



Smithsonian Associates

## Secrets and Symbols in Art: The Iconography of Christmas

Noah Charney

Monday, December 15, 2025 - 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. ET

Welcome to “The Iconography of Christmas,” a lecture that looks beneath the surface of familiar images to uncover how Christmas became one of the most symbolically dense visual narratives in Western art. This lecture is not about holiday sentimentality, but about how artists, theologians, folklore, politics, and popular culture collectively built the visual language of Christmas over centuries.

By the end of this talk, images you thought you knew by heart—the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus—will look different. Once you learn the symbolic vocabulary of Christmas, you can never unsee it.

This lecture is part of a broader series on iconography: learning how to “read” images in art by understanding the symbols embedded within them. Christmas is a perfect case study because it brings together Christian theology, pagan survivals, medieval legend, Renaissance symbolism, and modern commercial invention in a single visual tradition.

### Noah’s Other Books

Noah is the author of more than 30 books, including best-sellers and a Pulitzer finalist. Explore them wherever you buy books or on [Noah’s Amazon page](#).

### Video Materials

Noah is a TV and radio presenter, and also writes for platforms like TED. You can see some of his work on fields related to art forgery, including a TED video about “The art forger who tricked the Nazis” and “Why is the Mona Lisa famous,” all written by Noah. Find them on YouTube or on Noah’s website, [www.noahcharney.com](http://www.noahcharney.com). Noah presented and wrote a BBC series, “China’s Stolen Treasures,” that is available for free [here](#). Noah teaches for The Great Courses, and his latest course, “Understanding Western Art,” was just nominated for a Peabody Award. You can watch the full, 25-lecture video course by getting The Great Courses Plus app or by downloading from Amazon.

### Future Courses and Lectures

Dr Charney teaches online for other venues besides the Smithsonian, including the National Gallery UK and Yale University. These courses are open to all. To keep abreast of Charney’s next online appearances, sign up for his newsletter [here](#). There is still space available for his winter online Yale course, “[Can You Solve This Painting?](#)”

### ARCA

To learn more about the research group on art crime that Noah founded, the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, visit [www.artcrimeresearch.org](http://www.artcrimeresearch.org). You can join the annual, summer-long Postgraduate Program in Art Crime and Cultural Heritage Protection, the world’s first academic program in the field; subscribe to *The Journal of Art Crime*, the first peer-reviewed academic journal in the field, and much more.

**Bonus Text:** An Essay on the “Darker Side” of Christmas

## **Dreaming of a Black Christmas: The Iconography of Santa Claus is Darker than You Think**

By Noah Charney

It's the most wonderful time of the year, right? I agree, but only at a distance. With "Home Alone" on in the background, twinkling lights on the tree, the smell of clove-studded oranges and eggnog, a fat guy in red pajamas wearing an itchy fake beard grumbling "ho-ho-ho" as he tries to entice children to sit on his lap...it's a winter wonderland, for sure. But not to burst anyone's Christmas bubble, but the details of the holiday are a good deal less jovial (but perhaps more interesting) than most realize.

Let's get this out of the way: Christmas long ago ceased to have anything to do with Jesus being born. Sure, we've got those Christmas carols, but Santa Claus is the main attraction, the holiday's protagonist. This is fair enough, historically, because there is just about a 1 in 365 chance that December 25<sup>th</sup> was the historical Jesus' actual birthday. There is no evidence in the Bible to suggest it. Early Christian leaders argued about when it should be celebrated. A document dated to 243 AD, excavated in North Africa, marks his birthday as March 28. Clement suggested November 18. Actually, December 25<sup>th</sup> is extremely unlikely to have been his birthday. There are a few reasons for this. Joseph and Mary were headed to Bethlehem because the Roman rulers of the region obliged all residents to participate in a census, and censuses were not called in winter, when travel was difficult and fewer people could make the journey to local municipalities where censuses were taken. Then we've got the Bible saying that shepherds were watching over their flocks the night of Jesus' birth. But late December nights are cold and the flocks and shepherds are unlikely to have been out then—fall is a more probably time, if we are to take the Bible as literal (which, as any scholar will tell you, is a dangerous idea). Saint Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was six months' pregnant when Mary became pregnant with Jesus. The Bible offers more information on John's birth. Luke 1:8-13 tells that John's father, Zacharias, a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, was engaging in rites at the temple that are linked to the period of June 13-19, when he returned home and Elizabeth got pregnant. Nine months later would be March, and if John was six months older than Jesus, then Jesus would have been born in September.

