



Merry Christmas



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CHRISTMAS GREETING SECTION

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Spirit of Christmas infuses holiday season with joy



DISTANT AND REGAL, this enthroned Madonna and Child seem to stare into eternity. The painting, the *Madonna of Humility*, is by the 15th century Siennese painter, Sano di Pietro. In the collection of The Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Frank L. Babbott.

The creche — its history, legends

The *creche* — a representation in miniature of the manger in which Christ was born, complete with tiny figures of the Holy Family, angels, the adoring Magi, and even the animals which were present — is a familiar sight under the Christmas tree, where it commands a place of honor during the Christmas season.

Traditionally, the crib remains empty until Christmas arrives, at which time the miniature figure of the Christ Child is lovingly placed within it.

The original *creche* is believed by many to have been set up by St. Francis of Assisi. In the year 1224, St. Francis arranged a representation of the Holy Family in a grotto in the Italian hill town of Greccio.

With a white ox and a donkey — both of whom represented animals present at the Nativity — at either side of the *creche*, the midnight Eucharist was celebrated on Christmas Eve at an altar situated above the crib.

The *creche*, (*presepio*, in Italian) is still most popular in Italy, its country of origin. Each year, in Rome and Naples, children construct *presepi* of cardboard, and populate them with inexpensive clay figures bought in the market.

A typical Neapolitan *presepio* might incorporate a hill, with the sacred grotto below, a tiny shepherd's hut, some trees, a dirt path or two winding toward the cave, and perhaps a stream, the latter formed with pieces of glittering glass. Landscaping would be done with moss.

Rejoicing angels, and the star which guided the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem, would be suspended by nearly invisible threads, and the crib would be carefully padded with real straw.

So much for the simple *creche*. Many more elaborate were created in the course of time.

One German example was large enough to fill an entire room. This *creche* represented the main square of a small village, which was bordered by various large edifices, including a domed cathedral, in the porch of which the crib was

set up. Many figurines populated the scene, in different sizes depending upon where they were located, in accordance with the laws of perspective.

Another *creche*, from the Tyrol, imitates the villages and mountains typical of the area, and yet another, from Munich, represents the Adoration set in the dramatic environment of a ruined castle.

Some *creches*, made in Naples, boasted classical temples, or the remains thereof. Usually, the figures which were incorporated into the scene would be dressed in contemporary rather than Biblical garb, providing a fascinating view of the fashions current when the *creche* was created.

The animals most likely to be found in a *creche* are the donkey and ox, mentioned above, and the cow, the goat, and the horse. Each of these animals has a legend connected with it.

Both the donkey and the goat were noisy, disturbing the peaceful sleep of the Holy Infant. For this reason, both were punished: the donkey was not permitted ever to have offspring, and the goat was doomed to carry, throughout history, the opprobrium of having a voice no human could find pleasant.

The horse, too, was punished — for selfishly eating the hay which had been laid down for the Christ Child to sleep upon, he was doomed always to be the servant of man, and never to be satisfied, no matter how much he ate.

The ox, on the other hand, generously gave its hay to provide Christ's bedding, as well as warming the Infant Jesus with his breath. And, the cow, as a token of its devotion, gave her newly born calf as an offering to the Child.

Both ox and cow were rewarded by the Madonna, who promised them that they would always enjoy their food so much that they would chew it a second time.

Additionally, the cow was promised that she would bring forth a new calf every year. A fitting gift in a season of giving, which celebrates — above all — the miracle of birth, and especially the miracle of the Birth of Christ.

Universal in meaning, and deeply moving, Nativity touches heart, soul

In the course of two millennia, countless millions of people have lived their lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ. To all of them, the story of the birth of Christ is of great significance. It is at once the history of the Mother and Child whose lives are at the heart of Christianity, and the moving tale of a mother and her infant.

The story of the Nativity is both glorious and tender, infinitely complex and profoundly simple, universal in significance and deeply personal in tenor.

With a meaning that is truly for all time because it transcends it, the Christmas story is as integral a part of thought and belief in the 20th century, as it was in the third or thirteenth. Perhaps no other occurrence has touched so many lives in so many ways, fulfilling vastly different needs while remaining itself untouched.

The mystic bent of the medieval mind, for instance, envisioned the Christ child as a miniature adult, crowned with a golden halo. Perched rather stiffly on the Madonna's lap, He sits enthroned and surrounded by an honor guard of angels and saints.

Even in infancy, the painters of the Middle Ages seem to say, Christ was already the man who would die upon the Cross for our sins. The paintings of Madonna and Child which date from the Middle Ages are intensely devout celebrations of the glory of God and Christ, His Son.

In contrast, the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, when the philosophy of Humanism was current, depict the Madonna and Child as a very real mother and son. As painted by Leonardo da Vinci, Masaccio, Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, for example,

the infant Christ is truly a child, pudgy and squirming on His loving mother's knee.

