ALL ABOUT NESTING DOLLS

from MATRYOSHKA & HANDICRAFT with love
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Background

The matryoshka doll is a symbol of Russia and its culture. It is truly a doll—a child’s plaything—but it began its history just over 100 years ago as a highly collectible art form. The matryoshka doll (or, simply, the matryoshka) is a nested doll with two halves that can be pulled apart. The outer figure contains increasingly smaller versions of itself. The largest figure is usually on the order of 2-12 in (5-30 cm) tall, although larger ones up to several feet tall have been made. And the smallest may be very tiny—less than 0.25-in (0.6-cm) tall.

The painted image on the dolls is most often a woman wearing traditional Russian costume. The woman is a mother; the names Matryona and Matryoshka were common Russian country names for generations. Both come from the Latin root mater for mother. So matryoshka has come to mean “little mother” based on the idea that the outer or largest doll holds her babies inside like an expectant mother and that each daughter in turn becomes a mother. They are symbols of fertility and motherhood and have a modified egg shape.

From the largest doll to the smallest in a set, each resembles the others, but they are not necessarily identical. The outer doll may wear a costume that is red, the next one green, the third blue, and so forth. Or the costumes may be the same, but each doll may carry something different in her hands. For example, the outer doll may hold a loaf of bread (a symbol of welcome in Russia), the next may carry a bowl of salt (representing welcome and the family’s offering of its wealth to guests—salt was once very rare), the third doll may hold several large beets (a traditional Russian vegetable symbolizing the richness of the earth), and a fourth may carry a basket of strawberries (for the sweetness of the garden).

Flowers are one of the most traditional themes with particular flowers representing the cities where the dolls are crafted; usually, the flowers are painted as designs on the shawls and aprons of the matryoshka. The most highly prized artistic collectibles may not have faces; instead, they tell a story, perhaps of a Russian fairytale, all around the exterior. A different scene from the tale appears on each nest; stories are also told in the apron panels of traditional doll styles. The sets of nested dolls may include as few as three or as many as 25 nests or dolls; historically, sets containing up to 1,800 dolls are known. A typical set contains three to twelve dolls.

Souvenir and toy matryoshka also depict many other kinds of images other than the traditional Russian mother. Sets
have been made showing great Russian leaders (from Vladimir Putin, the Russian president elected in 2000, back to the czar Peter the Great), household pets (with the dog usually the largest and a cat, bird, fish, and mouse inside), a traditional Santa Claus (called Saint Nicholas or Father Snow in Russia) with his wife and elves as inner dolls, many scenes from Russian folk tales, or images of historical landmarks like Saint Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow or the Hermitage Art Museum in St. Petersburg. And the figures and scenes shown are not always Russian. Some matryoshka are sets of American baseball or football players or images of paintings from the Italian Renaissance. Russian artists are, for after all, eager to appeal to the buying public and eager to show the quality of their artwork. Although the majority of matryoshka show figures that are both Russian and traditional, the origin of the nested doll is neither Russian nor particularly old.

**Philosophical meaning. Matryoshka as a symbol of the energy structure of the world and man**

The authors say that it is a special form of dolls and the device seemed to symbolize man and a projection of the world in the depths of personality. This seemingly common form predisposes to such subjects as motherhood, love, or the fabulous history of the continuation.

Our doll is known all over the world. Many people admire this toy and the world matryoshka with a bear has become a symbol of a mysterious and incomprehensible Russia. We matryoshka - is something of childhood memories: disassembled, assembled and forgotten. In the same way as our ancestors once forgot the essence of this magical toy.

Ironically we realize it, but the inner meaning of our children’s fun re-opened for the first time in Japan. Appearing there, our nesting dolls are not only caused a storm of excitement and interest in himself as a subject of folk art, but also attracted the attention of those whose knowledge distributed in intangible. Japanese are the world's first hypothesis was that this wonderful figure is not just a toy but a cult object, whose original purpose was forgotten masters, over many generations to keep intact the secrets of its production and forms.

