

Village Voice

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Roman Holiday

As an old carol reminds us, Christmas is “the most wonderful time of the year.” In ancient Rome, the weeklong festival of Saturnalia starting on December 17 was just as popular. The famed Roman poet Catullus went so far as to say that Saturnalia offered “the best of days.”

Saturn was the Roman god of agriculture, seed, sowing, and time. Saturnalia began as a farmer’s holiday to mark the end of the autumn planting season. Over time, the holiday evolved into a widely celebrated festival and moved later into the season, eventually coinciding with the winter solstice. The Temple of Saturn in Rome was the best place to celebrate Saturnalia. Rituals were performed to honor Saturn and ensure a good harvest. Some records indicate that the hollow statue of Saturn was filled to the brim with olive oil. The statue’s feet were bound with woolen ties, which were loosened on Saturnalia to symbolically free the god.



Romans also freed themselves. Slaves were permitted to wear the *pileus*, the red felt cap denoting freedom. Businesses and courts were closed. Banquets and feasts were held throughout the week, and gifts of candles were exchanged so they could be offered at the Temple of Saturn. Evergreen boughs were used as decorations, and tin ornaments were hung from trees and shrubs. Revelers wandered from door to door singing songs. Saturnalia was such a raucous affair that the author Pliny the Younger built a soundproof room to shield him from the noisy crowds.

Many cherished Christmas traditions were originally part of Saturnalia: gift-giving, decorating with evergreen boughs, lighting candles, and door-to-door caroling. Emperor Constantine may have converted to Christianity in AD 312, but Saturnalia celebrations continued into the next century. Slowly, as Christianity became the dominant religion, the traditions associated with Saturnalia were celebrated on Christmas Day, December 25, a date chosen nine months after Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary on March 25.

December Birthdays

In astrology, those born from December 1–21 are Archers of Sagittarius. The Archers are the travelers of the zodiac, curious and energetic, with open minds craving new experiences and challenges. Those born from December 22–31 are Capricorn’s Goats. Like goats that perch on mountain crags, Capricorns are masters of self-control and responsibility. Intense focus and fortitude help them reach their goals.

Bette Midler (entertainer) – Dec. 1, 1945
 Lucy Liu (actress) – Dec. 2, 1968
 Sammy Davis Jr. (entertainer) – Dec. 8, 1925
 Raven Symone (actress) – Dec. 10, 1985
 Frank Sinatra (entertainer) – Dec. 12, 1915
 Jamie Foxx (actor) – Dec. 13, 1967
 Beethoven (composer) – c. Dec. 16, 1770
 Cicely Tyson (actress) – Dec. 18, 1924
 Samuel L. Jackson (actor) – Dec. 21, 1948
 Clara Barton (nurse) – Dec. 25, 1821
 John Legend (musician) – Dec. 28, 1978
 LeBron James (athlete) – Dec. 30, 1984

Celebrating December

Bingo’s Birthday Month

Universal Human Rights Month

Hanukkah Continues *December 1–6*

Saint Nicholas Day *December 6*

Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day *December 7*

Poinsettia Day *December 12*

Yaldā *December 21*

Christmas *December 25*

Kwanzaa *December 26–January 1*

Boxing Day *December 26*

New Year’s Eve *December 31*

December Is a Circus

Charles Ringling, born on December 2, 1863, was one of seven Ringling brothers to operate the Ringling Bros. Circus, a traveling act that became the largest and most famous circus in the world by 1930.

Four of the seven Ringling brothers were born in Iowa. It was there that they saw a circus unloaded off the back of a steamboat, a scene that inspired them to develop their own traveling act. In 1872, the family moved to Wisconsin, a state renowned as an overwintering destination for the nation’s circuses. Perhaps the move was destiny. The Ringlings showcased their variety show across the state, performing musical numbers, skits, and juggling routines. They used their earnings to purchase suits and top hats, and later added a donkey, Shetland pony, and a bear to their act. By 1887, Charles oversaw the production of a massive show starring all seven Ringling brothers and various exotic animals such as tigers, elephants, and camels. He called the act *Ringling Bros. United Monster Shows, Great Double Circus, Royal European Menagerie, Museum, Caravan, and Congress of Trained Animals*.

The Ringling Bros. eventually caught the attention of the famous Barnum & Bailey Circus. The two companies agreed to avoid direct competition by splitting the U.S. into territories, but after the death of James Bailey in 1906, Ringling Bros. purchased the Barnum & Bailey Circus to become the largest circus in the world and the self-proclaimed “Greatest Show on Earth.”

The “Greatest Show” would not be great forever. The public would lose their taste for the traveling circus and its exotic animals. In 2017, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus performed its final show. Yet the end of the Ringling Bros. did not mean the end of circuses altogether. Other acts such as Cirque du Soleil and Circus Vargas continue to entertain audiences across the globe, showcasing performers who demonstrate feats of human strength, balance, and flexibility. Audiences, it seems, still crave the art and spectacle of the circus.

Betty Lewis 5th

Maddie Adams 5th

Wanda Mason 5th

Debra Burnette 8th

Muriel Smith 11th

Bruce King 13th

Calvin Bell 18th

Terry Coleman 18th

Diane Appling 23rd

Tiajuana Richardson 25th

Larnett Perkins 30th

From Saint to Santa

Illustrator Thomas Nast has been called the “Father of the American Cartoon” for the illustrations he featured in *Harper’s Weekly* magazine in the 19th century. It was Nast who first used a donkey and elephant to symbolize America’s political parties. He fought corruption with scathing political cartoons. But Nast’s most enduring contribution to popular culture might be his depictions of Santa Claus as a jolly, fat man from the North Pole dressed in red and white.

