The red-suited Santa Claus who brings gifts to children around the world in a single night is a familiar and beloved figure in the twenty-first century. However, his roots go deep into prehistory, when a charitable god brought the gift of sunlight back to a dark wintery world, particularly in the cold northern hemisphere where the tradition traces back to the Norse Yule gods. Gift giving at mid-winter is also a millennia-old custom. The Romans, perhaps, celebrated the most enthusiastically, enjoying the week-long Saturnalia in mid-December, the feast of lights (Natalis Invictis) on December 25 when the winter solstice sun is at its weakest, and finally the Kalends during the first three days in January when more gifts were exchanged.

The Christian tradition included the visit of the Magi — popularly known as the Three Wise Men or the Three Kings, although the Bible does not say how many there were — bringing gifts of gold (royalty), frankincense (divinity), and myrrh (bitter death and sorrow) to the Christ Child. Many European Christmas traditions include a visit by the Three Kings, who bring gifts to children. One interesting variation is the Italian legend of Befana, an old woman who was asked for directions by the Magi but who was too busy with her housecleaning to pause and go to visit the Christ Child. Now she visits all houses where there are children and leaves gifts.

The most immediate predecessor of Santa Claus, however, is St. Nicholas, a fourth century Christian Bishop of Myra (in present-day Turkey). Although the St. Nicholas of legend may himself be a combination of several historical figures, the stories of his kindness and acts of charity have become a vital part of the Christmas tradition.

The best known of the St. Nicholas stories laid the foundation for several modern Christmas traditions. According to broad legend (the details vary), out of charity he once threw several small bags of gold down the chimney (or through the window) of a house where three young girls were facing a life of prostitution since they couldn't be married without dowries. One bag landed in a stocking (or a shoe) hung by the fire to dry. Another well-known story connecting him with children is his discovery of three children, murdered and pickled in a barrel of brine by a greedy innkeeper. Nicholas miraculously restores them to life and punishes the evildoer. Over the centuries he continued to be associated with kindness to children. It also is easy to see the connection between his full episcopalian bishop's robes of red and white vestments and the white fur-trimmed red suit of the modern-day Santa Claus.
United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 1972–1982

Scott 1415–1418 • 1969 • Antique Christmas Toys

Tin and Cast-Iron Locomotive
Scott 1415

Toy Horse on Wheels
Scott 1416

Mechanical Tricycle
Scott 1417

Doll Carriage • Scott 1418

Santa Claus
1972 • Scott 1472

Christmas Tree in Needlepoint • 1973
Scott 1508

Child on Hobby Horse & Christmas Tree • 1978
Scott 1769

Santa Claus Ornament • 1979
Scott 1800

Wreath, Toys on Windowsill • 1980
Scott 1843

Felt Teddy Bear with Gift on Sled • 1981 • Scott 1940

Children Decorating an Outdoor 1982 • Scott 2030
St. Nicholas first appeared on a stamp in 1951 (France Scott 657), where he is shown in an eighteenth-century print by Jean-Charles Didier bringing the three murdered children back to life. Other early stamps with the saint’s image include Liechtenstein Scott 267 and 433, Monaco Scott 161 and 268, and Turkey Scott 1191, which also shows the St. Nicholas Church at Myra.

St. Nicholas Day is celebrated December 6. On that day the saint arrives on his white horse to deliver gifts to good children and switches to punish bad children. Often he is accompanied by a dark figure known variously as Klaubauf, Krampus/Grampus, Bartel, Knecht Ruprecht, Zwarte Piet, or Pelznickel who carries out the punishments. A classic image of St. Nicholas on his horse can be found in the Netherlands Holiday Folklore issue of 1961 (Scott B358). Among the first stamps to commemorate St. Nicholas Day are Austria Scott B261, and Luxembourg Scott B186 and B189.

