

Sinterklaas

Dutch Culture II

December 5th: Pakjesavond

(packages evening)

- Every year Dutch children get very excited when November comes around
- Three weeks before the actual Sinterklaas holiday (December 5), Sinterklaas arrives in the Netherlands
- Most towns celebrate the “Sinterklaas intocht” *(arrival of Sinterklaas)*
- This is the start of three weeks of excitement, culminating on the evening of December 5th

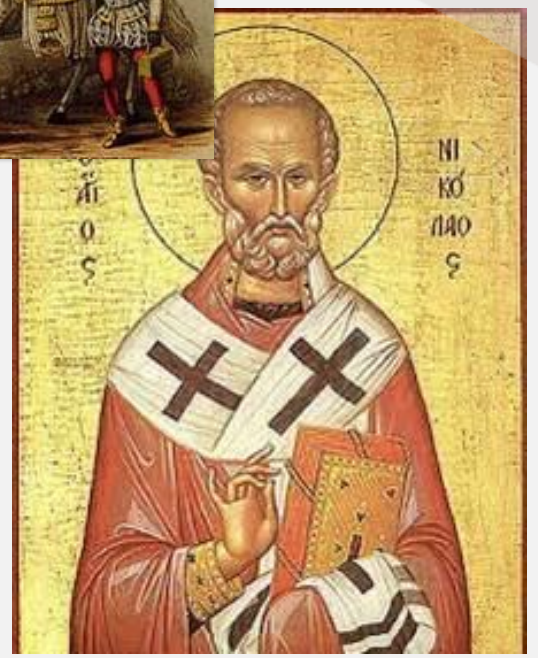


History of Sinterklaas

- St. Nicholas, born 271 A.D. and Bishop of Myra (Turkey), devoted his life to using his inheritance to assist the sick and suffering
- He died December 6 343 A.D.
- Two centuries later, many legends around his person started going around, including that he would throw gold coins in poor people's shoes
- In 1850 school teacher Jan Schenkman wrote the story book "Sint Nikolaas en zijn Knecht" ("Saint Nicholas and his Servant") forming the basis of the modern Sinterklaas celebration
    - Sinterklaas comes from Spain by Steamship with his servants called "Pieten"
    - He travels around the Netherlands on a horse
    - His "Pieten" deliver presents through the chimney and sometime punish naughty children











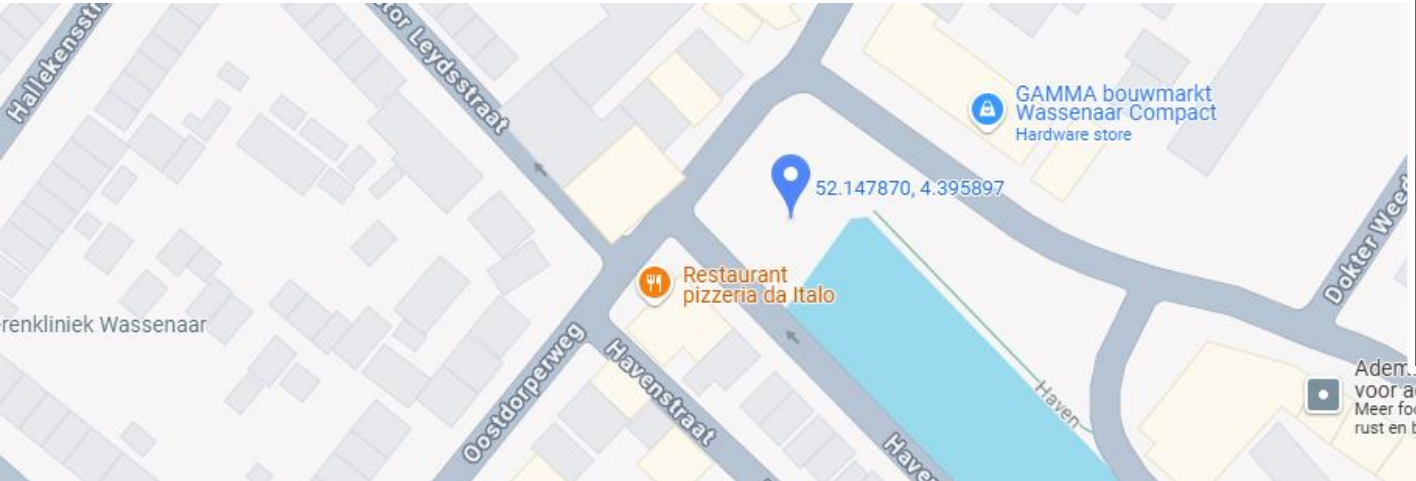
Controversy around Zwarte Piet

- Jan Schenkman's book referred to a "Servant" that assisted Sinterklaas.
- He was referred to as a "black-skinned" servant thought to be of north African descent
- His job was to punish naughty children, or sometimes carry them away.
- In the early 1900s he was known by many names, but by the 1920's he was commonly known as Zwarte Piet (Black Piet).
- Around the 1950s there began to be a shift, attributing his blackened skin to **soot from coming down the chimney**.
- Since 2010, there has been a big shift in how Piet is depicted and nowadays Piet is either "Sooty Piet" or "Rainbow Piet"