But our subconscious mind with you that holds the answers to all the mysteries of our world, and knowing this hidden meaning, to make this a low-brow fun attractive and incorruptible, like the hidden information in the form of printed and proportions of the pyramids. And if, on the assumptions of the pyramid are keeping the secret "space - time," the secrets of time management and movement in space, our wonderful matryoshka stores information about the energy structure of the device and of ourselves and our world. The world in which we live - the multi-dimensional. Any physical body radiated an aura surrounds them energy, called an aura. And that’s not all. If we consider the structure of the energy of any object, it is easy to see that it, like the human body, is composed of several layers of a qualitatively
different energy.

From the earliest times it is believed that these various auras of our body that is able to sense and understand the people - seven. Originally a classical Russian nesting dolls always housed seven figures, symbolizing the seven human bodies belong to us to merge our energy with the power of Infinity. And, according to tradition, a handkerchief, and each doll clothes were painted in one of the colors of the rainbow, starting with red and ending with purple. As a result, the smallest matryoshka was always red, and the largest - violet. Similarly, the distribution of these colors in space, and, ideally, in our subtle body. The red color is a powerful force, but its vibrations are not very high and not allow it to go up into the vastness of the sky. Red color attracts the body to Mother Earth and allow enough gain its life-giving force. Low power of this kind of a person - little strength and vitality. The orange color is around the power of fertility. Yellow - gives health and stability. Green - supports our mental strength and our intuition. Blue - sociable with other people, fueling our nerve and mental strength. Blue - gives us knowledge of the laws of the universe and of the gift of foresight. Purple - controls the harmony of the energy distribution of all types in the body. Remember the rainbow: its color is always in a specific order - "Every hunter wants to know where sits the pheasant." Similarly, were originally painted with our dolls.

History

The "Russian" matryoshka doll came to Russia from Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. Little more than 100 years ago, Russia was experiencing an economic boom and a rising sense of culture and national identity. New artistic trends were developing, and a "Russian style" was growing and focusing on the revival of traditions that were in danger of being lost. In St. Petersburg, Russia, in December 1896, an exhibition of Japanese art opened. Among the exhibits was a doll depicting a Buddhist wise man named Fukuruma. The sage was shown as a bald-headed old man with a wooden body that could be split at the waistline into two halves; nested inside were the images of the man when he was younger and bearded and still with hair on his head. The doll came from the island of Honshu; the Japanese claim that they are the inventors of nested dolls or matryoshka, but they also generously admit that the first nested dolls made on Honshu were carved and painted by a Russian monk. That first set of dolls showing Fukuruma is in the Artistic Pedagogical Museum of Toys (APMT) in Sergiyev Posad, a city in Russia that is a cultural center for the making of matryoshka dolls.

Meanwhile, the matryoshka began developing its Russian identity thanks to an industrialist Savva named I. Mamontov (1841-1918). Mamontov was also a patron of the arts and a believer in traditional and nationalistic artistic expression. He established an art studio at his Abramtsevo estate near Moscow. This studio was also an innovation and was the first of a number of "artistic units" around the country where folk craftsmen and professional artists worked together to preserve the skills, techniques,
and traditions of Russian folk art including peasant toys. Mamontov's brother, Anatoly Ivanovich Mamontov (1839-1905) created the Children's Education Workshop to make and sell children's toys. The first Russian matryoshka set worked by Vassily Zviodochkin and painted by Sergei Maliutin (an illustrator of children's books) was made at the Children's Education Workshop and shows a mother carrying a red-combed rooster—inside are her seven children, the smallest being a sleeping, bundled baby.

Whether the first matryoshka was Japanese or Russian, Russian artists have clearly made nested dolls a symbol and souvenir of Russia. Woodworking and turning is an ancient Russian craft, and the first paintings by Maliutin all came from archaeological and ethnographic (ethnic tradition specific to different regions) sources. Embroidery, clothes, historic dyes and colors, and peasant culture were sources of inspiration for him. Clothing for the dolls that are traditional motherly figures includes an apron, a brightly colored scarf, an embroidered shirt, and sarafan (the national dress of Russia). Lace, flowers, fruit and vegetables, traditional embroidery patterns, and bright colors and complicated designs are copied in detail by matryoshka painters.