However, it was in America with its melting pot of cultures, religions, customs, and languages that the modern Santa Claus evolved. Although Christmas itself did not become a national holiday in the United States until the 1890s, when it was finally approved by the last of the state legislatures, the celebration of this sacred and festive day was an important occasion in early settlements, where people were homesick for traditions and family left behind. The exception was New England where the very concept of observing Christmas was so strongly disapproved of by the Puritans, who were attempting to cleanse church traditions, that celebrating the day was declared illegal and violators were subject to a fine. One of the early laws enacted by Puritans forbade local citizens, among other things, to “keep Christmas or saints days, make mince pie, play cards, or play on any instrument of music except the drum, trumpet and Jew’s harp.” The agricultural South, on the other hand, was more heavily settled by members of the Church of England and they celebrated well and heartily with feasting, visiting, music, and gift giving.

Nevertheless, by the 1800s Christmas celebrations were gradually becoming acceptable to even the strictest of the Protestant groups, and Sunday school pageants and presentations came to incorporate decorated trees, small gifts (especially candy), and secular recitations and songs. There were no Christmas carols in American-printed hymnals before 1830, but by the time of the Civil War some of the most popular of today’s carols had been written and were being sung: “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

But it was in New York State that the Santa Claus we know today took his final shape and form. In 1809, writing under the pseudonym “Diedrich Knickerbock,” Washington Irving published his fictional Knickerbocker’s History of New York, in which he retooled the St. Nicholas legend. In his version children hung stockings for the saint to fill (in Europe they usually left shoes filled with hay and a carrot or two for his horse). He also described St. Nicholas flying through the air and leaving his white horse and wagon parked on the roof while he dropped gifts down the chimney. Irving also originated the image of St. Nicholas “laying a finger aside of his nose.”

A few years later, in 1821, a small Christmas book titled The Children’s Friend: A New-Year’s Present, to Little Ones Five to Twelve included colored lithographs showing a sleigh pulled by a single reindeer and filled with presents for good children and switches for the naughty. The driver of the sleigh was a diminutive figure called “Sante
United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 1983–1992

Santa Claus Holding Gift
1983 • Scott 2064

Ornaments on a Tree
Branch • 1987 • Scott 2368

Sleigh Full of Wrapped Gifts • 1989 • Scott 2428

Santa Claus Holding His Sack • 1984 • Scott 2108

Christmas Tree (garland bands & “Greetings” in blue green) • 1990
Scott 2515

Santa Claus in Chimney
1991 • Scott 2579

Santa Claus Checking His List • 1991 • Scott 2582

Santa Claus with Present
1991 • Scott 2583

Santa Claus at Fireplace
1991 • Scott 2584

Santa Claus & Sleigh
1991 • Scott 2585

Victorian Christmas Toys • 1992 • Scott 2711–2714

Horse & Jockey • 2711
Fire Engine • 2712
Locomotive • 2713
Riverboat • 2714
Claus,” a name that appears to have been derived from a combination of “Sanct Herr Nicholaas” and the colloquial Dutch “Sinterklaas.” In the book, “Sante Claus” delivered his gifts, not on St. Nicholas Eve but on Christmas Eve.

In 1822 the Rev. Clement C. Moore wrote a light-hearted Christmas poem for his children, a copy of which a family friend, without authorization, offered for publication in the local paper. It appeared anonymously in the Troy Sentinel, December 23, the following year. (Moore finally acknowledged his authorship in 1837, but the poem was not printed under his name until 1844.). “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” (or “The Night Before Christmas,” as it became known in the twentieth century) put a stamp on the creation of Santa Claus that cannot be erased. He added more reindeer, for a total of eight, and gave them all names: “Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! Now, Prancer and Vixen! On, Comet! on Donder and Blitzen!” Moore’s description of a very secular Saint Nicholas is reported to have been based on the jovial Jan Duyckinck, caretaker of the Moore’s New York home: “He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf.”

Another element to the story was added in the 1840s. A German tradition that was particularly popular in Pennsylvania held variously that the Christ Child, or an angelic child spirit representing Him, visited homes on Christmas Eve with gifts for children, humbly traveling by mule or donkey. The Christkindel or Krist-Kringle morphed into the secular Kriss Kringle who appeared in two children’s books, Kriss Kringle’s Book (published by Thomas Cowperwaite & Co. in 1842) and Kriss Kringle’s Christmas Tree: A Holiday Present for Boys and Girls (published by E. Ferret & Co. in 1845) — both publishers were located in Philadelphia where the Pennsylvania German traditions were very strong. In Kriss Kringle’s Christmas Tree, for the first time the presents are hung on the tree rather than tucked into shoes or stockings. This became an extremely popular method of displaying small gifts, particularly before they were distributed in schools and churches.