Sinterklaas arrival celebrations

- This year, the national Sinterklaas arrival will be in Grave (November 14). This event is televised live and most young kids will watch in awe
- Wassenaar has its own Sinterklaas arrival:
  - **This Sunday, November 15, 12:45 PM at the Wassenaar harbor**
- Other big Sinterklaas celebrations happen in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Den Haag







Sinterklaas Celebration Traditions

- After Sint has arrived (November 14), excitement quickly peaks!
- Every night, Dutch children put their shoe in front of the fireplace, with a letter to Sint and a carrot for his horse
- They will sing as loud as they can, in the hope he visits at night and exchanges the offerings for a small present or treat
- Not every day will be successful and strangely enough, good behavior correlates with higher chances of success
- The big day comes on December 5th: Pakjesavond (*“packages evening”*). Children wait anxiously for the big moment. Often a big bag suddenly appears at the front or back door and the doorbell rings. The kids run to catch Sinterklaas, but they never do…

Sinterklaas Celebration Traditions

- Once kids get older and figure out that Sinterklaas is not the one putting the presents in their shoes, the celebration changes a little
- Often Sinterklaas evening is celebrated with broader family where everyone picks a random name who they buy a gift for
- The gift is then wrapped creatively in a “surprise” and accompanied by a poem
- The poem is key: while the Dutch are already quite direct, this is an excellent time to highlight a less positive trait of the ~~victim~~ subject, in a gentle (or sometime not so gentle), joking manner:

“Sint and Piet have been observing
And what they saw is quite unnerving

Endless time is spent on your looks
And little time on reading your books

Often late or absent from school
Sint does not think that is very cool

So maybe this helps you to be on time
Please use it daily and you will be fine”







Sinterklaas treats







Treats are a huge part of the Sinterklaas tradition

- Pepernoten (*“pepper nuts”) - Small round cookies made with cinnamon*
- Chocolate letters
- Banketletter - puff pastry filled with almond paste
- Taaitaai (*“chewy-chewy”*)
- Marsepein (*“marzipan”*)





Sinterklaas vs Santa Claus

Home	Spain	The North Pole
Transport	Steamship	Sled
Favorite animal	Horse	Reindeer
Presents	Via the chimney	Via the chimney
Marital status	Eligible bachelor	Married to Mrs. Claus
Date	11/16-12/5	12/24-12/25
Naughty children	Go back to Spain	Get coal







Christmas Markets 2026

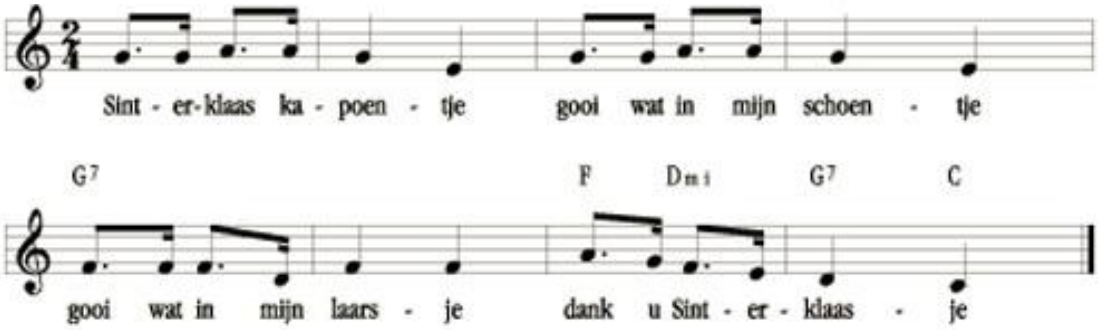
- European Christmas Markets are well worth visiting
- Nearby, Den Haag, Leiden and Dordrecht organize very good Christmas markets
- Within three hours driving, there are many German Christmas markets worth visiting, specifically Münster, Dusseldorf and Aachen are highly recommended

https://www.hotelgift.com/nl/blog/leukste-kerstmarkten-van-nederland/

https://www.kerstmarkten.net/informatie/top-10-duitse-kerstmarkten/

Sinterklaas songs

Sinterklaas Kapoentje



Zie ginds komt de stoomboot