Long before he was Santa Claus, he was Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, a fourth-century holy man renowned for the miracle of resurrecting three young boys killed by a butcher. For this remarkable feat, Saint Nicholas became the patron saint of children. Over the centuries, veneration of Saint Nicholas would spread. The Dutch called him Sinterklaas, and when the Dutch set sail for the New World in the 17th century, they brought Sinterklaas with them.

Sinterklaas, or Santa Claus, and Christmas, were well-established in America by the 1800s. But in December of 1823, Clement Clark Moore published his poem *’Twas the Night Before Christmas*, and first described Santa Claus not as an austere bishop, but “chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf.” Charles Dickens then published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, transforming Christmas from a religious holiday into a popular and commercial extravaganza. By January of 1863, with the United States plunged into Civil War, Thomas Nast had plenty of inspiration for his first cartoon depicting Santa Claus.



Nast’s first depictions of Santa portray him not just as a jolly old elf but as an ally of the Union Army, and he used his own long beard as inspiration for Santa’s flowing white one. Over the next 23 years, Nast would make 33 illustrations of Santa, none more influential than his 1881 image of “Merry Old Santa Claus,” complete with a white beard, rosy cheeks, red suit, and pack full of toys. This image, more than any other, has made Santa Claus who he is today.

The Silent Treatment

On December 20, 1980, the Miami Dolphins and New York Jets played a rather meaningless football game at the end of the regular season. Neither team had any hopes of making the playoffs, but the game’s broadcaster, NBC, used the game to conduct a national experiment.

NBC called it the “Announcerless Game.” They wanted the game to speak for itself in all its hard-crunching, play-calling, endzone celebrating glory. For producers, it proved a technical challenge. Play needed to be covered by a wide variety of camera angles and sensitive microphones, so that viewers believed they were in the game. Unfortunately, many of the sounds were muffled by the grass on the field, the shape of the stadium, and the background crowd noise. Despite all the frantic hard work of the producers—changing cameras, zooming in on quarterbacks, all attempts to heighten visual drama—television viewers were watching a silent movie. It turns out that announcers are a vital ingredient to any broadcast. An “announcerless game” has never been attempted since.

Bah, Humbug!

Maybe it’s the long lines at shopping centers, or maybe it’s the incessant drone of holiday music, but some people just don’t enjoy the holiday season. Luckily, December 21 is Humbug Day, a day to unapologetically embrace your inner Scrooge.



No one knows where the word *humbug* came from. Some think it came into use during the 18th century as the word *Hamburg* during a time when England was flooded with counterfeit coins from that German city. Others think that it comes from a humming bug, something small, but incredibly irritating. Either way, the word denotes something that is a hoax or nonsense. When Scrooge utters, “Bah! Humbug,” he is declaring Christmas to be a fraud.

Comforting Thoughts

The Danes have the perfect antidote for the long, dark nights of December—hygge. Pronounced *HOO-guh*, hygge has been described as everything from a lifestyle choice to the very essence of the Danish soul. Simply put, hygge is coziness, but it is far more than that.



The word *hygge* comes from the old Norwegian word *hugga*, roughly translated to mean “to comfort” or “well-being.” It was used to describe refuge or shelter from the harsh Arctic elements. These days, hygge is about creating a warm atmosphere where you, your friends, and your family can enjoy coziness and happiness. Put on your most comfortable clothes. Enjoy the flickering glow of candlelight. Prepare some good homecooked food and eat it with your fingers if you want to. Pour a cup of tea and snuggle up under your favorite blanket to read a good book. All these things are hygge.

Waxing Poetic



Marie Tussaud, born on December 2, 1761, is best known for the many wax museums around the world that bear her name, but in the late 18th century, she was one of the world’s most famous artists. Tussaud learned the art of wax modeling from Philippe Curtius, a doctor whose house was cleaned by Tussaud’s mother. Tussaud showed exceptional talent in the art of waxworking. Her uncanny models of the author Voltaire, the philosopher Rousseau, and American patriot Benjamin Franklin caught the eye of the French royal court, but her associations with the French royals would put her in danger during the French Revolution. In 1802, Tussaud left France for England, where she became a household name. In an era before photographs, Tussaud’s waxwork figures of famous people satisfied a public craving. In 1835, she opened a museum in London, and it has drawn visitors ever since.

The Great Debate

Canada’s Great Flag Debate officially began on June 15, 1964, when Prime Minister Lester Pearson proposed a new design for the flag of Canada. The de facto flag of Canada was known as the Red Ensign, a red flag bearing the United Kingdom’s Union Jack in the upper left corner. Sometimes the flag bore a coat of arms in its center; other times it was a maple leaf. None of these variations appealed to Pearson, who felt the country needed a new flag for a “new Canada,” one that represented all Canadians, not just those of British descent. Weighing heavily upon Pearson’s mind was Quebec and rumors that the French-speaking province sought independence from Canada.

The Great Flag Debate sharply divided the Canadian government and caused acrimony amongst Canadians across the country for six months. Over 3,500 designs were submitted, but on December 15, 1964, the design proposed by Col. George Stanley was accepted. Canadians have sung “O Canada” to the two red bars flanking a red maple leaf ever since.

It’s a Long Shot

The first Tuesday in December brings World Trick Shot Day, a holiday started by the Harlem Globetrotters, those basketball wizards renowned for making impossible shots look easy. Ordinary people with a basketball hoop and a ball are encouraged to amaze their friends by making trick shots of their own.



If you need inspiration, look to the Globetrotters. Each year on Trick Shot Day, they perform an impossible shot. In 2019, Globetrotter star Hammer Harrison performed the world’s highest slam dunk by skydiving from 13,000 feet and slamming the ball home. Share your trick shot on social media, and the Globetrotters might take notice. You could win tickets to a Globetrotters game.