The setting is realistic — a landscape or light-bathed interior — rather than a stiff throne floating on a golden background. The saints and angels of Renaissance art are as likely to be teasing the infant Christ as solemnly adoring Him. The playfulness of the artist's conception in no way dims the glory of God and Christ, but rather enhances it, emphasizing love rather than awe.

At the same time, the Italian Renaissance conception of Christ was a glorious one. Paintings such as Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration*, with its air of regal courtliness, illustrate that, to the Renaissance mind, Christ was a king as well as a child and a man.

The Flemish painters of the 15th century see the Nativity from a different perspective. The emphasis is on the personal in such paintings as Hugo van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece* (whose central panel depicts the Adoration) and Geertgen tot Sint Jans' *Nativity*.

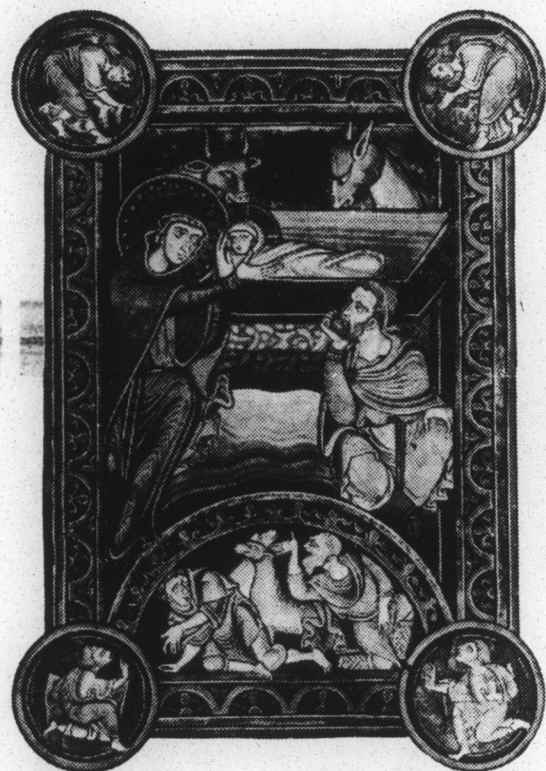
The homely virtues the Flemish admired are represented in the many true-to-life details, as well as in the attitude of the Madonna watching over her Babe, the epitome of loving motherhood.

Mystic, regal, touching, awe-inspiring, loving. That the Nativity can be so many things at once, is in some way a measure of its immeasurable significance.

That it has meant so many things to so many people indicates its infinite power to reach disparate lives, in centuries and continents far removed from one another, touching both heart and soul. As the eternal leaves its indelible mark upon the temporal, it repeats the lesson of its ultimate, essential universality.

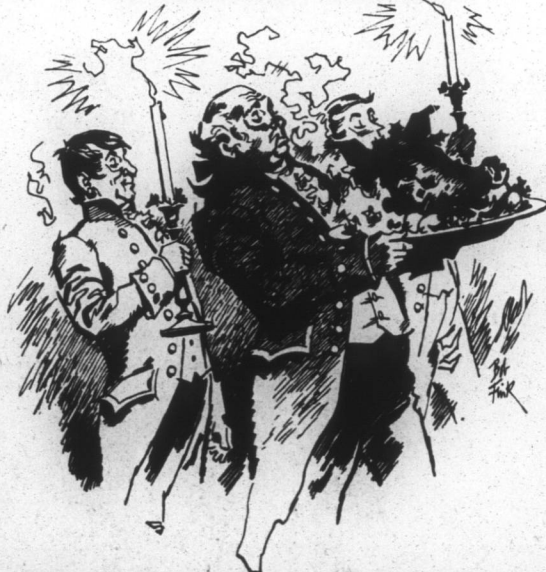


A TENDERLY EVOCATIVE RENDITION of a Madonna and Child by Sandro Botticelli. The Madonna is loving and stately; the Infant Christ, the image of a real babe. Illustration courtesy: The New York Public Library Picture Collection.



AN EARLY NATIVITY from an illuminated manuscript is iconographic, basically two-dimensional. The Annunciation to the Shepherds, below, has little of the wonder and joy associated with this scene in later art. Missal is from Weingarten Abbey in Germany and dates from the early years of the 13th century. Reproduced courtesy: The Pierpont Morgan Library.

Traditional Yule fare



CHRISTMAS DINNER IN OLDE ENGLAND often commenced with a boar's or pig's head. The origin of this traditional dish — now rarely to be seen on the Christmas groaning board — is buried in the mists of pre-Christian ritual. Illustration by Randolph Caldecott for Washington Irving's *Old Christmas*, reproduced courtesy of Sleepy Hollow Restorations.

MINCE PIE

Two pounds and a half of tongue, or lean beef.
A pound and a half of suet.
Eight good-sized apples.
Two pounds of raisins.
Two pounds of sugar.
Two gills of rose water.
One quart of wine.
Salt, mace, cloves, and cinnamon, to the taste.

