

The History of Christmas Trees

You may not realize this but the history of christmas trees did not begin in America, England or even Germany. In fact America was one of the last continents to catch on to the tradition of decorating the Christmas tree. The history of christmas trees begins long before the birth of Christ and even before the Egyptian civilizations.

Many historians and anthropologists agree that the history of christmas trees begins in post-primeval times, just as agricultural societies were developing across the globe. Christmas did not exist. It was simply, in one culture or another, a pagan celebration of the winter solstice. The winter solstice marks the shortest day of the year which usually occurs on the 22nd or 23rd of December. The boughs of evergreen trees were brought indoors to protect inhabitants from the evil spirits that could cause starvation and illness.

Ancient peoples also scattered evergreen boughs over their floors, doors and around the windows. In fact, the tradition of hanging an evergreen garland comes from the tradition of hanging evergreens over the mantelpiece to keep witches, ghosts and spirits from traveling down the chimney and into the house.

Evergreen boughs were also used to keep away illness. Scents such as pine, juniper and balsam are still used by aromatherapists today to fend off illness and winter depression.

Even the ancient Egyptians were thought to play a role in the history of christmas trees. Of course there were no evergreen forests in ancient Egypt but during the solstice they filled their homes with palm rushes to protect themselves from evil and celebrate the return of their Sun God Ra.

European and Mediterranean cultures also have episodes in the long saga that is part of the history of christmas trees. On the solstice, known as Saturnalia, the Romans decorated their homes with evergreen boughs. This honored the God Saturn whose domain was agriculture. Further north, the Celtic Druids used evergreens on the darkest day of the year to symbolize eternal life. These trees were not decorated as we know them today. They were not much more decorative than the famous Charlie brown christmas tree. This is because the function of these evergreen boughs was more protective than celebratory.

By the 12th century indoor trees were brought inside. Nobody is sure why but originally Christmas trees were hung upside-down from ceilings at Christmastime. This was a popular custom in Central Europe. The upside down tree was seen as both as a symbol of Christianity and a pagan symbol. At that point Christianity was not wide spread and the tree may have been a nod to both pagan and Christian traditions.

It is widely believed that the history of the Christmas tree as we know it began in Germany in the sixteenth century. However few people realize that the tree was not brought inside and that in fact, the first decorated christmas tree was a pyramid made of wood. These German indoor pyramids were decorated with boughs and candles. Often jars of pickles were set on the steps. The pyramid shape was not a direct inspiration from ancient Egypt but rather, the triangular shape was thought to represent the three points of the Holy Trinity - the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The person credited with adding lighted candles to a real tree is Martin Luther - a German Protestant reformer who lived in the mid 1600s. The legend is that he was inspired to do so by the sight of stars in the night sky peeking through the limbs of an evergreen while he was on a walk.

The next big development in the history of christmas trees was tinsel. Tinsel was invented in Germany around 1610. At that time, tinsel was made of real silver and it tarnished easily thanks to the smoke from the christmas tree candles. Silver was used for tinsel right up to the mid-20th century when it was replaced by aluminum.

The history of christmas trees was non-existent in America until about the 1840s. They were sometimes displayed as curios in traveling sideshows. The christmas tree decorating ritual was considered sacrilegious for most of the 17th and 18th century. It was seen as a mockery of the sober celebration of the birth of Christ. In fact in 1659, people were fined for hanging decorations. This law continued until the 19th century when the tradition was brought more into common practice by German and Irish immigrants to the United States. The practice was also made more acceptable when Queen Victoria decided to make a right side up floor-to-ceiling xmas tree part of her décor in 1846.

One difference between European customs and American customs seemed to be that Europeans were more inclined to decorate their trees with food, cookies and candies (and even pickles!) whereas Americans were more into glitzy decorations. Also the European christmas trees tended to be shorter (three to four feet in height) while the Americans preferred their trees to be sky-high. Both cultures however enjoyed decorating their trees with garlands of popcorns and electric lights.

In the 1950s America saw the advent of the first artificial christmas trees. This event was celebrated by Charles M.

Schulz famous fable about the Charlie brown Christmas tree. In this fable Charlie Brown is told by Linus, Lucy and Shroeder to go out and find the biggest flashiest aluminum tree to use as a decoration for their Christmas play. Instead Brown falls in love with the most pathetic tree ever and finds the true meaning of Christmas. You can buy a replica of this type of tree which is often called the "pathetic charlie brown christmas tree" online. True to the original cartoon, the tree boasts just one red Christmas ball ornament on a single bare limb.

The argument about which is better - a fake christmas tree or a real christmas tree still rages on today. The most recent development in the history of Christmas trees is the return of the upside down christmas tree, which is disapproved by the church just as it was in the sixteenth century. If history keeps repeating itself the next trend we will see in xmas trees is the ancient wooden pyramids that served as artificial trees in pagan times.

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