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St. Nicholas, artist: Roger Zellner

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Where did Santa come from?

Gift-Giver



Postcard, France
St Nicholas Center Collection

Children around the world know and love St. Nicholas—for he brings gifts and treats in December. He is known by different names—and even looks different from place to place. But, it is the same St. Nicholas who delights with small surprises and good things to eat. Nicholas gave in secret, alert to others' needs, and expecting nothing for himself in return. It is this selfless generosity which seeks only the good of the other that made Nicholas' gifts the gifts of a saint.

In the West the saint's image changed between the eleventh and twelfth centuries from a rather severe figure to the compassionate children's friend, giving gifts on St. Nicholas Day. As early as 1163 it was observed in Utrecht, the Netherlands. During the same time span, the 12th century, French nuns began leaving candy and gifts outside the doors of children in need. The St. Nicholas Day children's gift-giving custom spread through the Low Countries, Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland and England. It took root across most of northern and central Europe, as far east as Romania. Henry Machyn described the 1550s London feast day processions, led by people dressed as St. Nicholas, that "went abroad in most parts of London singing after the old fashion," and were "received among good people into their houses, and had much good cheere as ever they had in many places."¹ 15th century Swiss writer Hospinian wrote:



Christmas stamp, Ukraine,
2006
St Nicholas Center Collection

it was the custom for parents, on the vigil of St Nicholas, to convey secretly presents of various kinds to their little sons and daughters who were taught to believe that they owed them to the kindness of St Nicholas and his train, who, going up and down among the towns and villages, came in at the windows, though they were shut, and distributed them. This custom originated from the legendary account of that saint having given portions to three daughters of a poor citizen whose necessities had driven him to an intention of prostituting them.²

The custom in 16th century Germany, as described by Thomas Naogeorgus:

Saint Nicholas money used to give
To maidens secretly,
Who, that he still may use
His wonted liberalitie
The mothers all their children on the eve
Do cause to fast
And when they every one at night
In senselesse sleepe are cast
Both Apples, Nuttes, and peares they bring,
And other things besides
As caps, and shooes and petticotes,
Which secretly they hide,

And in the morning found, they say
That this Saint Nicholas brought.³

Nicholas primary virtue came to be seen as generosity to children—rooted in the stories of rescuing the desperate maidens with gold for their dowries and of saving three children or schoolboys from an evil fate. Nuns in France began leaving treats on St. Nicholas Eve, December 5th, for the small children of poor families. St. Nicholas' gifts were usually good things to eat: apples, oranges, nuts, and eventually cookies and sweets.

By the time of the 16th century Reformation, Nicholas customs had moved beyond the church into popular culture. St. Nicholas had been a favorite subject of medieval saints' plays, making the story of his generosity well-known. In that way the saint moved beyond story and image, as shown in church fresco and glass, into dramatic presentation. From there St. Nicholas moved into home and shop. For two centuries bakers and sweet-makers had been making his image in gingerbread and marzipan to supply home celebrations. Even statutes passed to forbid selling these cookie, cake and candle likenesses in Delft, Arnhem, Utrecht and Amsterdams could not stamp out such a beloved custom. This popularity kept the good saint alive in many places on the Continent despite the Reformation's Rerepression of saints.

It was in this era, as well, that Nicholas' mode of entry shifted from windows to chimneys. There were no chimney's in Lycia when Nicholas lived—they simply did not exist and most cooking took place outdoors. Chimneys, as we know them, appeared in colder Europe during the 13th century. Art from that time begins to show Nicholas' charity being delivered via chimney, rather than window.

As gift-giving spread across Europe, St. Nicholas Feast Day, December 6th, was celebrated by both rich and poor. Saint Nicholas is still the gift giver, with his early December day being the primary gift-giving day, in parts of Europe and beyond. Whether gifts are given on Nicholas' feast or at Christmas, his example still inspires acts of charity and generosity.

[St. Nicholas Customs Around the World](#)

NOTES:

1,2,3– Seal, Jeremy, *Nicholas: The Epic Journey from Saint to Santa Claus*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishers © 2005, pp. 152, 153.

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