The American holiday classic took on even stronger visual form with the publication of political cartoonist Thomas Nast’s 1863 drawings of Santa Claus in Harper’s Weekly, based on the descriptions found in Clement Moore’s poem and Washington Irving’s earlier work. Nast continued to draw Santa Claus for publication until 1886 and his work had a profound influence on the image we see in our mind’s eye today. The final touches were added by commercial artist Haddon Sundblom who in 1931 began a thirty-five year career illustrating a jolly Santa Claus enjoying a Coca Cola beverage at Christmas time.

A final element was added in 1939 by an advertising writer for Montgomery Ward Company. Robert L. May was asked to come up with a Christmas story the store could give away as a small booklet for children. Thus was the story of the ninth reindeer, Rudolph, born. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was published commercially in 1947 and shown in theaters as a short cartoon the following year. May’s brother-in-law, songwriter Johnny Marks, worked up a short, catchy song that was recorded by Gene Autry in 1949 and went on to become one of the best-selling American songs of all time.

By the 1950s the American version of Santa Claus was familiar around the world. It was not the United States, however, that was the first to honor this iconic Christmas symbol with a postage stamp. Cuba issued the first stamp celebrating Santa Claus (Scott 532–533) in 1954. Released in two values (2 centavos and 4 centavos), the stamp showed Santa’s face with the words “Navidad 1954–55” across the lower portion of his full beard.

The U.S. Post Office Department did not get around to issuing a Santa Claus stamp until 1972 (Scott 1472), and he has remained an irregular visitor to the annual Christmas issue ever since. Some of the other images associated with his
**United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 1993–1995**

Christmas Issue • 1993 • Scott 2790–2794

- Snowman • 2790
- Jack-in-the-Box Toy • 2791
- Red-Nosed Reindeer • 2792
- Toy Soldier Marching • 2794

Stocking Filled with Toys • 1994 • Scott 2872
- Santa Claus Holding Gift • 1994 • Scott 2873

Victorian Christmas Images • 1995 • Scott 3004–3007

- Santa Claus Entering Chimney • 3004
- Child Holding Jumping Jack Toy • 3005
- Child Holding Small Tree • 3006
- Santa Claus Working on Child’s Sled • 3007
story (children, toys, a decorated tree with gifts, reindeer, etc.) have appeared as well. A collection of Santa Claus-related stamps makes a colorful display and is a pleasure for the child in all of us to assemble.

Although there are a number of towns in the United States with a name reflecting the Christmas season, perhaps the earliest is the town of Santa Claus, Indiana, which was so-named by Swiss colonists in 1852. The story goes that as the settlers sat in church contemplating names for their new community, children began shouting “Santa Claus” and name stuck.

Postmarks from these various communities make popular collectibles and the local post offices receive sacks of holiday mail from around the country, forwarded to be postmarked “North Pole, New York,” “Noel, Missouri,” “Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,” “Christmas, Michigan,” “Christmas, Florida,” “North Pole, New York,” “North Pole, Alaska,” or “North Pole Branch, U.S. Post Office.”

First Day covers with Christmas cachets can form an attractive auxiliary part of a Santa stamp collection. Enthusiasts also look for first day covers with Christmas seals featuring Santa Claus. There are endless possibilities in creating a Santa Claus-related exhibit. This album is just the beginning.

Resources in the American Philatelic Research Library:

American Philatelic Society Affiliates:

First Day Cover for 1987 Christmas Seals.
United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 1996–2003

Family at Christmas • 1996 • 3108–3112

- Family at Fireplace with Wreath and Candles • 3108
- Family Decorating a Tree • 3109
- Children Dreaming of Santa Claus • 3110
- Mother and Child Holiday Shopping • 3111
- Father and Child Skating • 3112

19th Century Chromolithographs • 2001 • Scott 3541–3544

- Santa Holding Holly, Rocking Horse • 3541
- Santa Dressed in Blue • 3542
- Santa in Dark Fur-Trimmed Robe • 3543
- Santa with Holly Wreath on His Head • 3544

