CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS IN THE WATKINSON LIBRARY
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JENN BRASFIELD
STUDENT CURATOR

TRINITY COLLEGE
The Watkinson Library
HARTFORD
As Thanksgiving passes we begin the Christmas season, if of course we ignore the advertisements and displays that pop up throughout stores around Halloween. While each family who celebrates Christmas has its own traditions there are bigger traditions throughout America and the world that mark the Christmas season. Christmas cards sent to loved ones offer wishes for a healthy and happy holiday season; Christmas trees which people proudly display in their homes, the ornaments, lights and greenery which are used to decorate homes and encourage the holiday spirit and the iconic Christmas stories that we read time and time again. These traditions mark the holiday season for all those who celebrate and bring to mind their own memories and traditions that make their holiday season special for them, their family, friends and loved ones.

Christmas is a part of our culture, whether you celebrate its religious origins or not. We are surrounded by it in our culture, in our literature, in our decorations and our seasonal customs. The Watkinson library has evidence of these traditions in the books, and ephemera in its collection. These pieces show just how strong of an impact Christmas and its tradition has had on our culture for centuries.

**CHRISTMAS CARDS**

Not a holiday season goes by without being celebrated by sending loved ones near and far a greeting of well wishes, good health and good cheer. The Christmas card is the easiest way to let family and friends know that you are thinking of them at a time when you celebrate the ones you love and celebrate the good fortunes you’ve been blessed with.
The first official Christmas card was brought to life by Sir Henry Cole who encouraged his friend John Calcott Horsley to illustrate the card to send to friends with Christmas sentiments in 1843. Horsley's card featured three panels framed by branches covered in ivy, the largest panel, set in the middle, featured a family during Christmas dinner with plentiful food and drinks. The two side panels depict scenes of Christmas charity, where less fortunate people are being fed and clothed. Though it came out the same year as Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, it echoes the same thoughts of charity and kindness. The card also features the message “A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year To You,” with lines printed on which to write the names of the recipient and the sender.

While Horsley’s card is the first to feature specific wishes of Christmas merriment, wishes for a happy new year were far from revolutionary. Egyptians exchanged small tokens to send seasons greetings and wish family or friends a prosperous and happy new year. These customs continued through Roman times, and after Pope Julius I declared the 25th of December as the day to celebrate the birth of Christ, these traditions transferred themselves to Christmas greetings and greetings of the season as a whole including Christmas, the New Year, and a celebration of the winter solstice.

Cole and Horsley created a tradition that has been widely embraced. The ease of sending a Christmas card appealed to people who, instead of having to write a specific greeting to each addressee, could sum up their feelings in a delightful illustration and a pre-printed message. As the popularity of the Christmas card grew so did the business of making them. Card companies employed a variety of tradesmen including artists, lithographers, engravers and printers to produce the cards themselves, as well as the people making the supplies to produce these cards, including ink and paper producers. Christmas card producers spent months coming up with new and innovative designs to feature on their cards; they experimented with different materials, sizes, illustrations and adornments, making a variety of cards in a wide range of prices so that everyone could afford to send their loved ones these greetings.

Pioneering the industry in its early years, Goodall and Son abandoned Christmas card production after only a few years of innovative designs. The Christmas card first made its arrival in America between 1850 and 1852, and was similar in design and style to the Cole and Horsley card. The American version featured images of Santa and gifts on the side panels and in the center panel was a family gathered around the tree exchanging gifts. Louis Prang, a German immigrant, helped popularize the Christmas card in America with his firm, L. Prang & Co., whose beautiful designs became a standard in the American greeting card industry. Highly ornamented and extensively designed, Prang’s cards were a gift in themselves. With superior craftsmanship, his cards featured lace and silk embellishments that were ornamented with beads, feathers and dried and pressed flowers. Today we rely on companies like Hallmark and its competitors to create these same innovative and fun cards that we love to send out.
The Watkinson’s collection of these cards, from the 19th century, show a variety of styles, designs and sizes. The personal notes on these cards range from a simple signature to personal wishes for a happy holiday season. With a variety of cards showing various scenes, adornments and sizes, this collection showcases the wide range of cards that were produced both in Britain and America during the 19th century.

It is interesting to note the progression that holiday greetings have made. The tradition of sending season’s greetings by Egyptians and Romans was secular in comparison to what it became in mid-nineteenth century England. People focused on sending wishes for wealth, health and happiness for the new year, not religiously focused greetings. Holiday greetings have come full circle, it seems. It has become almost taboo for public entities (like companies and institutions) to send out greetings specifically for Christmas, as it is considered not culturally sensitive. The public’s focus has returned to a more universal season’s greetings, sending wishes for a healthy and prosperous new year, so as not to offend those who do not celebrate Christmas. On a private level people are still dedicated to sending out Christmas cards. It has become a very personal event for some families, sending out photographs along with their cards, or as their actual cards.

Whether you send wishes for a happy new year or a photo card of the whole family decked out in Santa hats, the spirit of the tradition is the same, to remind the ones you love that you are thinking of them and wish them the very best for the holiday season.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

In the home on Christmas, the tree plays a vital role, around which many memories and traditions center. Whether you cut down the tree yourself, or take the less strenuous route and buy a tree pre-cut from a local retailer, or you take the even easier route and pull the tree out of its convenient storage container, hidden year round in the
by immigrants, the original artificial trees were made of dyed green goose feathers and wire, these trees had branches that were set far enough apart so as to not invite a blaze from candles and so that families could fill their trees with ornaments. Critics of the fresh tree believed that they were wasteful, destructive to the environment, dangerous, and that there were more economical choices to be made. Because of these concerns the artificial tree gained popularity and was promoted by fire officials. But who doesn’t love that fresh pine scent?

