

Three Key Words: Temporary, Folk, and Memory.

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This essay aims to explore the 3 words: Temporary, folk, and memory. Due to the word count constraints of this essay, I will be focusing on only Polish folk art and Polish folk traditions. Looking at small and key samples of Polish folk practices, along with how they embrace the ephemeral nature of all things, this essay will investigate how that all links into the theories of collective and cultural memory, focusing on passing down the culture throughout generations.

The first word that this essay will explore is “temporary” and how it fits into the world of art and design not only through the making process but also through a conceptual one. “Temporary” is defined as something that is not long lasting by the Cambridge Dictionary (‘Temporary’ (n.d.n)): impermanence (from now on the words “temporary” and “impermanence” will be used interchangeably).

From a philosophical point of view, the idea of impermanence has direct links to Eastern philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism. Within this school of thought, it is important to recognise that all things (whether natural or manmade) are temporary. Nothing in the world is truly permanent, and everything is subject to change (Nash, P.h.D., 2016).

In fact, many other philosophical theories agree on the subject of impermanence. Ancient Stoics believed that in order to find true inner peace, we have to come to terms with the fact that life is fluid and temporary (Barbosa, 2022). While Taoism puts great emphasis on the cyclical nature of life, teaching that all things are in constant change (Ward, 2020).

These different theories all share very similar ideas of impermanence, showing that this concept is a worldwide phenomenon experienced by all, and can still be applied to the modern days. We have all, since the beginning of time, experienced the temporary nature of life, making this the only thing that is truly permanent. And since it is a common thing among artists that we draw inspiration from life around us, and it’s no different when it comes to the idea of temporary things; it’s reflected all throughout art as well.



Figure 1

While not all art is meant to be impermanent, all art still is. Part of making art is knowing that it will deteriorate and become damaged over time. For example, with paintings, they will become faded and the varnish will eventually distort the colours by yellowing or browning over time (Kubik, 2010). Figure 1 shows a 400 year old painting in the process of being restored by Philip Mould, and the effects that ageing can have on a paint's varnish (The Irish News, 2017). The original is barely recognisable, and a lot of the details (like the lace on the collar) are completely lost.

It's not just paintings that undergo this deterioration, but all other forms of art. From performance art, to sculptures, to installations. Whether the piece is subject to ageing, or the environment (such as the weather on outdoor sculptures), all pieces of art will at some point in their lifetimes experience damage and in some cases complete destruction.

Traditional Polish folk art takes the idea of "impermanence" and "temporary" to the extreme. Most pieces of traditional folk art in Poland have the intention (whether direct or indirect) of only lasting for a couple of days at the most and then being destroyed. A lot of art traditions in Poland stem from pre-Christian pagan traditions. It is through the process of Christianisation of Eastern Europe and the careful assimilation of Slavic pagan culture to the new Christian culture, that these traditions have survived and are still thriving in modern lives of Poles (Sobolewski, 2017).

Folk art in Poland has always had a religious, functional or aesthetic meaning to it (Wronska, 2000, p.9). Whilst this type of art is seen all over Poland during the major holidays (Easter, Christmas, spring equinox), it can be seen all year round in more rural parts of Poland, like

villages and small towns. Folk art has derived from many different parts of Polish history and culture. In the book “Roses and Red Earth” the author argues that much of the folk traditions in Poland stemmed from its serfdom history, where the aesthetic and functional aspects of an object were intertwined (Wronska, 2000, p.11). Therefore, most of Polish folk art and tradition have been and still are upheld by poorer communities.

The ways in which the concept of impermanence is explored through art is ingrained within Polish folklore and folk art. Polish folk art is distinguished by its use of bold colours and traditional patterns and motifs (Kubilius, 2022). The concept of “temporary” is particularly relevant to Polish folk art and folklore, as much of it is associated with pre-Christian pagan traditions. Many of these pagan traditions in Eastern European countries revolve around our connection to nature (Ivakhiv, 2005), and nature’s cycles, which are ever changing and fluid. Many Polish folk art forms exist only as decor through a particular season of the year, making them inherently temporary in usefulness.



Figure 2

One of the most popular forms of folk art in Poland is “wycinanki”. They’re colourful paper cutouts with intricate designs, traditionally done with a knife or scissors. Their primary purpose is to brighten up the home during winter time as most of your time would be spent indoors (Brinn, 2012). They usually include pictures of roosters, flowers, medallions and traditional patterns seen in Polish embroidery (PaperCrafter Magazine, n.d). Not only are wycinanki temporary as they are a winter craft (making them dependent on the time of year), but they also represent impermanence through the material used: paper. The paper

becomes worn out, torn, dampened, ripped. This craft is made knowing that it will only last for a period of time before it gets thrown away.



Figure 3

Another folk art tradition that can be seen as ephemeral is “pisanki” (or the singular “pisanka”): decorating Easter eggs. Even though now, the tradition of making pisanki is associated with the Christian spring holiday of Easter, it is important to note that this practice has originated in the native culture of Polish people, before the Christianisation of Eastern Europe (Dudek-Woyke, 2015). There are various different techniques that can be used to create the patterns on a pisakna, including etching, dyeing, and drawing with markers. However, the most popular is the method of wax resist, where melted beeswax is applied using a stylus tool, protecting the areas of the egg that you don’t want to come in contact with the dye (Kepa, 2019). Most families across Poland, fill an Easter basket (called a “Swieconka” in Polish) with pisanki, bread, salt, butter, and cake. The basket is then taken to church for a blessing the night before Easter Sunday, and in the morning after, the content is eaten for breakfast (Rolek, 2020). Therefore, the tradition of making pisanki every year came with the knowledge that the shell would be broken, ultimately destroying the design on it, and the egg eaten.



