

The Cartoons of Thomas Nast

Grade Level: 4-12



Thomas Nast (1840-1902) *Merry Old Santa Claus*, *Harper's Weekly*, January 1, 1881, Proof, TN78.41

About the Artist

Thomas Nast (1840-1902) immigrated to America from Landau, Germany when he was five years old. With limited education and little artistic training, he joined the art staff of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* as a teenager. In 1862, the artist joined *Harper's Weekly* as its war correspondent. He worked for the weekly until 1877, and again from 1895-1896. During his tenure, Nast created hundreds of cartoons, including the Democratic Donkey, Republican Elephant, Uncle Sam, Columbia, Tammany Tiger, and Santa Claus. Nast also created cartoons commenting on issues of the day.

Themes

- US History
- American Politics
- Holiday Traditions

Background Information

Of all the hundreds, if not thousands, of drawings Nast created, *Merry Old Santa Claus* was the image he told his family he wanted to be remembered for. Nast's wish came true. This image is *the* icon of the American Christmas.

Merry Old Santa Claus is no mere sentimental holiday image. It is a complex political image. Santa Claus holds an armful of toys, each carefully selected by Nast for their symbolism.

The pocket watch hanging from Santa's finger indicates a few minutes before midnight. Rather than signifying the approaching moment when Santa Claus will travel across the night sky delivering gifts, the watch shows that at midnight on New Year's Eve, all Congressional legislation not passed will expire without action. Over Santa's arm hangs a Union officer's dress sword. On Santa's back, rather than a sack of toys, is an enlisted soldier's knapsack. These three elements are the key to this image.

At the time Nast created *Merry Old Santa Claus*, Congress was debating a pay increase for the United States military. He was staunchly pro-military and believed that for their risk and heroism, soldiers and sailors were due just wages. Nast's subtext in this holiday icon is "If Santa can bring gifts to our soldiers and sailors, why can't Congress provide a decent living wage?"



Read: *A Visit from St. Nicholas* by Clement Clarke Moore

Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.

*He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;*

*A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.*

*His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!*

*His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;*

*The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;*

*He had a broad face and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.*

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf..."

Underline any description of Santa Claus in the excerpt of the poem that you see in the Thomas Nast illustration.

Research: Santas Around the World

Different countries around the world have their own traditions and variations of Santa Claus during the holiday season.

Find at least one other country's version of Santa Claus.

What is the same and what is different from the United States version of Santa Claus that Nast drew?

Activity: Draw Santa

Thomas Nast used Santa in his artwork to drive political change. Pick a problem or issue in your community that you would like to solve. **Draw a political cartoon with Santa Claus in it to raise awareness and convince viewers of your point of view.**

Activity: Holiday Traditions

Thomas Nast included many of his own family traditions in his cartoons of Santa.

Nast often depicted his wife, Sarah, and his five children celebrating at Christmas.



In the above image, Nast draws his oldest son, Tom Nast Jr., hanging his oversized stocking on the mantel in the hopes that Santa will fill it.

Write about your family traditions around the holidays.





MACCULLOCH HALL
HISTORICAL MUSEUM

About Macculloch Hall Historical Museum

Established in 1950 by W. Parsons Todd (1877-1976), Macculloch Hall Historical Museum preserves and interprets its historic house and gardens, an unparalleled collection of the work of political cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840-1902), fine and decorative arts collections, and Macculloch family archives, inspiring visitors to experience everyday American history where it happened. The museum's unique historic setting, its period rooms, and professional galleries excite and educate visitors of all ages, connecting present to past in a dynamic cultural environment. On-site, online, and through outreach, MHHM serves local, state, national, and international communities.

Visit <https://maccullochhall.org/> to learn more.

Macculloch Hall Historical Museum receives annual general operating support from the W. Parsons Todd Foundation, the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the F.M. Kirby Foundation, the Mimi Washington Starrett Foundation, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, and New Jersey Arts & Culture Renewal Fund of the Princeton Area Community Foundation and program support from The Astle-Alpaugh Family Foundation, the Garden Club of Morristown, and Bloomberg Connects.



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