

## *The History of Saint Nicholas*

THE LEGEND OF SAINT NICHOLAS, who later would become Santa, is like an elaborate piece of embroidery with many intertwined threads, threads that start in the fourth century and wind their way through history to the present day, not only in Asia Minor and Europe, but also in North and South America.

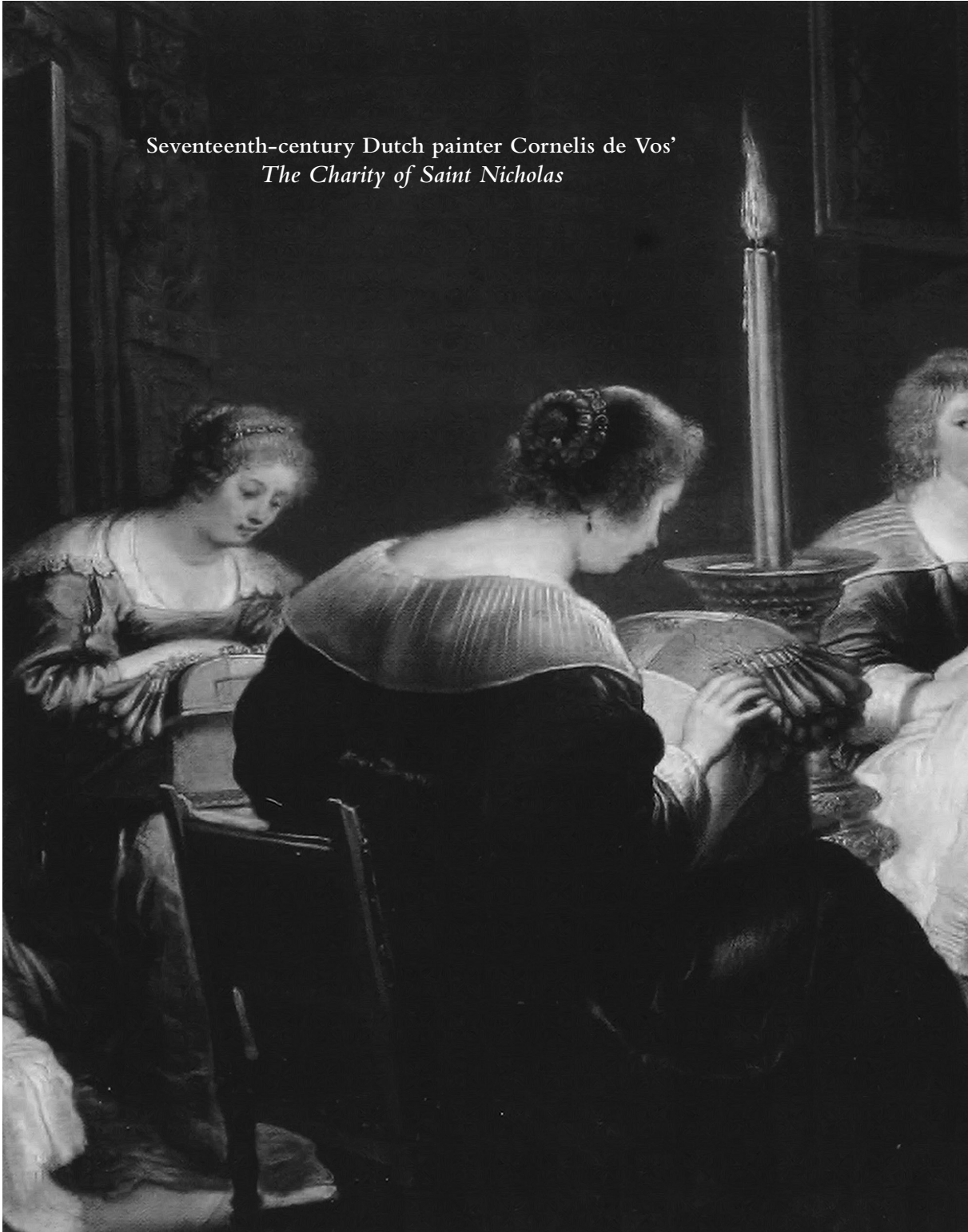
The man who became known as Saint Nicholas is believed to have been born in Patara in present-day Turkey. He became the bishop of nearby Myra, now called Demre, a town near the port of Andriake, on the south coast of Asia Minor between the islands of Rhodes and Cyprus. He is said to have died on December 6 and was declared a saint between 340 and 350. December 6 as “Nicholas Day” is part of the Roman calendar. Saints’ days are generally celebrated on the day of their death and rebirth in heaven. In Byzantine icons he is portrayed as a bishop dressed in the vestments of the Eastern Orthodox Church, wearing an omophorion, a band of brocade decorated with crosses worn about the neck and shoulders, symbolizing his spiritual and ecclesiastical authority (see opposite page). In Western portrayals he is clad as a Roman Catholic bishop with a red bishop’s garment, miter, and crozier.

