

Makings of Christmas

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winters, the first association of indoor trees with Christmas was made in the Black Forest region. Germany can also be credited with contributing marzipan, candle-bedecked evergreen wreaths and colorful Advent calendars with an individual window to be opened every day of the Advent season.

The Italian equivalent of the Christmas tree is known as the *Ceppo*, a pyramid constructed of cardboard and cane, layered with shelves and crowned with either a puppet or a pine cone. Candles line the outside of the frame, and a miniature Nativity scene adorns the lowest shelf. The upper shelves, much to the delight of children tall enough to reach, store candy, fruit and small presents.

Decorating the tree can be a cherished family tradition or a dreaded ordeal, depending on your perspective and past experiences. Families with cats or boisterous small children must often devise ingenious methods of keeping a generously appointed tree in an upright position; fortunately, evergreens feature a pyramidal shape that offers both pleasing proportions and structural stability.

The Courier-Journal advertised two weeks ago for children's suggestions on how to bake fruitcakes, make ornaments or adorn the Christmas tree at no sacrifice to one's general good spirits. Gabriel, my seven year old, who found himself stuck in the newsroom one recent Friday afternoon with nothing to amuse him but crayons and a typewriter, was punchy enough to produce the version at right. (I should add, for the benefit of the Humane Society, that we have not to date - nor do we ever intend to - substitute Lotus, my son's black Halloween cat, for our topmost tree ornament, as Gabe implies.)

While the brilliantly lit Christmas tree has fared far better in North America than the traditional English or French Yule log, the custom bears mentioning, particularly for those whose homes include true fireplaces. In France on Christmas Eve, a glass of wine is poured over the great log before it is set ablaze. After Midnight Mass, a late supper may be cooked over the Yule fire.

Modern Americans who wish to commemorate the tradition of the Yule log but have nowhere to burn one may do as the urban French do, and consume log-shaped cakes iced with shaved chocolate done up to resemble tree bark. Just be sure you don't confuse these eccentric confections with your daughter's Lincoln Logs.

Another French seasonal bequest is the king cake, or *gâteau du roi*, baked in honor of the

Magi and served on Epiphany. Each round cake, iced with almond paste, conceals a coin, a bean or an infuriatingly bite-sized favor. In France, the person whose piece of cake contains the prize is made to wear a paper crown and named king or queen for the day. In New Orleans, where I lived as a child, whoever found the favor (usually a tiny, hardly edible plastic doll) agreed to host the next king cake party, often held the following week.

Swedish Christmas, as I mentioned before, is almost synonymous with hearty feasting. Our modern-day ritual of leaving milk and cookies for Santa Claus originated in the pagan custom of setting out food and drink for the dead, who were believed by primitive inhabitants of Sweden to return to earth at Christmastime. In a part of the world where the midwinter darkness is brightened only by city lights and Christmas candles, it's fortunate that such disconcerting ancient superstitions have paled beside more reassuring modern ones.

No Christmas custom has been so thoroughly commercialized as the giving and receiving of gifts. Thanks largely to the encroachment of television on the latter half of the 20th century, children are literally barraged by subliminal suggestions of material goodies to swell their annual epistles to Santa Claus.

The horse-drawn sleigh of Christmases past has become a picturesque rustic memory suitable for framing in nostalgic Christmas cards or Currier and Ives prints, since the advent of the automobile and, even more significantly, the multi-laned expressway. Nowadays, adults frequently opt for mall shopping because of the alleged convenience of acres of free parking space.

For my part, I'd rather risk losing my child in the line for Midtown's Monorail, or expend valuable time slogging through neighborhood streets in search of small shops or local cottage industries, than brave the Can of Worms or West Henrietta Road during an early lake-effect snow squall. Still, when your child has his heart set on Pig Pong and your neighborhood toy emporium is out of stock, what choice do you have but Childworld, Kiddie City or a stocking full of coal?

The spirit of Christmas giving thankfully prevails, however, even in contemporary tykes surfeited by She-Ra cartoons and cereal advertising. My son announced to me that he's making all of his Christmas presents this year, for a lengthy list of friends and relatives. The most touching is a Day-glo orange scarf he's knitting for his grandmother, under the tutelage of his second-grade teacher, whose patience

with the none-too-nimble fingers of small persons is nothing short of legendary.

Whatever their origin, once the presents are festively wrapped and tucked away under the tree or hidden in the farthest reaches of the attic until Christmas Eve, we've earned the right to settle back, sip an egg nog and christen the Yule log with a glass of something stronger. Soon enough, it will be time to get out the screwdriver and labor over train sets, Hide-out Huts, Cabbage Patch Kid doll-beds and Commodore 64s in the wee hours — at the relatively small price of approximately a quarter of our annual savings and a few gray hairs.

Does it ever occur to us that there's got to be a simpler way?

Christmas Eve conundrums

Barring out the cold on Christmas Eve and playing Santa Claus is, of course, not the only option open to parents on December 24. The stirring spectacle of Midnight Mass has become the distinctive Christmas service in Catholic countries all over the world, and the United States is no exception.

"Few Catholic rites are more impressive than this Midnight Mass, especially in country places," wrote Clement Miles in 1912. "(T)hrough the darkness and cold of the

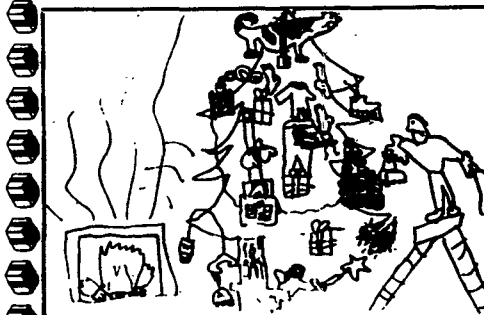
winter's night, often for long distances, the faithful journey to worship the Infant Savior in the splendor of the lighted church. It is a re-enactment of the visit of the shepherds to the cave at Bethlehem, aglow with supernatural light."

There's only one hitch: as Jeanne Gehret points out in her reflection on the monastic observance of Christmas, babysitters are, virtually impossible to find on Christmas Eve. If you have no qualms about rousing slumbering children out of their dancing visions of sugarplums — or keeping them up for the entire evening until it's time to depart for church — then you should meet with no further obstacles than "dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly" (or perhaps a few snow flurries, if we're lucky this year).

The first of three traditional Masses celebrated on Christmas Day, Midnight Mass is supposedly symbolic of mankind's condition in the dark era before the Law of Moses, according to Miles. The dawn Mass signifies the days of the Law and the Prophets, while the daytime Mass stands for the Christian era of light and grace. In another interpretation, adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas, the three Christmas Masses signify "the threefold birth of Christ, the first typifying the dark mystery of the eternal generation of the Son, the second the birth of Christ the morningstar with-

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How to make a silly Christmas tree



wire into the extra plug. If you still want to put the star or angel on the tree, put it in the pot that holds the tree. If your radio isn't in the same room as the tree, use chains to hang it on the tree, too.

If you're still hanging around your Christmas tree and you know that you're going to go somewhere later, hang your coat, boots and mittens on the tree so that you can just grab them and go.

If you do all these things, you're going to have a broken Christmas tree soon. (Be sure to have some ultra-wood glue with you so can get it back together. Also, get a couple of friends with you to help hold the tree while the glue is drying.) If it doesn't go back together, you've got a problem. Go get another tree and don't decorate it with all these silly things.

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Grade 2

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