



Sinterklaas history and traditions

Did you know that there are two bishops by the name of Nicholas? Both lived and died between 250 and 546 AD. The lesser known was Nicholas, Bishop of Pinora. St. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra, now in Turkey and called Demre. Pinora, Myra, and Patara were in Lycia, then known as Asia Minor.

St. Nicholas was born in 271 AD in Patara and died on December 6, 342 or 343. Recently, his original tomb was found by archeologists. His family was Christian and moderately wealthy. When he was only 9 years old, his parents died in an epidemic. Since the church took him in, he later gave all his wealth to the poor and became a priest. Eventually he was made the Bishop of Myra. There are many legends about his good works. The people loved him and he was regarded as a saint.

Around 1087 the Muslims captured Myra. Christian merchants took the bones of St. Nicholas to Bari, a seaport in southern Italy. Here they built a mausoleum for him. Bari then became the center for worship of St. Nicholas. For an unknown reason the Dutch later had the saint sailing to the Netherlands from Spain.

In the 12th and 13th centuries the Netherlands built

23 churches named for St. Nicholas. He became the patron saint of Amsterdam as well as several other European towns. Because he so often aided poor children and traveled a lot he became their patron saint too. Today he is also the patron saint of merchants. Guess why!

In the 14th century, the choirboys of St. Nicholas church were given money and a holiday on December 6th. Later monks teaching in convent schools would disguise themselves as Sinterklaas (an abbreviated form of Sint Nicolaas/St. Nicholas) and either reward or punish the students according to their behavior.

Also in the 14th century the convent schoolboys paraded through the streets during the Christmas season. One was dressed as a bishop. The others collected money for the church. Today in certain areas children, sometimes dressed as the magi, still collect food and money for the poor. Special songs are sung during this event. They also play a unique drum (called the foekpot or rommelpot) and usually some type of flute.

Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) originally was a Turkish orphan who became a helper or servant of Bishop Nicholas and traveled with him as his constant companion.



His dark features were a big contrast to the blond Dutch so they envisioned him as black. Another tradition attributes his blackness to soot from chimneys he has to climb down. (Coal dust is extremely hard to wash

off! There is more about chimneys later.)

In Medieval and Renaissance paintings Sint Nicolaas is shown with long white hair and beard, wearing a bishop's vestments (a mitre and red cloak over a white robe) and carrying a gold crosier (staff). On the other hand, Zwarte Piet is depicted with bright red lips and dark curly hair, wearing a gold earring and colorful clothes styled from the middle ages. His costume may vary a little from place to place except for the puffed hat with its long feather.

Sinterklaas always rides a Schimmel, a white or light grey horse. Zwarte Piet walks beside the horse (or sometimes rides another horse) and carries a bag of sweets and presents and perhaps a roede (rod) or switch (for whipping naughty children). In inclement weather they have been known to ride in a horse drawn carriage. Somehow through the ages Sinterklaas was thought to come from Spain, and he obviously modernized his ships from sails to steam. *I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In*, an old English carol, evolves to *Zie ginds komt de stoomboot* (*See, Yonder Comes the Steamboat*) for the Dutch.

Supposedly Sinterklaas departs Spain for the Netherlands a few days after Martinmas held on November 11th. He traditionally arrived on December 5th but now it is in mid-November. Today he has many helpers (about 20 Zwarte Pieten). The Mayor of Amsterdam and a delegation of dignitaries welcome him along with large crowds of people, usually with children. TV cameras broadcast the show live. During the parade the Zwarte Pieten throw pepernoten ('ginger snaps') to the crowds from large bags. Children are

told that, if they are bad, these empty bags will be used to carry them off to Spain. (Pepernoten are listed later under Sinterklaas Holiday Treats.) Every town has a reception for Sinterklaas with the Mayor and his delegation. Children who wonder at the sight of so many Sinterklazen are told that he could not possibly make the rounds without lots of help; so hulp-Sinterklazen (people who dress up like him to help) are necessary. This explanation sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Gifts are given on Strooiavond (St. Nicholas Eve or, literally, straw evening), the night of December 5th. This evening may also be called Pakjesavond (Parcels Evening). Sinterklaas usually rides his horse over the roof tops and Zwarte Piet goes down the chimney and leaves the gifts or a switch or lump of coal for bad children in the klompen (wooden shoes) left by the hearth.



