

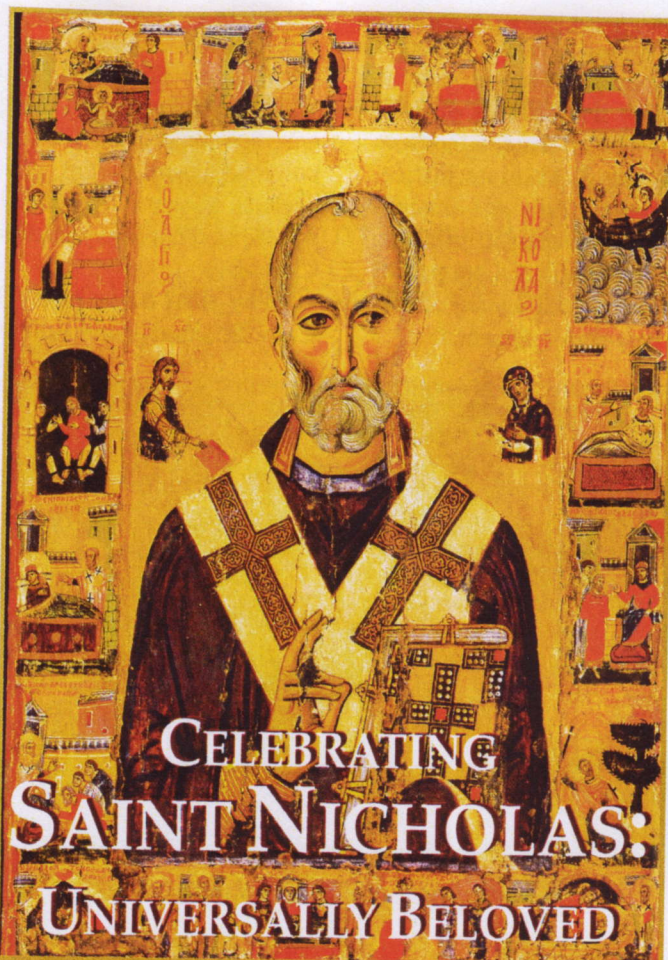
■ BY LUCY GORDAN

St. Nicholas, perhaps best-known by his Dutch name *Santa Claus*, has been universally revered by Christians of the East and West since the early Middle Ages, but the historical documentation of his life is limited to a few facts.

He was born during the third century into a wealthy, probably already Christian, Greek family in Panara, a city in the Roman colony of Lycia—today Antalya, Turkey. He was orphaned as a child. He became bishop of Myra, also in Turkey. He died of old age (unusual for prominent Christians in those times) on December 6, in either 333, 345 or 352 AD.

Other likelihoods of his biography are that he inherited a fishing fleet; that in his youth he made a pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine; that, shortly after his return, although a businessman, he became bishop of Myra; that he was cast into prison during the persecutions of Diocletian (303-305 AD); that he was released after the proclamation of Constantine (313), and that he could have been present at the Council of Nicea (325), although his attendance is not listed.

As early as the 5th century a shrine was built on his burial site in Myra, which soon became a very popular destination with pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean. In no time he became a cult figure; his image, depicted in frescoes, icons, miniatures, gold, and ivory, spread quickly throughout Christendom, particularly in the East.



A late 12th-century icon of St. Nicholas bordered by scenes of his life and his miracles on loan from St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai



The front of a panel door of a 13th-century traveling altar piece. It depicts St. John the Baptist and a very early version of St. Nicholas carrying his bishop's crook rather than a book

In the spring of 1087 AD, when Myra risked destruction by Islamic invaders, Italian merchants stole his remains and brought them to Bari, where they arrived on May 9 and are still revered in his namesake Romanesque basilica, built for this purpose. Ever since his translation, an oily, sweet-smelling, myrrh-like substance, known as *Manna di San Nicola*, which is highly valued for its medicinal powers, is said to flow from his bones. A report of the bones' measurements, based on photographs taken during the 1950s, was sent to a British forensic laboratory in 2005. The review of these data revealed that their owner was barely five feet tall, shorter than average even for his time, and had a broken nose.