The Children's Education Workshop was closed in the late 1890s, but the tradition of the matryoshka simply relocated to Sergiyev Posad, the Russia city known as a toy-making center since the fourteenth century. Sergiyev Posad is located about 45 mi (73 km) from Moscow and is the site of a famous monastery, the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery. The founding monk, St. Sergius Radonezhsky, carved wooden toys himself, using the rich woodlands surrounding the monastery for materials. His so-called "Trinity" toys became famous among pilgrims who came to the monastery and were even collected by generations of children of the czar. In the 1930s under the Soviet political system, Sergiyev Posad was renamed Zagorsk, and with the fall of the Soviet Union, the city reverted to its traditional name in 1991. With this long tradition of wooden toy-making, the artists of Sergiyev Posad quickly adopted matryoshka with the closing of the Children's Education Workshop. Dolls from this center are called Sergiyev Posad or Zagorsk matryoshka.

In 1900, Russia participated in the World Exhibition in Paris and entered various styles of matryoshka dolls. The nation's exhibit won a medal and many admirers for the nested dolls. The Russian Craftsmen Partnership opened a shop in Paris, and, by 1911, matryoshka—or dolls la Russe —were being sold to customers in 14 countries. Until about 1930, matryoshka dolls continued to be very individual. Under the Soviet regime, emphasis shifted to the mass production of nested dolls. In the 1980s, the opening of Russia and the other Soviet countries to the West introduced more freedom, and the "author’s matryoshka," with the highly individual style of the particular artist, began to dominate again. Today, matryoshka dolls are collected much like paintings or icons on the reputation of the specific artist over the school or style.

Other major centers for the turning and painting of matryoshka dolls are the city of Semyonov, the Russian region of Nizhegorod (especially the villages of Polkhovsky Maidan and Krutets), and the Mordvinia, Vyatka, and Tver’ areas. The popularity of matryoshka painting has spread from Russia to some of the other former republics of the Soviet Union, particularly the Ukraine (known for its delicately painted Easter eggs), Mari El, and Belarus.
Raw Materials

Matryoshka dolls are made of wood from linden, balsa, alder, aspen, and birch trees; linden is probably the most common wood type. These woods share softness, light weight, and fine grain texture. In early spring, the trees for matryoshka-making are marked for cutting. They are felled in April when they are full of sap. After cutting, the trees are stripped of most of their bark, although a few inner rings of bark are left to bind the wood and keep it from splitting. The top and butt ends of the trunks are smeared with sap to keep them from cracking. The logs are stacked in piles in such a way as to leave clearance between the logs so air can circulate.

The logs are aerated in the open for at least two years. A master woodworker decides when they are seasoned enough to be worked. The tree trunks are cut into lengths appropriate for the heights of the matryoshkas to be made and transported to the woodworker’s shop.

Raw materials for treating the worked dolls before painting include oil to retain the moisture and a starch-based glue primer. The artist uses tempera paints, oil paints, gold leaf, and less often, watercolors. Lacquer and sometimes wax are used to provide protective layers on the painted artworks.

Design

The source pieces of wood dictate design somewhat in that they may limit the height, diameter, thinness of the shells of the dolls, and other factors. The master woodworkers are extraordinarily skilled in choosing the right wood for the work. Although matryoshka dolls usually take one of several basic shapes, the turner is free to choose all aspects of shape and size. In painting, the author’s style dominates; that is, the individual artist is able to select the theme, story, or character of the doll and to decorate it as he or she wishes. Design limitations vanished with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of Russia to the world marketplace.
The Manufacturing Process

1. Turning

It is essential that the full set of matryoshka be made from one piece of wood because the expansion-contraction characteristics and moisture content of the wood are unique; making a set of dolls from different pieces of wood would result in a set that almost certainly would not fit together properly. Matryoshka-making begins with the smallest doll—the one that is a solid piece and cannot be taken apart. This smallest figurine is shaped on a turning lathe first, and her shape and size determine those of all the larger dolls that follow. The bottom half of the next doll (the smallest one that can be taken apart) is turned first. The last portion of this lower half that is made is the ring fitting the bottom to the top. When the ring on the lower half is finished, the upper part of the matryoshka is made and the inset for the ring is carved. Each doll is turned at least 15 times.

