



Martha Stewart Roundtable

The Revenge of Mrs. Santa Claus or Martha Stewart Does Christmas

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In 1881, in an otherwise unremarkable Christmas story for children published in *Harper's Young People*, Mrs. Santa Claus made her first appearance on the holiday stage. She was plump, of course, and "good-natured," the genial supervisor of the North Pole bakery and candy factory.¹ Several years later, in the same journal, she assumed the task of trimming hats for the Christmas dolls that every little girl included on her list; unlike the docile elves, the lady also complained bitterly when proper credit for her labors was not forthcoming.²

There is some dispute as to precisely where Mrs. S. Claus came from. The scholarly community seems reluctant to assign her invention to some lowly female hack, working for *Harper's*, *St. Nicholas*, or *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, although these are, indeed, the places where Margaret Eytinge, Sarah Burke, and Lucy Larcom first fleshed out the story of the woman behind the man at the North Pole in the 1880s.³ The experts prefer big-name authors, like Katherine Lee Bates, the poet who wrote the words to "America the Beautiful"; Bates, they note, cranked out thirty-two far less memorable books, including the 1899 *Goody Santa Claus on a Sleigh Ride*, a biography of Santa's better half. Louisa May Alcott, who mentions the mistress of the North Pole in one of her many magazine stories, has also been suggested as the primary source for the life of the childless and bespectacled Mrs. Santa, waiting patiently for her husband's return from a night in the world's chimneys, every December 24th.⁴

The Santa Claus introduced in *A Visit from Nicholas* in 1822 had no wife back home. As Clement Moore's poem described him, he was "a jolly old elf," a magical little creature who whooshed up the chimneys of New York City by the simple expedient of "laying his finger aside of his nose."⁵ His private life was glimpsed for the first time in 1866, in a double-page illustration in *Harper's Weekly* by Thomas Nast. Nast, an influential political cartoonist, single-handedly gave Santa Claus a plausible existence for those 364 nights of the year when he was not making his rounds with the reindeer. "Santa Claus—His Works," a collection of anecdotal visual fragments, formed a single, kaleidoscopic summary of nineteenth-century Christmas imagery and Santa-ness. In that picture, Nast established his hero as a homebody, a resident of Claussville, at the North Pole, where he enjoys a cozy world of tea parties for the resident dollies, toasty fires, and pleasantly cluttered workrooms. There Santa Claus sews doll clothes, tallies up the ledger of good deeds and bad, trims Christmas trees, makes wooden animals for toy farmyards, and, from his icicle-bedecked perch in the Arctic, keeps an eye on boys and girls everywhere with an up-to-date model spyglass.⁶ But he has no wife.

The provision of a Mrs. Claus in the 1880s reflected a certain weary realism on the part of women who wrote for the magazines. Santa Claus create a decent Christmas? they huffed. And how would he do that, all by himself? Between 1850, when *Godey's Lady's Book* published its first, germinal picture of a properly decorated Christmas tree, and the birth of Mrs. Santa, circa 1881, Christmas had become the primary home or family feast in the American celebratory cycle. Which meant, of course, that women—wives, mothers, sisters, grandmas, maiden aunts—were the ones who taught themselves how to wire upright candles to tree branches, how to make fancy paper cornucopias to hold the presents that were supposed to be the fruit of a blooming Christmas tree, and later, when gifts became more substantial manufactured items, how to wrap packages in snowy white tissue paper held in place with common pins and ribbons, and decorated (almost always) with sprigs of holly.⁷ They appealed to *Godey's* for recipes for roasted or boiled turkey, for plum puddings, like the one Mrs. Cratchit worries over in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.⁸ The domestic character of Christmas, with its family dinner, its program of lavish seasonal decor, and its emphasis on children and parental indulgence disguised by the figure of Santa Claus, put it squarely within the accepted sphere of female competence and authority.