The patron of bakers, barrel makers, bootblacks, brewers, brides, children, dockworkers, fishermen, Greece, merchants, pawnbrokers, perfumers, prisoners, Russia, sailors, spinsters and travelers, St. Nicholas is said to have devoted his life entirely to Christianity and philanthropy. He is said to have performed miracles even as an infant, when, on fast days and Fridays, he would refuse his mother's breast. Other miracles attributed to him during his lifetime: saving three young women from prostitution by providing them with dowries; cutting down a deadly cypress tree infested with devils; creating bread for the poor during a famine; and resurrecting three students whose murdered bodies had been pickled by a butcher. Since his death, over the centuries, it has been said



that he has often appeared to sailors to guide their storm-tossed vessels to safety, and to those unjustly imprisoned, to effect their release.

These many miracles are depicted in over 120 works of art on display until May 6 in Bari's Swabian Castle, begun by Roger II (c. 1095-1154) and adapted by Frederick II in 1233-9, in the exhibition "*San Nicola: Splendori d'Arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente*" or "*Saint Nicholas: The Artistic Splendors of East and West*."

Divided into seven sections in chronological sequence, the exhibition, which opened on December 6th, St. Nicholas Day, aims to illustrate the numerous artistic transformations of this enigmatic and transconfessional religious figure, who has been adapted to radically different traditions, contexts, and functions.

The first section is called "The Origins of the Figure of Saint Nicholas in Asia Minor From the 4th Through the 9th Centuries." In its first exhibition case is a series of coins dating back to the Emperor Gordianus III (238-244 AD). They indirectly recall the figure of Nicholas through representations of *Artemis Eleuthera*, a pagan goddess, whose cult the bishop-saint later opposed. He supposedly destroyed her temple with his bare hands.

Also on display here are the first figurative images, as yet uncoded, of Nicholas himself: on 7th-century lead seals and in a 7th-century trip-

tych together with Saints Peter, Paul, and John Chrysostom, which is on loan for the first time ever from 6th-century St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. Created in Egypt using encaustic techniques, in which paint is made of pigment mixed with beeswax and fixed with heat after its application, this is the world's oldest image of St. Nicholas.

The second section is called "The Spread of St. Nicholas Through Byzantium and Into the Eastern Mediterranean From the 9th to the 15th Centuries." Like the triptych, a series of ivory carvings, soapstone carvings, cameos, and golden trinkets, on loan from all over the world, are all on display here for the first time. They are a clear demonstration of how rapidly the image of Nicholas became established within the artistic realms and religious traditions of Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean, and are indicative of the saint's growing and immense popularity. In the Eastern Church the number of images of St. Nicholas is second only to the number of those of the Madonna.

The star items of this section, however, and also of the entire exhibit, are seven additional icons of the saint from the Monastery of St. Catherine's. Founded by the Emperor Justinian, and today the smallest diocese and the oldest monastery in continuous use in the world, St. Catherine's is located on the slopes of Mount Sinai, where the high altitude (1500 meters above sea level), dry climate, and fortified walls have protected and preserved these works in remarkably good condition. Dating from the 10th to the 15th centuries,



The monumental panel painting of the Annunciation with St. Gregory the Enlightener, St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great, and St. Nicholas, on loan from the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia for the first time. Below: The Monastery of St. Catherine's today.





## OF BOOKS, ART AND PEOPLE

these half-figure images of the saint painted on wooden panels by sophisticated painters from Constantinople, using Byzantine layers of dazzling gold, were intended to be the object of both public and private devotion. Moreover, some having escaped unscathed from the iconoclastic controversy, a movement in the 9th century which held that icons should no longer be revered but destroyed, they record a gradual evolution of Nicholas's image – he gets balder and balder over time, considered a sign of wisdom – into one that is becoming universally recognizable. In the earlier icons, hatless, he holds a book in his left hand and blesses with his right. In the 13th-century icon, he wears the bishop's miter and carries a bishop's crook, but no book – as he continued to be depicted in Europe over the centuries.

Because of the rarity of these icons, which have never before left St. Catherine's, and their fragility, it was necessary for the organizers of the exhibit to create the same



A 7th-century seal showing St. Nicholas

Russia had towards the bishop of Myra, who quickly became the country's patron saint. These images, such as the thaumaturgic icons of Zarajskand and Velikoretsk, were considered miraculous in Russia because they had manifested the saint's power of protection over individual communities. Several works here depict the saint at the center bordered by scenes of his life and miracles.

