



EARLY SANTA CLAUS WAS MAN OF MANY DISGUISES

History of a Holiday Icon, and Why He Looks the Way He Does

The imaginative portraits of the “Coca-Cola Santa Claus” that Haddon Sundblom painted over a span of 33 years forever changed the world’s perception of the North Pole’s most-famous resident. From Sundblom’s brush strokes emerged the quintessential look of Santa Claus that, over time, would be adopted by people around the world as the popular image of Father Christmas. Though he was not the first artist to create an image of Santa Claus for Coca-Cola advertising, Sundblom’s version became the standard for other renditions of Saint Nick and is the most-enduring and widespread depiction of the holiday icon to this day.

The Legend of Saint Nicholas

Most people agree the story of Santa Claus was inspired by the life of Nicholas, a bishop from fourth-century Turkey who became known as the patron saint of children. But the physical depiction of this somewhat mysterious benefactor was ever in debate.

Legend has it that Nicholas was born in A.D. 270, in the ancient Turkish port city of Patara. He became the first bishop of a nearby town called Myra (now known as Kale) in Asia Minor, renowned for his kindness to children and help to the needy.

In one of his better-known acts, Nicholas aided three daughters of an impoverished nobleman who could not afford a dowry by secretly tossing three bags of gold down their chimney.

He is also credited with bringing back to life three boys who had been killed and pickled in salt by an evil butcher. On another occasion, the bishop prayed for the life of a dead mariner, and soon the man breathed again. Following this, Nicholas became a patron saint of sailors.

After a life full of miracles and acts of charity, Nicholas died on December 6, A.D. 343. He was canonized in the ninth century.

Tales of Nicholas’ compassion and generosity spread throughout Europe and Russia. The stories of his legacy were handed down particularly through the Dutch and Germanic cultures, which alternately called the bishop “Sanct Herr ‘Cholas,” “Sinter Claes,” “Sinterklass,” “Pelze-Nichol,” and “Sint Nocoloses.” (The British Anglicized the name to Santa Claus.)

Since religious observances often blended with local feasts and festivals, it was not long before the legend of Saint Nicholas’ good deeds became associated with Christmas and the gift-giving season. By the 13th century, French nuns celebrated the feast of Saint Nicholas by leaving food at the doors of the poor. As his legend grew, the feast of Saint Nicholas also became a day of gift giving in Germany and Holland. In a significant number of regions, Christmas in fact was celebrated on December 6, the date of Saint Nicholas’ passing.

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A Saint of Many Dimensions

The artistic impressions of Saint Nicholas in these formative years often showed either a distinguished, intellectual-looking gent or a mischievous sprite that at times seemed even gnome-like or trollish. Artists and storytellers in Russia and Europe alternately described Santa as a tall, gaunt man, or short, or even “elfin” and a bit spooky. Other accounts reported a demeanor that ranged from pleasant to grumpy to downright frightening. All agreed, however, that he was indeed a saint.

The outward appearance of Santa Claus continued to take many forms, and even the most-popular views of Saint Nicholas in earlier centuries often were worlds apart. Some nationalities insisted Saint Nicholas traveled alone, on foot, while others claimed he rode a horse. And as for the assorted trappings associated with the modern-day Santa, those, too, arose from a combination of stories from different countries – the concepts of the reindeer and sleigh are from Scandinavia, while the pipe and chimney ideas are from the Netherlands.

Though generally regarded as a kind old man, some of Saint Nicholas’ first incarnations actually struck terror in the hearts of various populations. In Germany, for example, children waited in both anticipation and fear of this “Weihnachtsmann,” who carried gifts for the good and a birch twig to beat children who misbehaved. Among his sinister companions were the “child-gobbler” and demonic helpers who would kidnap bad girls and boys.

Prelude to a Common Claus

It is believed the legend of Santa was brought to the New World by Christopher Columbus, who, upon arriving in Haiti, named a port after the patron saint. In 1621, when the Dutch landed on the New York island of Manhattan, they erected a statue of Saint Nicholas as a tribute to him for their successful journey.

American writer Washington Irving made an effort to describe Saint Nicholas in his 1809 book, “Knickerbocker’s History of New York,” which focused on Dutch folklore. Irving framed the character with “a low, broad-rimmed hat, a huge pair of Flemish trunk-hose and a [long] pipe.”

Later in the 19th century, two other American literary pioneers created individual works that served to bring more focus to Saint Nick’s appearance and greatly influence how Haddon Sundblom would later shape the definitive image of Santa Claus.

The first was New York author Clement Clarke Moore, whose epic 1822 poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (better known as “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”) began approaching the singular vision of Santa today. The poet described Santa as “a right jolly old elf,” when legend held that the bishop Saint Nicholas from ancient Turkey was actually a human. And since nobody claimed to really have seen an elf, the popular interpretations of Father Christmas remained quite diverse and confusing.

