Danuta Dymon is sitting by the side of the road, painting flowers on her fence. The 70-year-old has been at it since the sun came up, dressed from head to toe in clothes also displaying her brushstroke. "As you can see I'm covered in flowers," she said, adding neon green leaves to the fluorescent orange and pink garland spanning the fence's brick base in front of her home in Zalipie, in southern Poland. Dymon is known around the farming village for having painted flowers on virtually everything under her roof: the ceiling, walls, curtains, pillows, kettle, wooden spoons, börek, even the cat.

She took to the paintbrush with particular gusto but she is not alone: for over a century, Zalipie women—and the occasional man—have been decorating the inside and outside of their homes with folk art. Last year, some 25,000 tourists from countries as far away as Japan and the United States visited the village of 700 people to see the bright, cheerful flowers that adorn about a quarter of the cottages nestled among fields of corn, cabbage and strawberries.

Origins in soot

The tradition began in the late 19th century as a way to cover up soot from the stove, according to the head of the local community center, Wanda Chlastawa. "Women would take a homemade brush, dip it in whitewash and whack at the dirty wall to brighten up the space with the white splotches," the 59-year-old director of the center, appropriately called the House of Painters, told AFP.

"Later they started adding dots, lines and circles and that's how the first primitive flowers came to be." The first floral motifs were limited to three colors—white, black and beige—made at home out of lime whitewash, soot and clay, while early brushes included birch branches with shredded ends, as well as horse or cow tail hairs tied together with twine.

Imaginary flowers

At 78 Maria Chlastawa—not related to Wan—remembers making the brushes at home, as well as using the powdered paints the women would buy once they expanded their repertoire into today’s flashy rainbow range of colors. "Sometimes you’d paint, the rain would come, and it’d all run. So you’d have to do it over," she said, adding that today’s fast-drying acrylic paints are a whole lot better than what she started with 70 years ago.

"My mum painted so I’ve been painting since childhood. Then my daughter started painting as a kid, and now my granddaughter is painting too. It’s tradition, from one generation to the next.”

For decades, the village has held a painting contest every spring, when a jury of ethnographers makes the rounds of the houses and awards prizes. Some residents only paint ahead of the contest, but Chlastawa is at it all year, saying it calms her nerves. "The yard looks sad when everything’s white, but here..." she said, before her daughter Boguslawa, 50, chimed in: "Flowers bloom in the winter and autumn!"

Poppies, roses, daisies

While the designs may resemble red poppies or pink roses or white and yellow daisies, they are all drawn from imagination. "They’re invented flowers. You won’t find them in any field," said 44-year-old Anna Owca, who works at the community center and did not grow up in a painter family, but instead married into one.

"We moved in with my mother-in-law and when I walked in, there were flowers everywhere. I was 19 then and I thought, ‘My God, I’m gonna lose it. I can’t look at this!’" she said, laughing. "First thing I wanted to do was paint over all the flowers... But then, after a year or two, I started painting as well.”

"I remember my husband saying, ‘Damn. I was born among flowers and now I’ll die among flowers too’."— AFP

The legacy of all-year blooms in Poland’s painted village

‘As you can see I’m covered in flowers’

Maria Chlastawa on her yard where the walls of buildings are covered with traditional flower patterns in Zalipie, southern Poland. — AFP photos

Gabriele (left) and her mother Boguslawa (right) mix painting traditional flower patterns on the wall of a farm building in Zalipie.