While the tree is a staple inside the home, some public Christmas tree displays have become landmarks—and tourists and locals often add these to their itinerary of “must-see” sights. The Rockefeller Christmas tree in Manhattan and the National tree in Washington D.C. are two examples. Rockefeller Center began a tradition of erecting and decorating a tree in 1931, when the first tree was selected and decorated by the construction workers of Rockefeller Plaza. The first “official” tree was put up in 1933. Standing 50 feet tall, this tree began the tradition of choosing only the biggest and most perfect tree available. In 1923 Calvin Coolidge lit a tree in Washington DC on Christmas Eve and began a national tradition. Originating on the ellipse, the National Tree has occupied various locations in the heart of Washington including the ellipse, Lafayette park and Sherman park.

Seeing a Christmas tree covered in lights, garland, and a star at the top during the day is beautiful, but seeing that same tree lit up and shining in the night reminds one of the innocence and joy that Christmas is about.

Christmas Decorations

While a lit Christmas tree is beautiful on its own, people often feel inclined to decorate the rest of the house as well. Whether you hang a simple wreath on your door or deck out the house in lights and a blow-up Santa, the tradition of decorating the home is older than Christmas.
Prior to the “creation” of Christmas, Romans, Egyptians and Germanic tribes decorated their homes with evergreens and holly that bloomed over the winter months as a way of brightening and bringing cheer to the dark months of winter. In the 1870s and 1880s in America, greenery was a more popular decoration for Christmas than the iconic tree. Bundles of greenery, holly and mistletoe that were sold in the cities were the equivalent to Christmas ads appearing on television today, they marked the changing of the season and the approach of Christmas to city dwellers.

Several of the books from the Watkinson’s collection use descriptions of greenery to enhance the story and emphasize the season, including Louisa May Alcott’s story *Jack and Jill*. Alcott decorates a dreary hospital room in garland and holly create the feeling of Christmas for her characters and her audience.

The tradition of placing candles on the branches of Christmas trees became a dangerous combination of open flame and dry trees. The creation of strings of lights, made specifically for use during Christmas, eased the fears of people who wished to brightly decorate their trees. Perfected by Thomas Edison’s Electric Company in the 1880s, tree lights became widely available in 1901 from General
minds that bring the season to life. Two specific works come to mind most often because of the historical significance their impact had on the creation of Christmas as we celebrate it today.

When you think of Christmas and the stories that define it, it is impossible not to think about *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. In hundreds of stage, film, television and print adaptations, *A Christmas Carol* has defined holiday storytelling while promoting the morals of generosity, kindness and charity.

When Dickens set out to write *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, his sales had fallen, he was worried about finances and he was losing confidence in himself. He had begun to lose the support of his publishers despite his celebrity. The spirit of Christmas came alive in Dickens when he developed the idea and he had become so confident in this piece that he chose to move forward with it despite the lack of support from Chapman & Hall, his publishers. Dickens took on all responsibility for the publication of *A Christmas Carol*. He had to do the editing, choose an illustrator, pick a typesetter, have it printed and bound, advertise it and have it distributed to stores with enough time that it would be appropriate for the season. The Watkinson holds a first edition of *A Christmas Carol*. The red cover, the gold printing on the cover and the gold-lined edges are just a few of the details that make this copy special; in recent printings of *A Christmas Carol* the same attention is given to these elements.

What of Christmas before Dickens? During the fourth century Pope Julius I chose the 25th of December for the celebration of the birth of Christ, and it is believed that this date was chosen because of the alignment with the winter solstice and that this would attract converts to Christianity. Pope Julius I’s plan worked so well that the church believed Christmas celebrations had become blasphemous, as it had become a time for loud drunken debauchery, rather than the holy day that was intended. By the mid-1600s religious authorities, through the governments they influenced, cracked down on the raucous behavior, making celebrations illegal. When these bans were revoked, authorities still kept a watchful eye making sure people...
ple were celebrating in moderation. Two hundred years after celebrations were made illegal, Christmas had not yet become the holiday we know today. It was a second-tier holiday, far behind Easter.

After Dickens? In four days the 6,000 copies of the first printing of *A Christmas Carol* had completely sold out. This short novel, less than 30,000 words, a fraction of the normal length of Dickens’s other works, had managed to touch the souls of those who read it. With his skilled narration and word choice, Dickens was able to make his audience feel, not just think. This feeling he created in people was the spark that reminded people of the joy and pleasure the Christmas season could hold. He wanted to restore Christmas to its former glory, not mourn its passing like other authors, and he succeeded. The spark that *A Christmas Carol* created reminded people of the joy of the season, of spending it with family, and of the good that people have in them no matter how misguided they are the rest of the year.

Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 poem *The Night Before Christmas* or *A Visit from St. Nicholas* created the image of a character that we still celebrate today. Moore read his poem to his family during their 1822 Christmas celebration. At the insistence of a friend (it is unknown who) Moore allowed the poem to be published in the newspaper the following year, with the promise that he would remain anonymous, and he did until several years later when he finally claimed authorship of the poem.

Moore’s descriptions of St. Nicholas’s round belly, white beard and rosy cheeks inspired illustrators to depict this version of Santa. Illustrator Thomas Nast is credited with capturing the essence of the St. Nick that Moore described. In the Watkinson’s copies of Moore’s poem and Nast’s original illustrations you see the smiling jolly man that has become the face of a holiday. Moore is also credited with St. Nick having a flying sleigh and his eight reindeer and their names. With simple rhyming words Moore created the vision of an icon, one of the most recognized characters in the world.

His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!


Happiness attend the New Year.