



## Christmas Unwrapped

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Most Christians around the world celebrate December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birthday of Jesus, but a telltale clue in the Gospel of Luke (2:8) implies an alternate date: the shepherds are tending their flocks. In the southern Levant, flocks are grazed in spring when vegetation is available, not in winter, when it is absent. A May birthday for Jesus was actually reported in the second century CE by theologian Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 1.21). But scholars suggest a number of reasons for the early Christian Church's appropriation of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birthday of Jesus, including the fact that Romans celebrated the winter solstice on that day. As St. Augustine explained in a fifth-century sermon (no. 192), Jesus's birthday was on the shortest day of the year, but it heralded an increase in light thereafter. As the "light of the world," Jesus thus brought a universal, divine illumination with his birth. Others have suggested that the choice of date was an attempt by the Church to supersede Saturnalia, a popular Roman festival in honor of Saturn, an ancient deity of agricultural bounty. Beloved by Romans, the joyous festival included gift-giving, among other events. Roman poet Catullus called it the "best of days," and it seems to have been held initially on one day (December 17<sup>th</sup>), but its exceptional popularity eventually transformed the festival into a week-long celebration. Regardless, the Church's re-appropriation of the date stuck, and the first celebration of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> took place in Rome in the fourth century CE.

Bishop Nicholas of Myra (ca. 270–343 CE) is yet another pivotal link between Christmas and its antique origins. Little known as an early bishop, Nicholas would nonetheless be canonized by the Church for his philanthropy, but posterity would reimagine him as the iconic "jolly old St. Nick" of Christmas tradition. Although details of the august Bishop's life are slim, we can safely assume that he never wore a red velvet suit, could not identify a reindeer, and may have never seen snow. He allegedly came from the ancient town of Patara, on the southwest coast of Turkey. After the death of his wealthy parents, he began distributing wealth to the poor, often in secret after dark. That tradition of clandestine

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**Denarius of M. Nonius Sufenas with Head of Saturn (obverse)**  
Roman, 59 BCE  
Minted in Rome  
Silver  
Museum purchase (59.64.19)



Louise Rayner (British, 1832–1924)  
*Belfry, Church of St. Nicholas near Canterbury*, 1869  
Watercolor and gouache on cardboard  
Gift of Roger and Mary Bumgarner (2005.7)



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

gift-giving survives today in St. Nick's visits to houses in the dead of night. Nicholas is also recognized as having been exceptionally kind to children, once even resurrecting three from the dead, after they had been slain by a nefarious butcher who intended to sell them as pork. Nicholas thus became a patron saint of children and students (among others), making him extremely popular. His veneration was known in Europe by the early Middle Ages, and churches dedicated to him are numerous. The saint became particularly popular among the Dutch, who knew him as "Sint-Nicolaas" or in the altered form of "Sinterklaas." Dutch immigrants carried their traditions to North America where Sinterklaas would morph into "Santa Claus," but it would be some time before he became the figure we know today.

It would also take some time for Christmas celebrations to become accepted in America. Early settlers considered the English celebrations to be drunken and impious. Historians suggest that many of the recognizable traditions of Christmas did not coalesce until the nineteenth century. Authors such as Washington Irving (*The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, 1820), Charles Dickens (*A Christmas Carol*, 1843), and Harriet Beecher Stowe (*The First Christmas in New England*, 1850) solidified the image of Christmas as one that emphasized family, compassion, and generosity. Clement Clarke Moore's poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (1822), forever immortalized its opening line, "Twas the night before Christmas..." Santa Claus's emblematic look, i.e., red, fur-lined suit and cap, is attributed to cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840–1902), who first illustrated the figure in the 1880s. Nast is also credited with creating the initial images of Santa's workshop at the North Pole, thus making Santa and Christmas synonymous with snow. Decorated evergreens are said to have originated in sixteenth-century Germany, but evergreen boughs and garlands, still used as Christmas décor, have significance back to antiquity, as symbols for the continuity of life through winter. The Christmas tree was present in American homes by the 1880s, though initially confined to wealthier residences. Candles, followed by strings of electric lights (which Edison debuted in 1880), became familiar decoration, but Christmas candles originally symbolized spiritual light. During Roman Saturnalia, verses accompanied some gifts, and we might imagine the former as predecessors to the modern Christmas card. Louis Prang (1824–1909), a Prussian immigrant living in Boston, created the first American Christmas cards in 1875. The cards, depicting flowers, carried a simple greeting: "Merry Christmas." As time wound on, images of



[Santa Claus by Thomas Nast, from \*Harper's Weekly\* \(1881\)](#)

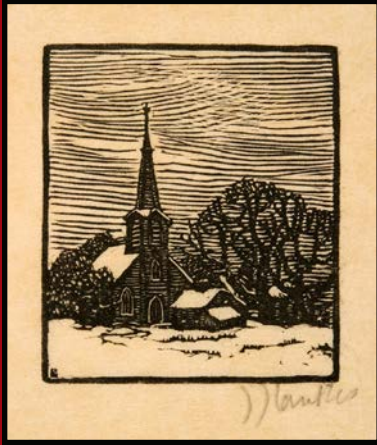


[The first Christmas card available in the US \(1875\)](#)

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J. J. Lankes (American, 1884–1960)  
*Little Church, Christmas Greeting*, 1927  
Woodcut on paper  
Gift of the children of J. J. Lankes (2007.25)

Santa Claus and the typical “snow scenes,” such as Lankes’s woodcuts, proliferated.

In addition to her novel noted above, Harriet Beecher Stowe also wrote a short story entitled *Christmas; or, the Good Fairy* (1850), which opens with a young woman fretting about her Christmas shopping list, then lamenting the lost meaning of the season. Enduring crowds of harried shoppers seeking that perfect gift would become as synonymous with Christmas as Santa himself. James’s painting of 1940s Kansas City thronged with shoppers is, however, becoming a thing of the past as clicking “add to cart” rapidly replaces it. ■



Frederic James (American, 1915–1985)  
*Kansas City Christmas*, 1947  
Watercolor on paperboard  
Gift of Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney, Inc.  
Transferred from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Operations, MU (2014.70)

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*Happy Holidays  
to our readers!*