The fourth section is "The Translation of the Saint's Body and His New Image in Bari From the 11th to the 18th Centuries." The most important work here is a very ornate gold-plated silver votive icon for private devotions given to the basilica in 1327 by the Serbian King Stephan Uros Decanskij, which ever since has been considered the saint's "true effigy." This ex-voto image, which is still in the basilica today, closely resembling the earlier oriental models, played a fundamental role in the development of the saint's iconography in Puglia, and is frequently reproduced. According to legend,



Fra Angelico's *Miracles of the Grain and of the Tempest*, on loan from the Vatican Museums, is the exhibit's logo

extremely dry climatic conditions of the Sinai desert inside the exhibition cases. They were accompanied to Bari by a delegation of monks headed by S.E.R. Damianòs, the abbot of St. Catherine's and archbishop of Sinai, Faran, and Raithou, as well as a delegation of officials from the Egyptian ministry of culture.

The third section is "St. Nicholas, the Saint and Protector of All Russia." Between the 9th and the 11th centuries the image of Nicholas extended from Byzantium into Russia, where it took firm root. A group of works on loan from the Tret'jakov Gallery in Moscow and two panels which, although painted in Russia, today are housed in the Palazzo Leone Montanari in Vicenza, are proof of the vast geographic extent of the saint's cult and the profound veneration

Uros Decanskij had been blinded by his father; his sight was miraculously restored after St. Nicholas appeared to him in a dream. Only one of the many gifts the medieval kings of Serbia gave to Bari, but only one of two to have survived, it attests to the very strong bond between the Serbian court and this basilica.

The fifth section, "St. Nicholas Along the Pilgrim and Sailing Routes of the Mediterranean," underscores his special relationship with the sea and continues to follow the diffusion of the image of St. Nicholas in the major ports of the Mediterranean; from Puglia to the Middle East, Cyprus and eventually Catalonia. The outstanding work here is the monumental panel painting on loan from the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, Cyprus. Commissioned by a knight of the Cru-





The Basilica of San Nicola in Bari today

sades and his family for a Greek church, this panel incorporates elements of both Eastern and Western influence, a testimony to Nicholas's universality.

After our voyage crisscrossing the Mediterranean, the sixth section, "The Image of Saint Nicholas in Western Tradition from the 13th Through the 18th Centuries," concerns the spread of veneration to St. Nicholas in France, Flanders, Germany, Austria, and Italy. The highlight here is a splendidly embroidered 13th-century casula on loan from the Museum of Decorative Arts in Vienna. It depicts scenes of the saint's life and his miracles.

The last section, "St. Nicholas in Popular European Imagery from the 17th to the 20th Centuries," traces the transformation of Nicholas from a saint to a figure of folklore via his role as the protector of children and the bearer of gifts to children on the eve of St. Nicholas's Day.

This transformation, which began in Northern Europe, can first be seen here in the two 16th-century paintings by Dutch artists, Jan Steen and Richard Brakenburg, which show St. Nicholas entering houses and bearing gifts for the children, but accompanied by a diabolic and beast-like figure.

The works which follow — masks, engravings, and illustrations in children's books — are a brief reflection on the complex relationship that has emerged between the popular representation of St. Nicholas and the folkloristic figure known as *Weihnachtsmann* or the



"The Feast of St. Nicholas" by Jan Steen



Andy Warhol's "Santa Claus"

"Christmas Man" in Germany, "Father Christmas" and "Santa Claus" in Great Britain and the United States, and "*Ded Moroz*" or "Father Frost" who is part of Slavic (mainly Russian) 20th-century folklore.

However, while these three characters and the saint share the role of gift bearer, the same name Nicholas and the same physical appearance, the sources of their iconography are different.

The wild beast-man was widely used in the late Middle Ages and the old man with a long beard is the allegorical representation of winter. The last painting is *Myths* by Andy Warhol, in which Santa Claus appears together with other figures of the post-modern age, a sign of the new and distinct symbolic horizon.

The exhibition opened on Nicholas's December 6th universal feast day, and it will close the day before Bari's own special *Festa di San Nicola*, which runs from May 7-9. On May 8, the relics of the saint are taken out to sea in a procession of boats that passes in front of the city to commemorate the arrival of the relics here more than 1,000 years ago.

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