

CHRISTMAS Resource Box

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

These notes are intended primarily for KS2. The notes are divided into three sections focussing on pre-visit preparation, using the resources in the Museum and post-visit follow up in the classroom.



Christmas is one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar. The objects and practices we associate with it evoke powerful images of the way we are supposed to celebrate this festive occasion. And yet many of the elements of a 'traditional' Christmas originated quite recently in the Victorian period; others are very ancient, dating from pre-Christian times. The Christmas cards in the V&A's extensive collection are decorated with a rich mix of symbols from all these traditions. This section describes how pupils can use the Christmas card collection to separate the strands of these traditions. Pupils are set the task of producing four cards each celebrating a different type of festival: Christmas described by St Matthew, Christmas described by St Luke, a pre-Christian festival and a Victorian Christmas. This activity is partly a historical one, in which pupils have to examine sources for evidence, and partly a design exercise.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

- Give pupils a copy of the 'Christmas checklist'. Discuss any other things that they can think of that appear on Christmas cards and add them to the list.
- Start by reading the version of the nativity story that appears in the Gospel Of St Matthew (Chapter 2, vs 1-14). If any items are mentioned that are not on the checklist, pupils should add them to the list. Read the story once again and ask pupils to record everything mentioned by putting ticks in the column headed 'St Matthew'.
- Now read the version of the nativity from the Gospel of St Luke (Chapter 2, vs 1-20). Repeat the process you followed for St Matthew's Gospel. On the first reading add new items to the checklist. On the second reading ask pupils to put ticks in the column headed 'St Luke' to record everything he mentioned. Compare the two columns. Discuss with pupils how this is all the information we have from the Bible about the Christmas story. Note the items on the checklist that have no ticks against them. Since these traditions were not mentioned in either of the Bible versions of the nativity story, they must have come from elsewhere.
- Prepare your pupils for their visit to the Print Room by telling them a little about the history of the Christmas card. The world's first printed Christmas card was published in 1843 by Henry Cole, first director of the Victoria and Albert Museum and organiser of the Great Exhibition. But the practice of sending cards at Christmas did not become established until the last part of the nineteenth century, when they often took the form of postcards.

Many of the V & A's Christmas cards come from the Victorian period and reflect Victorian customs. Christmas trees often appear on nineteenth-century cards. The practice of decorating fir trees originated in Germany, and was first recorded in England in 1800; it was popularised by Prince Albert in the 1850s. Santa Claus

is a relatively modern character who was better known in the United States than Britain until the late Victorian period. He is based on the traditional figure of St Nicholas, patron saint of children.

The practice of hanging up stockings to be filled with presents is another Victorian tradition. Food is an essential part of the Christmas festival; the nineteenth century was the time when eating goose and turkey became associated with Christmas, although mince pies go back to the Middle Ages. The Christmas cake as we know it, with marzipan and white icing, is another Victorian custom. Christmas crackers were invented in the 1840s.

IN THE PRINT ROOM

- Pupils should bring their Christmas checklists with them to the Museum. This is your pupils' opportunity to look at the way different artists have drawn the images associated with Christmas. Ask pupils to look on the cards for some of the people on their list. They should note what the figures are wearing, what they are doing, and particularly their expressions (often either joy or awe). What else can they find and should any more items be added to their list? Include anything in a picture that is part of the story of the birth of Jesus, such as candles and lanterns, the ox and the donkey, frankincense and myrrh in elaborate containers. If the material in the Print Room shows different versions of the same scene, point out to pupils any variations in approach to illustrating the same story.
- The main task for pupils in the Print Room is to draw a number of the symbols that are associated with Christmas, to remind them of the large number of these and to act as source material for their work in the classroom. Pupils are unlikely to find everything on the checklist, but they should draw as many as they can and tick the 'Drawn' column once they have done so.

BACK AT SCHOOL

- Discuss the range of symbols to be seen on the cards in the Print Room, those that came from the Bible and those that originated in Victorian times. Explain to pupils that some of the symbols that we associate with Christmas, like holly and ivy, were significant even before the Christian era. The Celts saw the evergreen holly as a winter companion, which gave strength to resist the spirits of the dead. To the Romans, holly was sacred to Saturn, and was used in his festival in December as a symbol of health and happiness. In Roman mythology, ivy was associated with revelry and Bacchus, the god of wine.
- Ask pupils to mark their charts to show the origin of each of the non-Biblical symbols. Once pupils are clear to which tradition each of the symbols on their checklist belong, they can start to produce pictures of Christmas scenes. Using their sketches, ask pupils to produce cards for each of the four traditions marked, using only the appropriate symbols. You may prefer to allocate a different task to different groups. Pupils could also be asked to produce a card showing how Christmas is represented today.