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From Saint Nicholas to Santa Claus

6 Nov. 2021 – 13 Feb. 2022

O come all ye faithful to the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel (Toy Worlds Museum Basle): every year, in the Advent season, the museum spruces itself up with Christmassy display windows, a redesigned shop and a glittering Christmas show. The 2021 exhibition puts the spotlight on Saint Nicholas and his evolution into characters such as Santa Claus.

The exhibition presents Saint Nicholas in various shapes and hues. Some of his clothes are reminiscent of his early days as bishop of Myra; sometimes he is dressed in a green, brown or blue coat trimmed with white fur, as befits *Ded Moroz* in Russia. The show features Victorian Christmas decoration with Santas arriving in hot-air balloons or zeppelins, as well as candy containers full of sweet secrets. Our young visitors are invited to record a poem for Saint Nicholas (or *père Noël*, *Weihnachtsmann*, *Santa* ...) and make it a part of the exhibition. They will get a colouring and puzzle book. On 6 December, *Santiglaus* himself pays a visit to our young visitors!

The exhibition is trilingual (German, English, French) and barrier-free. It opens on 6 November 2021, one month before St Nicholas' Day, and closes on 13 February 2022. The temporal proximity to Valentine's Day is not a coincidence, since Saint Nicholas is also considered the patron saint of lovers.

The big, old, white-bearded man in a red coat has seen 1500 years of worship, cutesy kitsch, relentless commercialisation, and appropriation for educational purposes. He is known by different names across the globe (*Santiglaus*, *Sinterklaas*, *Santa Claus*, *père Noël*, ...) and rewards good children with presents, naughty ones with the rod.

The beginning of a tradition

Customs surrounding Santa have a long tradition, which grew from different elements and was subject to change over time. It started with Saint Nicholas, a combination of two historical figures, bishops Nicholas of Myra (4th century) and Nicholas of Sion (6th century), both of whom lived in what is now Turkey. According to legend, Saint Nicholas performed many miracles: he pacified a storm, brought the dead to life, and protected women from prostitution. He has been venerated in Europe as a patron saint of children since medieval times.

Nicholas gets replaced

Until the Reformation in the 16th century, it was Nicholas who brought the presents, but the new Protestantism rejected the veneration of saints. In 1535, it was still Nicholas who brought presents to Martin Luther's children. Ten years later, Luther's outgoings for the "holy Christ" were noted in the accounts. From Christ emerged the Christ Child (*Christkind*), who replaced Nicholas as the gift-

bringer. In the 19th century, Nicholas returned as a bringer of gifts, albeit in a secular shape. As early as 1820, the Grimm brothers' German dictionary described *Weihnachtsmann*, which in some places was synonymous with the Christ Child, as a "word without history". August Hoffmann von Fallersleben's song "Tomorrow Weihnachtsmann is coming" indicates that *Weihnachtsmann* was bringing the gifts in 1835.

Saint Nicholas emigrates

Sinterklaas arrived in America with Dutch emigrants in the 18th century. Far from home, he lost his religious roots and became Santa Claus, who had hardly anything in common with the bishop of Myra. The image of the jolly man in a red coat spread in the 19th century, long before Coca-Cola started in 1931 to use him for annual Christmas campaigns. He returned to Europe with a big belly, reindeer, and a new name.

Today, numerous traditions and modern images coexist: the faithful venerate Saint Nicholas, while the advertising industry favours Santa Claus – or *Weihnachtsmann*, in the German-speaking part of the world – because he makes the tills ring. It seems impossible today to even imagine the pre-Christmas season without Santa. Bishop Nicholas of Myra would no doubt be surprised to see what has become of him.

A bagful of Christmas events

Workshop

27/28 November 2021

4/5 & 11/12 December 2021

1:30–5:30 pm

Decorate sweet gifts from *Santiglaus* in the Christmas bakery!

***Santiglaus* in Basel**

Thursday, 18 November 2021, 7 pm

Gottfried Keller's lecture on the historical figure of Saint Nicholas and his tradition in Basel.

Admission: CHF 7.–

Venue: Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel

Christmas cinema

Sunday, 28 November 2021, 11 am

The Christmas classic "Drei Haselnüsse für Aschenbrödel" on the big screen. (in German)

Admission: free tickets can be obtained at the cinema upon presentation of a ticket from the museum

Location: Stadtkino Basel

A visit from *Santiglaus*

Monday, 6 December 2021, 1–5 pm

Saint Nicholas pops in on 6 December. He can't wait for your poems and has a small gift for everyone.

Opening hours of the Spielzeug Welten Museum (incl. Shop and Restaurant)

January to November: Tue. to Sun. 10 am–6 pm

December: daily 10 am–6 pm

Opening hours on bank holidays:

24 December 2021: 10 am–4 pm

25 & 26 December 2021: closed

31 December 2021: 10 am–4 pm

1 January 2022: closed

Admission

CHF 7.–/5.–

Children up to 16 years of age are free when accompanied by an adult.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The building is accessible by wheelchair.

The Swiss Museum Pass and the Museum-PASS are valid for the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel.

Further information

Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel, Sibille Arnold, curator and director of Spielzeug Welten Museum

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Background information / high resolution images online at: www.swmb.museum
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