The craftsman uses few tools, including the turning lathe and a variety of woodcarving knives and chisels of different lengths and shapes. The woodworker completes his job by putting the upper part of the matryoshka doll on its lower half and allowing the wood to dry. This tightens the ring to its upper fitting so the halves of the doll will close securely.

Turning the dolls on a lathe and sizing them to fit each other takes skill, intuition, and a master woodworker's experience. No measurements are made during the manufacture of a set of dolls.

2. Treating

The worked doll is almost pure white because of the color of the source wood. She is oiled to retain moisture and prevent cracking and left to cure over time. After curing, she is cleaned thoroughly, and one or more coats of starchy glue are painted over the outer surface as a primer for painting. The primer is very carefully applied to create a smooth surface and to prevent smudging.

3. Painting

In the history of the matryoshka doll, the early dolls were prized for the skills of the turner and his ability to make a thin shell for the matryoshka. Woodworking was prized above painting. By the 1980s, this balance had shifted and the painting was considered to add more value than the wood turning. There were also two schools of emphasis in painting; one puts more importance on the doll's face, and the other features the costume and its details. Matryoshka artists are often also painters of religious icons (images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and other religious figures) that are revered in churches and private homes. Thus, the detail they can achieve in their chosen style is amazing.

The painter is the next craftsman to work on the matryoshka. Early matryoshkas were painted with gouache, an opaque form of watercolor; today, high-quality tempera (colloid-based paint like poster paint), oil, and other paints (the same as those used by artists on canvas) are used to color the dolls. Watercolors are also used, but watercolor dolls are more rare and expensive because watercoloring wood is a difficult technique. The painters are true artists who know the
character of the wood, the tradition of the matryoshka and other wooden toys, and national costume and folk tales, as well as their own individual artistic strengths. The themes used to paint the matryoshka are usually typical of the studio of the artist and the region and are suited to the size and shape of the dolls. The artistic style may be very coarse or extremely fine—sometimes, only a single hair from a brush is used to add eyelashes and threads of lace. Gold leaf is also added to enhance the detailing.

Some styles of matryoshka are colored with aniline (synthetic organic) dyes instead of paint. The dye has a lighter texture, more like watercolor, and dolls that are dyed usually have a more childlike style. The colors tend to be basic green (from a vegetable dye), fuchsine (a brilliant bluish red), blue, and yellow. Early examples of dolls colored with dye were also coated with glue that dried the colors to dark hues.

Although the majority of matryoshkas are painted all over, some are not primed so the native wood is exposed. The wood becomes the background or thematic color of the doll, and paint is added to give her a face and costume. A heated poker is also used in some designs to burn in details of the doll including facial features and costume details. The doll may be left with only the poker work designs as her character, or the poker outlines may be filled with paint. All painted dolls are covered with lacquer to finish them and protect the paint. Some dolls with unpainted wood and poker detailing are not lacquered.

4. Finishing

After the paint has dried, the dolls are finished with a protective coating. Wax and varnish are used rarely, and lacquer is the most common finish. For the artistic sets, at least five coats of lacquer are applied.

Byproducts/Waste

Matryoshka making does not produce any byproducts although the artistic centers where they are crafted usually make other wood products. The seasoning of the wood is time consuming, and, when the wood is ready for turning, woodworkers avoid waste whenever possible. Similarly, the painters are highly skilled craftsmen and little paint or lacquer waste is generated.
Several ways to teach activities children with nesting dolls

Nesting dolls not only are they beautiful as decoration, but they are also a great tool for teaching educational concepts. The ideas listed below are geared for toddlers to early grade school children. You can take each idea and make it more challenging or provide more support (depending on what your child needs). I have given you some examples on how to do this! Because this toy is adaptable to teaching a variety of concepts, it is a great sibling learning activity. All of these activities can also be done in the language of your choice – making it a great language learning experience too!