For the content of most nativity scenes, we do not have the Bible to thank, but rather Saint Birgitta of Sweden, a 14<sup>th</sup> century nun who wrote of her visions. It is her description of the Nativity scene that has been adapted by most Renaissance artists, and appears today in the countless crèches that abound the world over. It makes sense that a newborn would be swaddled and blanketed, but if you've ever seen the infant Jesus lying on the ground with rays of light spraying from his body, that's thanks to Saint Birgitta. This was particularly popular for Baroque painters, who enjoyed the drama of *chiaroscuro*: the play of light emerging from darkness, in which they used the glowing baby Jesus as the main internal light source of the painting. A blonde virgin? You can't fault a Swedish saint who has never been to Palestine for imagining a Swedish Mary. A single lit candle? Symbolic of the presence of God as the father of Jesus. The ox and the donkey are described not in the New Testament but in the Old (Isaiah 1:3 "The ox knoweth his owner, and the donkey his master's crib.") They were described by Saint Augustine as representing the Jews (the ox) and the pagans (the donkey) who would be freed from their burdens by Jesus' birth. They are present even when Mary is not. In fact, Mary was not standard in Nativity scenes until after the 5<sup>th</sup> century Council of Ephesus, in which it was determined that she should be included. You can occasionally

spot a little devil in a Nativity, Adoration of the Magi or Adoration of the Shepherds, such as the *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo van der Goes, which is the textbook example of a Christmas painting a la Saint Birgitta. The devil hovers above the ox and the donkey, to tempt them to remain with their own religions, rather than see Jesus as the way forward (and of course the Devil was already planning Jesus' demise, even as he was born).

The gifts of the Three Kings seem innocuous at first. But only at first. They are in fact extremely macabre things to give a newborn, as they are all associated with burial rites. Frankincense is scattered to mask the smell of a corpse's decay. Myrrh is an intoxicant, which was offered to those sentenced to crucifixion, essentially to make them stoned so as to suffer less. According to John 19:39, 100 pounds of "myrrh and aloes" were brought by Nicodemus to wrap Jesus' body before burial. It was even used by ancient Egyptians for embalming mummies. And gold coins were placed on the eyes of the dead, as ancient Greeks thought that these coins would be used to pay Charon to row the dead soul across the River Styx, into the afterlife, referred to as "Charon's obol." As I said once in the past, this is the equivalent of rocking up at a baby shower with gifts of a tombstone and a shovel. The theme of these gifts is no coincidence: theologically speaking, the only reason for Jesus' creation by God was to die, and in dying reverse Original Sin. So the original Christmas gifts are just a reminder of Jesus' *raison-d'être*.

So if Jesus is not the protagonist of Christmas, what's with this Santa Claus guy? Here in Slovenia, there are three Santa Clausian figures (which makes things very confusing for my daughters, trying to explain why three nearly-identical white-bearded, gift-bearing men show up within a few days of each other and have different names). On December 5 we have Sveti Miklavž, Saint Nicholas (Dec 6 is his feast day). The 3<sup>rd</sup> century Bishop of Myrna is the patron saint of children, which may explain why he is the gift-bringer (though he's also the patron saint of brewers, pharmacists and pawnbrokers). Among the legends surrounding him, during a famine an evil butcher supposedly murdered three children for meat and cured them in a barrel, to sell as ham. Saint Nicholas disapproved and brought them back to life. Yeah, I know...merry Christmas. A lighter story tells of his hearing that a poor old man felt compelled to prostitute his daughters, but Saint Nicholas entered the house by night and secretly placed bags of coins there, to save the girls from this fate. I guess that's a (very) rough equivalent to Santa placing gifts under your tree (the Christmas tree being a pagan Scandinavian tradition, in case you have any more bubbles that want bursting). Around December 15, we have Dedek Mraz, the Socialist Santa concocted around 1930 who would visit factories and bring gifts to children of the proletariat.

Then there is Bozicek, Santa Claus, whose iconography comes from...wait for it...Coca-Cola ads from 1930. An artist named Fred Mizen painted an ad featuring the world's largest soda fountain, at the time in the Famous Barr Co. department store in St. Louis. It showed a fat, red-suited, white-bearded Santa Claus drinking Coke from a glass bottle. This ad appeared in the very popular *Saturday Evening Post* in December 1930. The following year, the Coca-Cola company hired the D'Arcy Advertising Agency to develop a campaign inspired by Mizen's painting. They called upon artist Haddon Sundblom to produce the images, and it is his illustrations that gave the world the symbol of Christmas. Let's hope Jesus doesn't mind.