Figure 4.

One of the most famous holidays across Poland is Noc Kupały (Kupała Night). It is a Slavic pagan holiday that, again, survived the Christianisation of Eastern Europe and is still celebrated among Slavic countries, including Poland (Koprowska-Głowacka, 2016, pp.164, 165). Part of the reason as to why this tradition survived for so long is because the holiday got “rebranded” as Saint John's Eve, making it acceptable to the church while also allowing the pagans at the time to practise their traditions without persecution (Rudzka, 2022). Now, both of those holidays are celebrated during the summer solstice. During the day, single women would go out to forage plants and wildflowers. These wildflowers would then be used to make wreaths for the women to wear. The wreaths were in themselves seen as a craft, as they would incorporate traditional weaving techniques.

What makes these wreaths temporary isn't the fact that the wildflowers would wilt and dry out, but also that the whole purpose of making them was to throw them away into a river for the single men to catch (Wasyłuk, (n.d.)). Then, the men would be paired up with the owner of the wreath for the rest of the evening, allowing the pair to get to know each other around the lit campfire.



Figure 5.

Another pagan tradition which is still practiced to this day in Poland is “sypanie piaskiem”, which translates to “spilling sand”. While being a direct translation, it is quite misleading, as the sand isn’t “spilled” but rather the person uses the sand to carefully draw intricate designs onto the pavement. The designs take inspiration from nature, with a mix of floral and geometric patterns (Armata, 2013), and are drawn in areas in front of the home. The patterns usually depicted the tree of life (*Kujawskie Sypanie Wzorów Piaskiem*, 2019). Again, the use of loose sand to make outdoor art is ephemeral as it’s subject to wind and foot traffic.



Figure 6.

The last example that will be covered in this essay is the making and drowning of the “Marzanna”. Marzanna is a Slavic pagan goddess associated with winter, death, illness and

rebirth (Woodruff, P.h.D., 2020). At the end of winter, Marzanna is said to die and a spring goddess is born, taking her place. So, at the beginning of spring, Polish communities make a huge straw doll that represents the goddess. In many cases, it is tradition to adorn the effigy in cloaks, ribbons and beads (Laskow, 2023). The doll is then paraded through the town and taken to a nearby body of water (usually a lake or a river). This custom was made to represent the end of winter and the death of Marzanna, and start the celebrations that come with rebirth and spring.

As shown, there is a strong recurring theme among Polish folk art and craft: it's not meant to last forever. It can be argued that such art forces us to be present in the moment to actually enjoy it. It also makes every piece unique. Not one pisanka is the same, not one wildflower wreath or sand drawing is the same. This uniqueness that's added to each piece makes it so much more enjoyable to make or observe. It allows us to make purely for the joy of making, without stressing about aesthetics.

The last word that this essay will delve into is "memory". Within the field of psychology, memory is used in reference to the human ability to retain and recall information (Wingfield & Byrnes, 1981, p.4). However, Assmann distinguishes two different types of memory: embodied and embedded. She argues that embodied memory is personal and based on individual experiences, while embedded memory is that of a collective culture as it is implanted into the core of the society through art, rituals and customs (Assmann, 2008).

It is this cultural memory theory that will be discussed throughout this section of the essay. The theory seeks to explore the idea that memory isn't only an individual and private experience, but also a collective one in which the traditions and culture are passed down from one generation to another (*Cultural memory*, 2022). This cultural memory is stored as museum artefacts, literature, stories, and folklore, and can be either passed down with objects or through words and traditions but in a lot of cases it's a mix of all of these things (Nevils-Karakeci, 2020).

In the context of folk traditions, cultural memory refers to the passing down of customs from one generation to the next to keep the culture alive and thriving. Folk knowledge in Poland is something that is normally passed down verbally, with very few things being written down (Wronska, 2000, p.10). Therefore, most of the traditions that Poland has today is predominantly due to human memory. This can be in the form of folk tales and storytelling, art and craft, language, and modelling behaviour (National Geographic Society, 2022).

It is important to note that Polish folk traditions almost completely rely on the verbal passing down to the next generations. This is because, during the christianisation of Poland in 966 in which Mieszko I was the first Polish ruler that was baptised (and with him, the whole country) (Lukowski & Zawadzki, 2020), many of the written and physical documents that Slavic countries had regarding their native faith and traditions were destroyed by the Christians (Helvin, 2019). Therefore, almost all of the information that we have now about early Polish culture and customs is information that has been passed down through folktales (like that of the famous Baba Yaga), and through the adaptation of previously pagan traditions into Christian ones (such as Kupala Night into Saint John's Eve).

Memories also relate to the word "temporary". Without constant reminders of embedded memories, humans have a tendency to forget a lot of information throughout their lifetime. Memory loss is not only linked to old age either. We lose memory from our childhoods and infancy (a phenomenon called "infantile amnesia") (Ikeda & Teasdale, 2018).

In conclusion, by highlighting these three key words, this essay discusses the themes of cultural identity and memory and how we perceive the permanence of cultural traditions through the lens of folk practices, along with how the impermanence of these art forms and folk tales connect through history with the use of memory and how they continue to live on through the next generations.

Even though folk practices are an ephemeral practice, they still continue to live on through the memories of those within the culture and are still a part of the lived experience of Poles. This means that our experiences and memories in the modern day can be the same as those 100 years ago, connecting us not only to our culture but our family and heritage.

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