

Will the Real Santa Claus please stand up -the Transformation of Saint Nicholas from Byzantium to Bari and Beyond - Janet Robson BA, MA, PhD



Who is Santa Claus? The familiar image of the jolly fellow with the white beard and red suit was to a large degree the creation of American illustrator Thomas Nast in the 1860s. This lecture follows the various transformations of St. Nicholas through 1,600 years of history. Originating in Byzantine Turkey in the fourth century, the cult of 'Nicholas of Myra' was actually the result of two completely different Nicholases getting muddled up. In 1087, when a bunch of Italian sailors snatched the saint's relics and took them back to Puglia, 'Nicholas of Myra' became 'Nicholas of Bari'. Medieval Europe made St. Nicholas into one of the greatest miracle-workers of all time. His stories were painted everywhere. Saving poor girls from prostitution and sailors from shipwreck, rescuing boys from kidnappers, clerks from murderous innkeepers, and babies from boiling bathwater... Nicholas became the Mister Fix-It of western sainthood. Add a propensity for gift-giving, and a feast-day during Advent, and what do you get...? Santa Claus. The ideal Christmas lecture

Janet Robson

An independent art historian with a BA in History from UCL (1980), an MA in Early Sienese Painting and a PhD in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art (1997 & 2001). Has over a decade of lecturing and teaching experience, including summer schools and public programmes, for the Courtauld, Birkbeck (University of London) and Christie's Education, as well as private study groups.



She has published extensively on thirteenth and fourteenth-century Italian art. 'The Making of Assisi: the Pope, the Franciscans and the Painting of the Basilica', her book on the frescoes of the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi (co-written with Donal Cooper) was published in August 2013 by Yale University Press. She has also published numerous book chapters, essays and articles in journals including the Burlington Magazine, Apollo and Art Bulletin. Has travelled and studied extensively in Italy, having held research fellowships at the British School at Rome and at Villa I Tatti (Harvard University) in Florence, and now divides her time between Assisi and London.