Nicholas was the son of well-to-do parents. According to legend, he was pious from a very early age and was attributed with many miracles throughout his life. I must point out though, that Saint Nicholas’s first encomium or the description of the life of a saint, was written between 814 and 840, nearly 500 years after his death, which explains the confusion in the details of his life and historians’ reluctance to confirm some incidents or even to say with certainty that he was a single individual rather than a composite of several who went by the same name.

By the sixth century, word of his miracles had reached Greece, and in the ensuing centuries spread to Russia, southern Italy and western Europe. Tales of Saint Nicholas saving sailors can be found after the eighth century, and it was sailors who helped spread his fame as Nicholas churches appeared, ringing the seaports of the Mediterranean, Aegean and Adriatic seas.

The practice of substituting Christian saints for pagan gods and Christian festivals for pagan ones was encouraged by early church officials, and continued over time. According to Charles W. Jones in his wonderfully detailed book, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend*, this eastern saint is assumed to have taken the place of the Greek god Poseidon in the heart of pagans. However, instead of causing shipwrecks as Poseidon was wont to do, he saved sailors from them. Poseidon was also the god of horses and is purported to have ridden the “spume of the cresting wave, as if

Seventeenth-century Dutch painter Cornelis de Vos'  
*The Charity of Saint Nicholas*





it were a horse,” Jones writes. Perhaps this is where Saint Nicholas acquired his faithful steed that we see him ride in contemporary Dutch celebrations. Then again, some Dutch historians think the tale of Saint Nicholas and his horse come from Germanic folklore.

The Dutch tradition of Saint Nicholas bestowing gifts anonymously at night appears to hark back to his most famous miracle. It is said that a poor father had no dowries for his three daughters and agonized over the fact that they might end up unmarried, and perhaps, even prostitutes. After hearing the sad tale, Saint Nicholas delivered a bag of gold one night for the oldest daughter and then returned twice more with sacks of gold for the other daughters when they came of age. He is often portrayed with three gold balls, which represent the bags, as an attribute, or a visual way of identifying saints, and we see him pictured in this way in frescoes and sculptures. Seventeenth-century Dutch painter Cornelis de Vos (1584–1651) illustrated the entire miracle tale in *The Charity of Saint Nicholas* (see pages 4–5). He portrays it as if it happened in seventeenth-century Holland. On a dark night, Saint Nicholas is seen dropping a bag of gold through the window while the three young women are busy with their sewing and lace making and the father is reading. It was such a famous miracle that in medieval times it was often performed as a rhymed miracle play. Another famous story, later made into a miracle play, tells how Saint Nicholas saved three boys who had been killed, cut up, and their body parts salted away in a pickle barrel. He restored them to life and punished the evil killer. The boys in a barrel are also frequently seen in portrayals of Saint Nicholas, and even found on a Dutch seventeenth-century carved cake board (see page xiv, 22).

In other stories as well, Saint Nicholas is shown as a gift giver, whether of dowries or of life. I believe it is the purity of the anonymous gift—expecting nothing more in return than knowing one has done a good deed—that sustains his legend. However, there is a pedagogical quality to his giving, and perhaps another reason for his fame. It is illustrated by part of a song Dutch children sing every year. Such songs, which tell the stories of various miracles, date back as far as the eleventh century and were first written in Latin then later in the languages of the countries where Saint Nicholas day celebrations took place. The song’s lyrics, in part: *wie zoet is krijgt lekkers, wie stout is de roe*, in English translates into good [children] get sweets, naughty ones get switches for spanking. This sentiment is duplicated in Clement Moore’s famous poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*. The authorship of that poem is now disputed (see page 14).

