

# Did the popular image of Santa Claus originate in a Coca-Cola ad campaign? – The Straight Dope

*Ryan McGorman*

7-8 minutes

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A STAFF REPORT FROM THE STRAIGHT DOPE SCIENCE ADVISORY BOARD

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Dear Straight Dope:

I've been told that the image we have of Santa Claus (jolly old fat guy, white beard, red suit, rosy cheeks, etc.) was conceived for an advertising campaign by Coca-Cola. I then read elsewhere that the image had been common for a few years just before the Coke ad campaign. What's the definitive answer?

SDStaff Eutychus replies:

Unless the Coca Cola company is a lot more influential than we usually give them credit for, this little bit of advertising legend is merely that: advertising. The red coat probably stems from the fact that the original St. Nicholas was a bishop. A de-sanctified Nicholas appeared later in Clement Clarke Moore's poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* "dressed all in fur

from his head to his foot.” But how an obscure European bishop became the ultimate American Christmas icon is a story in itself.

The modern image of Santa Claus is an amalgam of several traditions. The figure of the Christmastime gift-giver is found in many cultures, showing up in the person of the “Christkindlein” (from which we get the name “Kris Kringle”), which was superseded by “Pere Noel” in France and “Pelsnickle” elsewhere in Europe. But the introduction of Santa Claus into American mythology stems from St. Nicholas himself.

Not much is definitely known about St. Nicholas. He is thought to have been the bishop of Myra, imprisoned during the reign of Diocletian and released upon the ascension of Constantine as Roman emperor. Nicholas is said to have been famous for his generosity — one story has it that he provided the dowries for three Italian sisters by throwing bags of money through their windows. The tradition arose that he was a secret giver of gifts to children on his feast day, December 6th. Nicholas was one of the most popular saints in Europe throughout the middle ages, but following the Protestant Reformation interest in him died out everywhere except Holland — a matter of significance, as we shall see.

The celebration of Christmas evolved separately. Christmas initially was the result of a tradeoff with the pagan world Christians were trying to convert. They didn’t want to be seen as the bad guys by out and out banning the general rowdiness of post-harvest Saturnalia celebrations. So they compromised, letting the populace keep its celebrations as long as they were now done in honor of the birth of Christ. The drawback was that an air of pagan abandon carried over to the new holiday,

and Christmas developed a bad reputation as a time of “misrule.”

As late as the mid 1600’s, a Christmas ritual in Lincolnshire, England, featured the crowning of a “King of Misrule.” The Puritans, coming to America, wanted no part of this “unholiness” surrounding the birth of Christ. They had good reason to be concerned — demographic records show that the number of childbirths spiked dramatically in the month of September, exactly nine months after the Christmas celebrations.

Although there were attempts to turn Christmas into a more devotional celebration during the Revolutionary War era (most notably by the Congregationalists) they were largely unsuccessful until the 19th century when another character enters the story — John Pintard, the forgotten hero of Holiday Town. Pintard was instrumental in establishing Washington’s Birthday, the Fourth of July, and Columbus Day as national holidays, and helped to do the same for Christmas. In 1804 he established the New York Historical Society, with Nicholas the gift-giver as its patron saint.

Pintard was motivated in part by his nostalgia for old Dutch customs and “ancient usages” of New York. St. Nicholas had been an important element of the Dutch celebration of Christmas in New Amsterdam, as New York had once been known. The name Santa Claus, in fact, is an anglicization of the Dutch nickname for St. Nicholas, Sinterklaas.

But an element of class struggle may also have been a factor. In New York, the wealthy Episcopalian gentry, known unofficially as Knickerbockers, felt their authority was

threatened by newcomers. In their eyes, the re-introduction of St. Nicholas into New York society provided a “cultural counterweight for the commercial bustle and democratic misrule of early nineteenth century new York.”

Helping with the re-invention of Christmas was Washington Irving, a member of the New York Historical Society who published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819-20). Best known for the stories of Rip van Winkle and Ichabod Crane, the book also contained four stories of a fictional Bracebridge Hall, a traditional English setting where “[the occasion of Christmas] seemed to throw open every door, and unlock every heart. It brought the peasant and the peer together, and blended all ranks in one warm generous flow of joy and kindness.” Irving later admitted that he could not remember actually seeing the type of Christmas he described, and that much of it was conceived from whole cloth. But it did give Pintard a model for his newly-invented Christmas season.

All these different strains came together in *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (1823) by Clement Clarke Moore. Moore, a wealthy New York landowner, took the traditional person of St. Nicholas and mixed it with some of the ideas in Irving’s *Sketch Book* to provide a visual image of Santa Claus. Pintard’s reintroduction of St. Nicholas was only for the upper classes, but Moore’s poem captured the imagination of rich and poor alike.

Eventually, Moore’s image combined with other traditions around the country to create the figure we have today. The well-known newspaper cartoonist Thomas Nast drew illustrations of Santa Claus that were widely circulated in the

late 1800's. Santa's image was solidified in 1931 when Haddon H. Sundblom began to draw his popular pictures of Santa Claus for the Coca Cola company. By that time, however, the image of Santa Claus in his traditional red and white had already become a standard figure in American iconography. (See the Urban Legends Reference Pages link below for a detailed history of the different elements in the Santa Claus image.)

So, when you think of the figure of jolly old Santa Claus, in his red and white costume, instead of grabbing a cold one, think instead of a minor bishop from Myra and the New York Knickerbockers.

It's the real thing.

SDStaff Eutyclus, Straight Dope Science Advisory Board

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