filters used in the respirator shown is P100, a rating that is the highest for personal respiratory protection. As long as your mask fits properly a P100 filter will block 99.9% of particles .3 microns or larger. Look for this rating when choosing a respirator and the filters.

Reusable respirators come in a few different sizes, usually small, medium and large, to fit different faces. That said, they are usually not meant to fit the small face of young kids.

One major advantage reusable respirators have over disposable ones is that they conform better to the curves of the face, giving a tighter and more comfortable seal (and hence better protection) than



disposable respirators. Unlike disposable respirators filters on reusable respirators also last longer, can be used multiple times and can be replaced easily.

What else should I be doing?

There is another safeguard that pysanky artists should use if they choose to sand their eggs, this one cheap and readily available. Water. Choose a emery or sandpaper that is designed to for wet/dry use. I use a 400 grit and and 600 grit for finishing. Sand under running water or keep a container of water beside you as you sand to continually wet the egg and the

sandpaper through the whole process. Dust is kept to a minimum using a wet sand method, but it does not replace the need for a respirator, it is merely an extra safeguard.

Keep everything as clean as possible, *do not* touch your face while sanding. I would strongly recommend safety goggles that fit to the face, or at least safety glasses.

Cleaning up after sanding is equally important. Stray dust can contaminate your work space long after sanding. Wipe down all work surface areas and tools. Take extra care to clean, dust can settle everywhere. Watch for dust will settled into the weave of clothing, be sure to change after sanding and launder your clothing. Personally, I also take a shower immediately after sanding to make sure no stray dust is on me or my hair.

There will be those who think that a great deal of what I am saying is alarmist. I can understand the reluctance to go through such lengths with something seemingly as innocuous as an egg shell. When I began carving eggs, my reasoning was that it was simply egg shell... calcium mostly... what's the harm? I carved using a dremmel and a dollar store paint mask. That decision proved life-changing in the span of mere months. I had to give up carving, not only eggs, but anything. As an artist, it was a terrible blow. But what was worse that I gave myself a lifelong condition that could have been avoided with a bit of knowledge. I want to pass that knowledge on in hopes to inform fellow egg artists that there is harm and that precautions are available.

Marjorie Verleun is a visual artist and owner of Flying Monkey Studio in Saskatchewan, Canada. She has switched from carving eggs to pysanky, batik and etching eggs with muriatic acid, ironically a process much safer for her with her acquired hypersensitivity to egg dust.