Another version has Sinterklaas dropping the gifts down the chimney so that they miraculously land in the right place. The gifts dispensed by Sinterklaas or Zwarte Piet are usually various kinds of sweets. A third story has Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet knocking on the door with his bag of presents. Opening his large book, he calls out the name of each person who must then answer questions about his/her behavior throughout the year. Gifts go to the good and a switch or lump of coal to the bad. Sometimes, when the door is opened, Zwarte Piet will throw pepernoten onto a white sheet purposely laid on

the floor. The children sing Sinterklaas songs as they try to get as many cookies as possible. For home visits Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, under their disguises, look amazingly like the father and/or uncle or family friend. In all versions the children provide treats for the horse by putting straw, a carrot, and a lump of sugar in their klompen, and perhaps a bit of water in a pan too.

When adults exchange presents, it is done differently from what we normally do. They disguise the contents of the package and usually add a poem, serious or humorous. A small item might be inside several larger boxes with a verse for each. These poems must be read aloud to all in the room. There could even be a humorous gift wrapped beautifully with a poem on the card. This disguise and verse may have the recipient going several places in the house only to find another box with another verse. The last one contains the gift. Often the recipient is expected to guess what the present is before opening it. Sometimes the worst-wrapped box will contain the most expensive gift. I vividly recall this procedure in my family. One year we carefully wrapped up an old broom by the kitchen door and handed it out to my parents before giving them the nice present. We also often wrote amusing poems for the gifts. From personal experience I can say that it is both a challenge and lots of fun as everyone tries to guess what the gift will be. Until now, I didn't realize that this was a Dutch custom.

Sometime on December 6th, according to tradition, Sinterklaas secretly boards his steamboat and goes back to Spain. There he remains until the following year.

Sinterklaas feestdag lekkers (holiday sweets)

Some of the traditional treats eaten during this season are listed here. My three Dutch recipe books differ slightly on the details and names for the same item. Apparently the Dutch are very fond of gingerbread (lots of allspice with an occasional pinch of ginger) and almond paste. These ingredients are in many of the Sinterklaas recipes.

Pepernoten are the hard gingersnaps/gingerbread biscuits thrown by the Zwarte Pieten to the crowds or through the door onto a white sheet in private homes when they visit. The children sing Sinterklaas songs as they try to get as many as possible. (Pepernoot is a ginger nut or gingerbread nut. Peper is pepper and noten are musical notes. The name comes from the spicy/peppery ginger plus the round shape like music notes.)



Kerstkrans (Christmas wreath/circle) is a white bread molded into a wreath and decorated with white frosting plus red and green candied cherries plus perhaps apricots and candied fruit peels. To top it off they add a red ribbon and holly sprig, both of which are inedible.

Letterbanket (fancy letter cake), sometimes called Boterletters (butter letters), has a flakey dough similar to that of pie crusts wrapped around an almond paste filling. For added

zest there might be also be some grated lemon peel mixed with the almond paste.

Speculaaspoppen (hard, brown, spiced, doll-shaped cookies), also called Speulaas Koekjes (cookies), are traditional gingerbread-people cookies formed in wooden molds. When these molds are in the shape of Sint Nicolaas, the cookies are called Sinterklaaskoekjes (Sinterklaas cookies).

Suikerbeester (sugar beasts) are animal-shaped sugar cookies loved by children everywhere.

Taaitaai (literally, taai means tough or hard), a very hard cookie with anise flavoring, is molded into fancy doll shapes.

Besides pastries there are special candies. Instead of candy canes they give a Chocolate Initial (for the first name only) to each person. Borstplaat (fondant or fudge), Marsepein (marzipan: a confection made of almond paste and sugar) and Roomborstplaat (cream fondant or fudge) are three favorites. Like dough, these fondants and marzipan can be put into molds. When the molds are shaped like fruit or vegetables, a matching food coloring is used. There are three common flavorings – peppermint (with red and/or green coloring), coffee, and cocoa.

Sinterklaaslieder en kerstlieder (St. Nicholas songs and Christmas carols)

There are several Sinterklaas songs. Apparently he likes to hear children singing, so they sing for him both at the public appearances and at home. I am working on a music book, *Olde Dutch Christmas Songs,*

and Carols, with the original Dutch lyrics, a very literal English translation and other information about each piece. If you have copies of any old Dutch carols and Christmas songs in Dutch, please send them to me! My address and e-mail are in *Who's Who*.

Nu ik wens jullie een Zalig en Vrolijk Keerstfeest en Gelukkig Nieuwjaar! (Now I wish you all a blessed and merry Christmas and happy new year!)