In modern times, this hegemony has provided the occasion for carping and jokes. A 1910 *Good Housekeeping* forum for men on the subject of Christmas irritants decried the propensity of wives and girlfriends to ignore the quality of the cigar and look instead "for those in handsome boxes." Sprigs of holly! Pretty tags! Bah, humbug! Men don't like presents "wrapped or 'fussed' in tissue paper, ribbons, or tinsel," roared one ungrateful husband.⁹ A standard holiday cover for the *Saturday Evening Post* showed either male incompetence when confronted with the task of Christmas shopping or the just the opposite—an un-

seemly female bossiness, bred of deep, instinctual knowledge of the wicked ways of the bargain counter. In 1937, Norman Rockwell lampooned the dilemma of the hapless male in a fade-away cover, showing the patriarchy humbled by the necessity to provide wreaths, dolls, hobby horses, and things in fancy wrappings.¹⁰ Rockwell's picture is a sort of pendant to J. C. Leyendecker's 1936 *Post* cover entitled, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," in which a formidable woman, with a husband and mewling boy-child in tow, sails through a department store like a Panzer division overrunning a captive state, the Reichsfuhrer of Christmas.¹¹

It is this branch of the American Christmas tree—the Victorian housewife, Mrs. Santa, the holiday superwoman—which has given rise to Martha Stewart, today's Ayatollah of Yuletide cookery, craftiness, and tasteful merrymaking. In the nineteenth-century, Washington Irving and Charles Dickens told the nation what Christmas meant; *Godey's* and *Harper's* showed how to make it so. But Martha Stewart fills both roles. In a series of pricey paperbacks she does it all. These paperbacks appear every autumn with the inevitability of the department-store Santas who assume their thrones on the morning after Halloween, she does it all: *Decorating for the Holidays*,¹² Christmas with 'Martha Stewart Living' (the title of her monthly magazine),¹³ and *Martha Stewart's Christmas: Entertaining, Decorating, and Giving*.¹⁴ Like all good Christmas rituals, the format is always the same: a discussion of the nature of the holiday, and her memories of childhood Christmases, followed by elaborate how-to instructions and sumptuous photos of finished projects—gingerbread houses, topiaries, cookies shaped with homemade cutters, pastel trees, gilded wrapping paper fashioned from grocery bags—that you and I will never quite manage to duplicate.

The reminiscent essays link Stewart's directions for sugaring lemons or hot-gluing pomander balls to snippets of life in a quasi-mythical household in Nutley, New Jersey, in the 1940s and 1950s. "It seems like yesterday, that early Christmas morning when I crept down the chilly oak staircase in our family home in Nutley to steal a glance at the beautifully decorated tree and the piles of presents beneath it," she writes in 1989. "Then, as now, I loved the *idea* of Christmas. I loved the . . . carols we sang at school, the big crèche in front of our church, the strings of lights crisscrossing Franklin Avenue, the electric candles in our neighbors' windows."¹⁵ Her mother began Christmas preparations in the summertime, and so does Martha, on a schedule of jelly-making and flower-drying that accelerates on the morning after Thanksgiving, when the plum puddings are made, and climaxes in December when the whole family frosts the cookies, makes the ornaments, decorates the tree, and hosts the gala parties.

Jerry Oppenheimer, author of *Just Desserts*, an unauthorized and thoroughly mean-spirited biography of Stewart, would argue that passages like this one are fraudulent because they give the impression that Nutley was Shangri-La, that life there amounted to an earthly paradise, and that Christmas at one of her much-photographed period houses in Connecticut or Long Island, with

frosting-smearing children gamboling through every perfect room, is an object lesson in family togetherness. In fact, as Oppenheimer discovered, things were not so great back at 86 Elm Place. Martha's girlhood chums remember an emotionally chilly environment and a normal child who thought that helping her mother was a onerous chore.¹⁶ Nobody remembers Martha having anything to do with the retired German bakers down the street, whom she often credits with her early culinary interests; in the telling, however, they seem to have popped out of a cuckoo clock, wreathed in jolly smiles, solely to mentor the little girl from down the block.¹⁷

That Martha Stewart was not born a silver-spoon-bearing member of the WASP establishment is barely hinted at when she recalls her mother cooking "Polish dishes that everyone loved" for Christmas.¹⁸ The pierogi and the babka could have been strange maternal quirks of taste: nowhere in the Christmas books does she admit to Polish-American ancestry. Or to a messy divorce from Andy Stewart and an on-again off-again relationship with her only child. The roomfuls of creative children who people her holiday reveries are not Martha Stewart's own. And if Martha is Mrs. Santa Claus for the new millennium, her Santa is nowhere to be found.