Through art, song, poetry, and religion, the fame of Saint Nicholas continued to steadily spread. A Saint Nicholas church was founded in Kiev as early as 882. By 988, Christianity became the Russian state religion, and Saint Nicholas was often portrayed in icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church (see page 2).

Around the first millennium, pilgrimages, which would cancel the guilt of sins committed, became very popular. Myra was on the way to the Holy Land, and pilgrims would stop to worship at the tomb of Saint Nicholas. Pilgrims were inveterate collectors of relics, and one such relic might have been vials of the oily liquid that oozed from his tomb and were said to have healing qualities, as both Jones and Seal relate in their books.

On April 11, 1087, Saint Nicholas’s remains were taken or you could say stolen from the church in Myra by merchants from Bari. On May 9, 1807 (Translation Day in the



Roman Catholic Church calendar; translation means removal/stealing of bones), he was interred in Bari in the province of Apulia, Italy, where he still can be found in the Basilica Pope Urban II dedicated to him in 1089. Ever since then, May 9 is celebrated in Bari and a vial of the oily liquid is collected from the tomb as a sign of Saint Nicholas's continued protection of the city, as told by Jeremy Seal in *Nicholas: The Epic Journey from Saint to Santa Claus*. Also of note is that the city of Venice disputes that all of Saint Nicholas's bones are in Bari. Venetians claim that during the Crusades, pilgrims to Myra brought some of his remains to Venice, where they are housed in the Saint Nicholas Church on the Lido.

By 1089, Christianity and the legend of Saint Nicholas had spread throughout Europe from Russia, to Italy, France, England, Germany and the Low Countries of present-day Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. His fame was spread by returning Crusaders as well as troubadours, and he became the main character of medieval miracle plays and the subject of songs/hymns sung in the churches. From his earliest days, Nicholas was more of a secular personality than most other saints. He was never cloistered, and unlike many saints, he was not a martyr. He was seen as a worldly problem solver as in the dowry story, and appeared to have spent his life as a good Christian helping others. He therefore became a folk hero, an all-purpose intercessor, and the patron of a wide variety of professions from button makers, solicitors, sailors, and firemen, to merchants, florists, and tanners. Above all he was the patron saint of children, scholars, and schools. This is probably why he is generally referred to in Dutch as *Sinterklaas*, a more homey, folksy name, and a contraction of the Dutch words *Sint Heer Claes*, or Saint Squire Claes, which is short for Nikolaas, and not the more church-like *Sint Nikolaas*. This is perhaps also why his day was reduced in stature. According to the St. Nicholas Center, a very informative website, "the 1969 Roman Catholic calendar revision did not remove Saint Nicholas," but his feast day on December 6 is "not obligatory under Roman Catholic law."

Luther denounced the mediation of saints as contrary to the teachings of the Bible and taught his followers to pray directly to God. During the Reformation, as iconoclasts smashed paintings, sculptures, and stained glass windows depicting the saints in churches, the celebration of Saint Nicholas moved from the church to the home, where gift giving became central to the festivities. In the Dutch Republic during and after the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) with Spain, stringent laws and regulations were introduced against saints' feasts and other Roman Catholic commemorations. Historian Simon Schama described them in his book, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, as "acts of petty suppression." Schama told how the city of Delft banned the sale of gingerbread men in 1607 and that the magistrates of Amsterdam prohibited the sale of dolls and molded cookies, while a statute in the city of Arnhem of 1662 forbade children to put their shoe by the chimney and the baking of molded spice cookies. J. J. Schilstra, the foremost Dutch authority on cookie molds, holds how *Sinterklaas* images were carved to look like an ordinary tradesman in disguise. Yet the celebration of Saint Nicholas Day with its treats and gifts for children—*het Kinderfeest* or "Children's Feast"—endured, not only in the Netherlands but, as we will see, in the next chapter in New Netherland as well.



*The Feast of Saint Nicholas by Jan Steen*