

DESIGN & INTERIORS

**Christmas past**  
A selection of images from the new collection, 'Christmas Vintage Holiday Graphics'



# How Santa Claus came to town

Can it really be true? Is the Christmas we know and love just the invention of a clever (and remarkably recent) band of designers and graphic artists? By **Christopher Hirst**

THE CHEERY, rotund fellow who will bring gifts down millions of chimneys in the early hours of tomorrow first appeared, appropriately enough, in the City of Brotherly Love. In 1841 a Philadelphia merchant called J W Parkinson hired a man to dress in the garb of the Christmas spirit known as Crisingle and climb in and out of a makeshift chimney in order to attract customers.

Evolved from St Nicholas, the bearded Dutch saint known colloquially as Sinterklaas, the Santa we know today was mainly the creation of the American cartoonist Thomas Nast. From 1863, Nast drew Santa as a whiskery toymaker who metamorphosed in size from year to year. The rotundity became established in 1885 when a Boston printer introduced the English custom of Christmas cards, including the American Santa as a red-suited, chubby figure.



“

Contrary to belief, Coca-Cola did not invent the image of Santa

”

A new collection of American Christmas graphics published by Taschen reveals that this generously proportioned individual has changed little since. An image from the early 20th century showing Santa about to tuck into a large Christmas pudding could feature on a card today. At the same time, an early Santa-ette appeared – a genteel young lady in white and red who pertly posts a card in a snowy mail-box.

But commerciality was never far away. By the Twenties, a Christmas cherub was offering a Lifesaver (“The candy mint with a hole”) to a lipsticked flapper. In later decades, Santa delivered Wrigley’s Spearmint (“the Christmas confection”), Sunkist oranges and Thermos brand vacuumware. His presents were delayed when he took a nap in a Barcalounger reclining armchair or was absorbed by a broadcast from a Westinghouse radio-phonograph. By the Fifties,

Santa’s workshop was producing Studebaker convertibles. At one point, he even swapped his sleigh for a Corvette (courtesy of Hertz).

What the Taschen book does not show, presumably for copyright reasons, is the appropriation of Santa by Coca-Cola. Contrary to belief, the soft-drink giant did not invent the image of Santa. He only appeared in Coke’s Christmas adverts in the Thirties, several years after the *New York Times* wrote about the “standardised Santa ... with red garments, white whiskers, ruddy cheeks and a jolly, paunchy effect”. But Coke’s marketing dept was not slow to capitalise on the fact that Santa happened to wear the company’s livery. Even today, when grissini-thin models dominate advertising, this is the one time of year when plumpness sells. \* *Christmas Vintage Holiday Graphics*, edited by Jim Heimann, is published by Taschen, £4.99.