

Art and history are woven throughout the Christmas story

By Robert Schimmel

Here's a trivia question for you: What do 476 AD, Gentile da Fabriano, auras, cloisonné, and the Grinch have in common? I'll bet if you weren't asked this at this time and with "the Grinch" as a clue, you'd have been challenged. But you're right; they are all significant in the history and imagery of Christmas.

We all know Jesus Christ's birth is the reason for the season, but who of you know how the dates or the icons evolved that we've come to observe and love? I certainly didn't until I had David Foster, retired Lake Tahoe Community College art professor, on my radio program. We got into more detail than I can share here.



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So in the interest of being succinct, let's start with the invasions and fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD and applaud the fact that the Romans, by Constantine the Great's decrees in the early 300s AD, established Christianity throughout their domain. This, coupled with administrative expertise and advanced documentation in manuscript form done by monks and scribes, led to the formalized dating of the life of Christ,

which ultimately is reflected on our calendars today, including Christmas Day.

In addition, these invaders burned most of the churches and new, durable stone edifices were built in the Roman style with the influences of Christendom: Gothic arches in threes that referenced the Trinity and the structural, cruciform (footprint) design and structure that reflected the crucifixion and became the most prevalent symbol of the faith. Cloisonné, which resulted in stained glass (prime example is in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris) accompanied the barbarians and blossomed during this same period.

But in spite of growing documentation, literacy still lagged and artists continued to tell the narratives of life pictorially. We can see how the use of symbols, for example halos (or auras), progressed from solid disks behind the saints' heads to hollow circles over them and finally to just an apparent vapor. Gentile da Fabriano of Italy created the best known and arguably most involved image of Christ's birth, "Adoration of the Magi", in 1423 at the end of the late Gothic period, and one can see all the influences of the day plus many of the traditional Christmas images including shepherds, halos and the manger.

Then in the Renaissance great advances occurred, such as art materials (like oil paints), tools (including the use of linear perspective), anatomical accuracy (Michelangelo the chief instigator), and the printing press that opened the doors to huge expansions of the artists' imaginations and capabilities for realism and expression. This in turn with the incumbent Age of Industrialization (that followed after the Baroque, Impressionism, post Modern ages, among others, and introduced a plethora of new materials and styles but not images), brings us to the "Here and Now Age" with such icons as the Christmas Tree and Santa Claus. Believe it or not, the Christmas tree is truly an adaptation of a Roman times celebration around the evergreen tree or Tannenbaum to which

annual tribute was paid in the form of gifts.

And St. Nicholas really was a man named Nicholas who, through his conversion and dedication to the faith and selfless acts, became a revered and honored saint imprisoned in the 1800s and ultimately the icon known as St. Nick or "Santa Claus". Artists all along the way and in myriad cultures and styles promulgated these and other images we cling to in our modern communities of faith and secularism.

Certainly a significant case in point regarding creativity and artists' license is the film "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas" and its tale of evil seeking to eradicate the joy of Christmas by stealing the Christmas trees and gifts of a town's people. When the people's spirit wasn't broken and the true meaning of Christmas lives on in their hearts and relationships, we witness the power of hope, joy, and giving. So, as you look at and touch your ornaments, gifts, wreaths, trees and favorite elements, listen to all genres of music, and probably watch various celebrations of this unique day, please take it to the next step. Quietly note the incredible history and sacrifices that have brought this celebration to you and all the various forms of art that have made it as ornate, elegant, multi-cultural and real as any Blu-ray TV possibly could, then give thanks and share your most precious gifts of all, you and your time and treasures.

Merry Christmas!

Robert Schimmel is a professional artist and teacher in South Lake Tahoe as well as host of "Lake Tahoe Art Scene" on KTHO radio on Thursdays at 5:15pm.