

Sinterklaas - Dutch Ancestor of Santa Claus



Sinterklaas parade in front of St. Nikolaaskerk, Amsterdam. Illustration from Panorama, 1958 St Nicholas Center Collection.

On a Sunday in the middle of November, St. Nicholas, known as Sinterklaas in the Netherlands, arrives in Amsterdam. Around 11:30 am the steamboat from Spain docks by the Central Train Station across from Sint Nikolaaskerk. Deafening salutes and ringing church bells fill the air, as the mayor welcomes the good saint before he mounts his white (or gray) horse.

The fun begins at noon with a big parade: Sinterklaas accompanied by many Zwarte Pieten, brass bands, beautiful floats, officials in cars, and colorful groups of jesters, cycling clowns, and more. Thousands of pounds of sweets and pepernoten have been put in burlap sacks for the acrobatic Piets to throw to the crowds lining the streets. The parade winds along the Damrak to the Rembrandtplein coming to an end at the Leidesplein. Here, around 2:15 pm, from the balcony of the city theatre, the Stadsschouwburg, Sinterklaas addresses crowds of children and their parents.

Thus begins "Sinterklaas Season" when Sinterklaas and his helpers travel around the country, visiting hospitals, schools, shops, restaurants, and even homes during the three weeks before the main Sinterklaas celebration. Sint and his Piets seem to be everywhere at once, asking about children's behavior and listening through chimneys. The children leave their shoes out with carrots and hay for the horse. In exchange the Piets put candy or a small gift in the shoes to be found in the morning.

The chamber of commerce began the now-traditional mid-November arrival in Amsterdam in the 1930s. The procession was intended to begin the shopping season in the weeks before Sinterklaas' gift-giving day.

Zwarte Piet



The Dutch character Zwarte Piet has developed and changed over time. Here is a look at some of those changes and the current controversy over this figure.

Jan Schenkman's book, *Sint Nicolaas en Zijn Knecht* [Saint Nicholas and his Servant], (1850), has been credited with establishing and bringing uniformity to Dutch Sinterklaas traditions. The book reflected then-familiar elements, such as riding a horse, giving gifts through chimneys and coming from Spain. It introduced bringing Sinterklaas on a steamer and, perhaps most significantly, accompanied by one black-skinned servant, commonly interpreted to be a Moor. This servant did not have a name. Rhymes from the book are still sung as popular Sinterklaas songs, such as *Zie ginds komt de stoomboot*.

The book fit well into the times with its strongly didactic emphasis. Sint Nicolaas interrogated children about their behavior and religious catechism. Naughty children were punished with switches and even carried away by the servant in a large jute sack.

Every holiday season, hundreds of white Dutch citizens dress up as Sinterklaas' helpers by blackening their faces, reddening their lips donning an afro wig, and wearing bright, colorful costumes with gold "creole" earrings. Scores of people living in the Netherlands, particularly those of African descent, are raising awareness about minstrel history, racist imagery and stereotypes associated with and promoted by the Zwarte Piet tradition. There are others, who have celebrated the tradition for many generations, who see nothing wrong with the celebration and think that protestors are blowing things out of proportion. **BLACK PETE, ZWARTE PIET** explores the controversial tradition of blackface in the Netherlands associated with Sinterklaas by following citizens who are both fighting against and upholding the tradition. Are the Dutch racist or are they just having fun?

[Source - <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/amsterdam-arrival/>]