Boil the meat, and chop very fine. Chop the suet and the apples very fine. Stone the raisins, cutting each into four pieces. Dissolve the sugar into wine and rose water, and mix all well together with the spices. Twice this quantity of apple improves the pies, making them less rich. Line your plates with a rich paste, fill, cover, and bake. Measure the spices used, to save tasting next time, and to prevent mistakes.

19th Century recipe for Mince Pie — as Washington Irving might have enjoyed it — is reproduced courtesy of Sleepy Hollow Restorations, in Tarrytown, New York.



HIGH RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS, such as this Adoration of the Magi by Sebastiano Florigero, combine moving emotions with courtly display. In the collection of The Brooklyn Museum, Gift of A. Augustus Healy.

A Washington Irving Christmas: dazzling celebration of the season

Few writers have been more enamored of the pleasures of the Christmas season than Washington Irving, whose fascination with old lore and traditions led him to create such fables as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip van Winkle."

Enchanted by the ancient customs faithfully followed by a family with whom he stayed during his sojourn in England in 1819, Irving annually observed the time-honored Christmas traditions that were so dear to his heart at his own home, Sunnyside, in Tarrytown, New York.

As early as 1809, Irving waxed poetic on the subject of St. Nicholas, the forerunner of the Santa Claus we know and love today.

In *Dierdrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, Irving wrote: "The good St. Nicholas would often make his appearance riding jollily among the tree tops, or over the roofs of houses, now and then drawing forth magnificent presents from his breeches pockets, and dropping them down the chimneys." A forerunner of Clement Moore's famous "Visit from St. Nicholas," if there ever was one!

Christmas, to Irving, meant all the homespun pleasures of good companionship, hospitality and good cheer.

"It is, indeed," Irving wrote in *Old Christmas*, the book of essays in which he celebrated his English Christmas. "The season of regenerated feeling — the season for kindling, not merely the fire of hospitality in the hall, but the genial flame of charity in the heart."

In a letter to his sister, Sarah Van Wart, Irving vividly describes one of the pleasures of the season.

"I know of nothing more exhilarating than the first sleigh rides; skimming over the sparkling snow, the air so pure and bracing, the sunshine so splendid; the very horse seems to share your animation

and delight, and dash forward merrily to the jingling of the sleigh bells."

The buoyancy of the description befits a boy of seven or 17, not (as Irving then was) a man of 57.

To his niece, Sarah Storrow, Irving described Sunnyside, ready for the Christmas festivities, as, "dressed in evergreens," as it was each year, as custom (and Irving was a staunch observer of custom) dictated.

In addition to evergreen garlands, wreaths and sprays, Sunnyside boasted its share of holly, and a wreath hung on the front door in welcome.

Mistletoe dangled over various doorways, reminiscent of that which Irving remembered from his English Christmas: "with its white berries, hung up, to the imminent peril of all the pretty housemaids."

In Irving's footnotes to *Old Christmas*, he explains the way the mistletoe tradition operated. According to Irving, "The young men have the

privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked, the privilege ceases."

Irving faithfully observed the custom of gift-giving at Christmas. Irving Van Wart, a visitor to Sunnyside, recalled Christmas morn in his journal: "This morning when we woke we lit our gas and then opened our stockings."

Irving's dining table, the center of much of the merriment, was traditionally adorned by a lustrous red satin ribbon which encircled it, tied into four large bows, one at each corner. The Christmas dinner which would be enjoyed at it, often included roast goose and pickled oysters.

The menu for Christmas Dinner, 1852, encompassed Macaroni Soup, Baked Ham, Turkey with Oyster Soup, Scalloped Oysters, Parsnips, Carrots, Boiled Turnips, Mince Pie, Rice and Plum Pudding, and concluded with coffee, fruit and nuts.

It was as elaborate, if not as unusual as the meal Irving associated with his English Christmas, which began with, "an enormous pig's head, decorated with rosemary, with a lemon in its mouth, which was placed with great formality at the head of the table," and encompassed such delicacies as mock-peacock pie (made from pheasant), "magnificently . . . decorated with peacock's feather's, in imitation of the tail of that bird."

The English Christmas dinner, which Irving remembered all his life, concluded with the ceremony of the wassail bowl, whose contents Irving described as, "Being composed of the richest and raciest wines, highly spiced and sweetened with roasted apples bobbing about the surface."

As everyone drank from the one bowl, which was passed around the table, it was the perfect beverage with which to toast Merry Christmas and enjoy the feeling of togetherness which the Christmas season instills.



IN PREVIOUS CENTURIES, creches were often elaborate dioramas with detailed scenery and a multitude of figures and buildings to fascinate the eye and stimulate the imagination. Here, children gaze in wonderment as a procession of miniature people and animals converge upon the humble manger, to do honor to the newly born Christ. Illustration courtesy: The New York Public Library Picture Collection.



A FESTIVE HOLIDAY TABLE, set for dessert, in the dining room of Washington Irving's home, Sunnyside, in Tarrytown, New York. The table is set with Irving's own dishes, and tied with a red satin ribbon, as it was in Irving's day.