1. To start at the very basics, Matryoshkas are great for teaching NUMBER CONCEPTS and COUNTING. Don’t just have your children count each piece, give them the numbers too! You could mix a couple sets together to get into higher numbers for children who have already mastered numbers 1-5! If you have a bunch of sets, like 3 sets of 5 piece Matryoshkas, you could even use them for basic multiplication. The possibilities are endless!

2. They are also great for letting kids practice their FINE MOTOR SKILLS. Opening and closing these little sets takes coordination and hand muscles.

3. Then there is the classic, ORDERING or SEQUENCING by size. Encourage your kids to put them in order from big to small AND small to big. If child puts them in order from big to small, you may say, “Can you put them in order from smallest to biggest?” You can also say, “How fast can you assemble the Matryoshkas and put them in order from smallest to biggest.” This way, child is given a 2 step direction, can practice her fine motor skills and ordering by size, while getting a challenge by racing the clock!

4. Oh, but you cannot forget the power of VOCABULARY! You already starting to use these words with you, but kids do not always have the understanding of vocabulary. It is important to use and explain the size words; small, medium, big, short, tall, smaller, smallest, bigger, biggest, tiny, tinier, tiniest and any other words you may want to use to describe size. (This vocabulary is in our K and 1st grade state math standards)

5. When they have the concepts of ordering and the vocabulary mastered, you can start to COMPARE! You may show them one Matryoshka and have them find another one that is smaller than the one in your hand (or bigger). Then, have your child pick one and ask you to find one that is smaller or bigger.
**Do-It-Yourself Matryoshka Set**

You can always buy a set, but if you paint it yourself, you can add educational elements and personalized elements. It can become a unique toy for your child that will have real history and culture behind it! Painting a Matryoshka set is simply fun, and if you have older children, who are around four and older, it can be a great family project.

Matryoshkas come in very different designs. Many sets would feature the same design, painted on a different scale, but there would be other sets where all the dolls will be different. Frequently, Matryoshkas depict women in traditional dresses with headscarves; however, there are sets of animals, cartoon characters and even politicians. Here I am going to show how to paint a very simple Matryoshka.

**Materials**
- a blank wooden set;
- paints (Gouache or Acrylics);
- if you use Gouache, you will need a polyurethane varnish; if you use Acrylics, a water-based varnish will work as well.

**Step-by-Step Guide**

1. Line all of your nesting dolls in front of you. Depending on how big your dolls are and how young your child is, you might want to remove some of them from the set for now. You can buy these dolls in my store.

2. Paint each in a uniform colour. I am propose to paint them red, blue and yellow, so that the dolls can be used for teaching colours and some basic sorting activities.

3. Mix a skin colour (white+ a bit of red+ a bit of yellow) and paint circles for their faces. Add some curls and fringes.

4. Now is the time for the most important part – babushka! Sometimes Matryoshkas are even called Babushka dolls, for the traditional headscarves they wear. It is funny that the English word for them happened to be babushka. In Russian, when you say babushka, you mean grandma. Old women do wear headscarves a lot, but those are called kosynka in Russian.
Linguistic curiosities aside, you can simply outline the headscarf or decorate its edges, like I did with the blue doll. You can paint some pattern on the headscarf or on the dress, like I did with the red and the blue dolls. I will also add a pattern to the yellow one, later.

5. Another noticeable feature of a traditional doll would be a painting on its belly. It could be a decorative floral design or a scene from everyday life. Often it is enclosed in a circle. Start by painting circles on your dolls’ bellies.

6. After the paint dries, make a small design inside of each circle.

7. Paint facial features.

8. Add any other details you want.

9. Varnish your dolls to preserve the paint.

10. Have fun!