In a way, however, Martha Stewart's white lies about a less-than-perfect life are less interesting than her vision of a perfect one. Besides, where would the comedy industry be without the brittle blonde who barks orders at her audience through clenched teeth in her Christmas specials on TV? There are the Christmas cards—a doctored magazine cover, entitled "Martha Stewart's White Trash Christmas."¹⁹ Parody issues of that magazine feature directions on how to best the neighbors at decorating outdoor trees: "For me," says the fictional Martha, "the true meaning of Christmas remains competition and absolute victory."²⁰ Martha Stewart spoofs on the internet include a holiday calendar. On December 1st, it is time to "blanch carcass from Thanksgiving turkey. Spray paint gold, turn upside down and use as a sleigh to hold Christmas cards."²¹ The public Martha—the professional designer of Christmases as they ought to be—is, according to the satirists, rigid, driven, dictatorial, and often absurd. But she is also the guardian and the high priestess of a feminized, nineteenth-century Christmas, adapted to modern times mainly by the use of an electric glue gun.

What is Martha Stewart's ideal Christmas—"the *idea* of Christmas" that she wants so badly to remember? First of all, it is an occasion almost wholly defined by things: strings of lights, "old-fashioned gingerbread cookies," fruitcakes, decorations, mincemeat, and homemade gifts—painted trays, handbound albums, ceramic vases.²² "A simple gesture, a handmade ornament, a special Christmas confection," she asserts with real feeling, "are the things that cause our spirits to soar and our hearts to burst with pleasure during the festive season."²³ Martha is no philosopher: ideas exist only insofar as they are embedded in Proustian objects centered on the home and those who live there. And women make these things, or deploy them. Her brothers—and sisters become gender-

neutral “siblings” in the retelling of family lore. Mother and Martha do the work and in her Christmas books, the editorial “I” does it all, singlehandedly, except when a picturesque child is invited to frost a cookie.

In one sense, hers is a postfeminist holiday, a tacit rebuke to any working woman without the time or inclination to deck the halls from basement to attic with snowflakes fashioned from sheets of something called quilling paper. But her own resounding success as the goddess of Christmas and the queen of Kmart—the tycoon who bought her own magazine back from Time Warner in 1997 after a series of hardball negotiations—makes her a model of feminist entrepreneurship. Her appeal, like that of Betty Crocker, General Mills’ fictional home economist, is premised on unremitting competence and professional acumen.²⁴ If you want to roast a goose, steam a pudding, and stage an authentic olde English Cratchit dinner, ask Martha Stewart how to do it.

The question of whether a given domestic advisor is or is not a worthy feminist is probably insoluble. Peg Bracken, author of the bestselling “I Hate to Cook” books in the 1960s, now positions herself somewhere between Betty Friedan (as a debunker of the happy housewife) and Julia Child, whose version of haute cuisine often intimidated working mothers.²⁵ The home—the place Martha Stewart wants “to glorify and beautify . . . inside and out, for the holidays”—is still an ideological minefield. Never mind that middle-aged middle-class suburban husbands make up 50 percent of those who collect and display Department 56 Christmas villages—and not “the fat old ladies from Milwaukee” once targeted by marketers of Christmas giftware.²⁶ Or that the audience for Christopher Radko’s updated versions of old German and Polish glass tree ornaments contains a huge proportion of gay men.

Because, despite the wreaths in the malls and the lights strung across busy shopping streets, Christmas is still the home festival Martha Stewart knows it to be. And whoever stirs the batter and hangs the mistletoe, however tasteful or authentic or labor-intensive their preparations may be, the whole enterprise is suspect: the world of things—especially things that are not made for profit—is still deemed inferior in some way to the world of words. But the American Christmas is the celebration of material culture through material culture of all sorts. Feelings, memories, and wishes reside in these talismanic objects, as Stewart correctly surmises. “Keeping family traditions alive and cherished is one of the most wonderful things you can do for your family,” she says as a prelude to minutely detailed directions on how to drape garland, bake a wreath out of cookie dough, and wrap strands of tiny beads around styrofoam forms to make unforgettable ornaments.²⁷