2003 • Scott 3821–3824 • Christmas Issue, 37-cent

- Reindeer with Pan Pipe • 3821
- Santa Claus with Drum • 3822
- Santa Claus with Trumpet • 3823
- Reindeer with Horn • 3824
United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 2004–2007

Santa Ornaments • 2004 • Scott 3883–3886

Purple Santa • 3883
Green Santa • 3884
Blue Santa • 3885
Red Santa • 3886

Christmas Cookies • 2005 • Scott 3949–3952

Santa Claus • 3949
Snowmen • 3950
Angel • 3951
Elves • 3952

Christmas Issue 2007 • Scott 4207–42010 •

Knit Reindeer 4207
Knit Christmas Tree • 4208
Knit Snowman 4209
Knit Teddy Bear 4210
United States Santa Claus and Santa-Related Stamps, 2008–2009

Nutcrackers • 2008 • Scott 4360–4363

Drummer • 4360
Santa Claus • 4361
King • 4362
Soldier • 4363

Gift Wrap Images • 2009 • Scott No. 4429–4431

Reindeer • 4429
Toy Soldier • 4432
Snowman • 4430
Gingerbread Man Cookie • 4431
There are many ways to enhance a thematic collection of Santa stamps: cachets, postmarks, postmarks, and stamps featuring toys, Christmas trees, stockings, reindeer, etc. But perhaps the most entertaining specialized collection that can be put together is one that shows how Santa Claus travels on Christmas Eve. Because the legend of Santa Claus is a compilation — a distillation, really — of many traditions, he can be found employing every imaginable form of transportation to make his rounds. In the tradition of St. Nicholas, he might ride a white horse (Canada Scott 1340); in the tradition of the Christkindel, he might ride a donkey (Anguilla Scott 1131). He might travel by a horse-drawn sleigh in the snow-covered north (Canada Scott 520), or by a wagon or cart in more temperate climes (Trinidad da Cunha 365). Island children might be visited by Santa in a speed boat (Cayman Islands Scott 841) or an outrigger canoe (Marshall Islands Scott 199).

Some of the most enchanting and creative stamps to be found are those drawn by children. Perhaps because of the close connection between children and Santa Claus, the postal services of many countries have used children’s art as the basis for their Christmas stamps. In a child’s eyes the magic of Christmas is without bounds: Santa might fly through the air on the back of a dove (Portugal Scott 1715) or travels in a flying saucer (Chile Scott 937); he might even appear riding on the back of a giant tortoise (Seychelles Scott 292). And of course, there is the traditional arrival on the rooftop by flying sleigh (Isle of Man Scott 726). One particularly lovely blue and white stamp from Finland (Scott 685) shows Santa driving his sleigh through a starry (or perhaps a snowy) night sky.

Of course, not all Santa stamps are created by children. The ubiquitous Disney stamps show Santa arriving by parachute (Gambia Scott 936) and by train (St. Vincent Scott 1128), in addition to the traditional sleigh and reindeer (Marshall Islands Scott 195). Other stamps show Santa on skis (Canada Scott 1628) or in a fire truck (Norfolk Island 422). When the automobile was a new and exciting invention, Santa Claus began delivering gifts by car (Chile Scott 1488b). One early picture postcard shows him parking an early jalopy, instead of a sleigh, on a snow-covered rooftop.

What follows is just the barest sampling of the variety of stamps showing the travels of Santa Claus around the world.
The Travels of Santa

Australia
Santa on Surfboard
1977 • Scott 669

Bahamas
Children’s art: “Santa Goes a-Sailing,” by Sabrina Seller
1983 • Scott 550

Canada
Santa on Skis
1996 • Scott 1628

Cayman Islands
Santa Arriving by Parasail
2001 • Scott 842

Christmas Island
Santa in Speedboat
1986 • Scott 189

Portugal
Children’s art: “Santa Flying on a Dove”
1987 • Scott 1715

Norfolk Island
Santa Distributing Presents by Fire Truck
1987 • Scott 422

Monaco
Santa in His Sleigh
1977 • Scott 1082

Marshall Islands
Se-tenant Strip Showing Santa Flying Over the Islands
1998 • Scott 195–199
SANTA CLAUS AND SANTA-RELATED STAMPS
THE AMERICAN PHILATELIC SOCIETY

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