Then, in 1862, political cartoonist Thomas Nast gave Moore’s Santa Claus a widely circulated, physical presence on the cover of *Harper’s Weekly* magazine. Still picturing Santa as an elf-like figure, Nast nevertheless made the character more realistically round and also was the first to give Santa the white beard and matching hair.

Nast continued to create Santa illustrations for 30 years and along the way changed the color of Saint Nick’s coat from tan to the now-traditional red. But the cartoonist neither established a lasting archetype for Santa nor settled on one firm height.



Santa Meets Coca-Cola

In the 1920s, The Coca-Cola Company began to promote soft drink consumption for the winter holidays in U.S. magazines. The first Santa ads for Coke used a strict-looking Claus.

Santa Claus made another appearance in Coca-Cola advertising in 1930. Artist Fred Mizen painted a department store Santa impersonator drinking a bottle of Coke amid a crowd of shoppers and their children. The illustration was used that Christmas season for Coca-Cola ads in *The Saturday Evening Post* and other publications.

Not long after, a magical transformation took place.

Archie Lee, then the agency advertising executive for The Coca-Cola Company, wanted the next campaign to show a wholesome Santa as both realistic and symbolic. In 1931, the Company commissioned Sundblom, a Michigan-born illustrator and already a creative giant in the industry, to develop advertising images using Santa Claus. Sundblom previously produced other illustrations for Coca-Cola, but nothing would compare with what was about to transpire.

Sundblom turned to Clement Moore's classic poem for inspiration. The ode's description of the jolly old elf led Sundblom to fashion an image of Santa that was warm, friendly *and human* – quite a change from the sometimes-harsh portrayals of Santa up to that time.

A Santa for the Ages

The Coca-Cola Santa that Sundblom conceived was strikingly different from the rest – a decidedly taller, lavishly dressed, flesh-and-blood being who radiated warmth and a personality, an image that summed up all that was good about life. The figure suddenly was everyone's favorite grandfather, a robust-looking man who lived life to the fullest, loved children, enjoyed a little honest mischief, and feasted on snacks left out for him each Christmas Eve.

Sundblom envisioned this merry gentleman as an opposite of the meager look of department store Santa imitators from early 20th century America. He wanted abundance and generosity. The character he drew was to glow with warmth and life, with the white beard flowing over a long red coat generously outlined with fur, an enormous brass buckle fastening a broad leather belt, and large, floppy boots.

The result was the perfectly lovable patron saint of the season, with a few markedly human foibles. The ad campaign featuring this captivating Santa ran year after year and, as distribution of Coca-Cola and its ads spread farther around the world, Sundblom's Santa Claus became more memorable each season, in more and more countries. Before long, it was universally accepted as the ideal, most-human look of the once-shadowy Santa.

The character became so likable, The Coca-Cola Company and Haddon Sundblom struck a partnership that would last for decades. Sundblom continued creating his seasonal Santa depictions for Coke advertising, retail displays, posters and other items until 1964, a full 33 years after the first painting.

Two Men, One Legendary Face

Sundblom initially modeled Santa's smiling face after the cheerful, somewhat furrowed looks of a friend, retired salesman Lou Prentiss. "He embodied all the features and spirit of Santa Claus," Sundblom said. "The wrinkles in his face were happy wrinkles."



After Prentiss passed away, the Swedish-American Sundblom used his own face as the ongoing reference for painting the now-enduring, modern image of Saint Nicholas. Over time, the Santa drawn both from Sundblom's imagination and from his own looks, as well as those of Lou Prentiss, became the world's property.

The first presence of a child in Sundblom's holiday creations occurred in 1938, when Santa was shown embracing a youngster in the family living room. In 1950, Sundblom began using Lani and Sancy Nason, his next-door neighbors in Tucson, Arizona, as models for some of his heartwarming Santa scenes. Though they were sisters, Sundblom changed the features of one to a boy, to create more-balanced settings. "I don't know whether she liked being a boy or not," the artist recalled. "I never asked her."

In 1951, Sundblom captured the Coca-Cola Santa "making his list and checking it twice." However, the ads did not acknowledge that bad children existed and showed pages of good boys and girls only.

Mischievous and magical, the Coca-Cola Santa was not above raiding the refrigerator during his annual rounds, stealing a playful moment with excited children and pets, or pausing to enjoy a Coca-Cola during stops on his one-night, worldwide trek. When air adventures became popular, Santa also could be caught playing with a toy helicopter around the tree.

Sundblom passed away in 1976, but The Coca-Cola Company continues to use a variety of his timeless depictions of Saint Nicholas in holiday advertising, packaging and other promotional activities. The classic Coca-Cola Santa images created by Sundblom are as ubiquitous today as the character they represent and have become universally accepted as the personification of the patron saint of both children and Christmas.

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