If there is something uncomfortably fussy about Martha Stewart’s ur-Christmas, in which every element is polished to perfection (and there is not much room left on the chimneypiece for one’s dimestore china angels and plastic Rudolfs), she is nonetheless true to the Victorian origins of the modern observance. *Godey’s* readers took pains with their tinsel. Mrs. Santa’s genera-

tion wrapped gift packages to surprise and delight the recipients. Martha Stewart reminds us that life is more than a virtual tour of cyberspace. At Christmastime, it is supposed to taste and smell like gingerbread. It glitters. It tinkles. It feels like velvet and pine needles. "These are the things," she says, "that cause our spirits to soar and our hearts to burst with pleasure during the festive season."²⁸

Notes

1. Margaret Eyttinge, "Mistress Santa Claus," *Harper's Young People* (December 20, 1881), 119.
2. Sarah J. Burke, "Mrs. Santa Claus Asserts Herself," *Harper's Young People* (January 1, 1884), 132.
3. Lucy Larcom, "Visiting Santa Claus," *St. Nicholas* (December 1884), 82-4. See also Edith M. Thomas, "Mrs. Kriss Kringle," *St. Nicholas* (December 1885), 138 and "Concerning Mrs. Santa Claus," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* (December 25, 1902), 716.
4. Philip Snyder, *December 25th: The Joys of Christmas Past* (New York, 1985), 235. "Santa Claus," an Arts and Entertainment Biography video (1994) also credits Bates and Alcott.
5. Charles W. Jones, "Knickerbocker Santa Claus," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* (October 1954), 359-60, 377.
6. Thomas Nast, "Santa Claus—His Works," *Harper's Weekly* (December 29, 1866), 824-25.
7. Nada Gray, *Holidays: Victorian Women Celebrate in Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 14, 23-4, and passim.
8. Dickens emphasized the Cratchit family dinner during his American public readings of 1867; see *Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings* (Boston: Loring, 1868), 8. See also "Receipts, Etc.," *Godley's* (December 1859), 551, and subsequent Christmas issues.
9. "Gifts Which Embarrass: A Protest from Men," *Good Housekeeping* (December 1910), 653.
10. Norman Rockwell, cover, *Saturday Evening Post* (December 25, 1937), unpaginated.
11. J. C. Leyendecker, cover, *Saturday Evening Post* (December 26, 1936), unpaginated.
12. *Decorating for the Holidays* (New York, 1998).
13. *Christmas with 'Martha Stewart Living'* (New York, 1997).
14. *Martha Stewart's Christmas: Entertaining, Decorating, and Giving* (New York, 1989).
15. *Martha Stewart's Christmas*, 9.
16. Jerry Oppenheimer, *Just Desserts: the Unauthorized Biography of Martha Stewart* (New York, 1997), 43.
17. *Ibid.*, 31.
18. *Christmas with 'Martha Stewart Living'*, 9.
19. The cards (1997) are published by Atlas Design, Culver City, Cal.
20. Tom Connor and Jim Downey, *Martha Stewart's Better Than You At Entertaining* (New York, 1996), 56. See also *Is Martha Stewart Living?* (New York, n.d.), 36-7.
21. "Martha Stewart Holiday Calendar" made the rounds in 1997. Other 1998 e-mail parodies included "Top 10 Signs You're Being Stalked By Martha Stewart" ("#4. No matter where you eat, your place setting always includes an oyster fork.") and "Martha Stewart Letter to Erma Bombeck," in which she claims to have made her own typewriter ribbon.
22. *Decorating for the Holidays*, 9; *Christmas with 'Martha Stewart Living'*, 9.
23. *Decorating for the Holidays*, 9.
24. For Betty Crocker, see Karal Ann Marling, *As Seem on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, 1994), 202-213.
25. Susan L. Crowley, "Done to perfection: 'The I Hate to Cook Book' author still sizzles," *AARP Bulletin* (June 1999), 14-17.
26. Sally Appgar, "Ceramic dynamics," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 22, 1995.
27. *Decorating for the Holidays*, 9.
28. *Ibid.*