

CANADIAN CHRISTMAS THROUGH MAXIMUM CARDS

By George Constantourakis

The season of Christmas is laden with meanings, which are a mixture of historic facts, religious teachings, folk customs & legends, and the imaginative creations of artists, writers, poets, and musicians. The essence of Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, who according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke was born in Bethlehem to Joseph and to Mary, a pious young woman selected by God. Built on the foundation of these few Biblical passages, the season of Christmas has evolved into the holy and spirited world-wide celebration that we know today. Through the centuries, artists such as Giotto and Brueghel, Bach and Handel, Shakespeare and Milton have embellished the few facts with imagery and import to convey their own visions of the Nativity. The place of Jesus birth becomes in paintings a stable, a grotto, or a temple. The Magi, whose number, names, and origins are unknown, become the three kings Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh (see *Figure 1*). Shepherds, sheep, and oxen encircle the Christ Child in worship, and choirs of angels fill the skies.

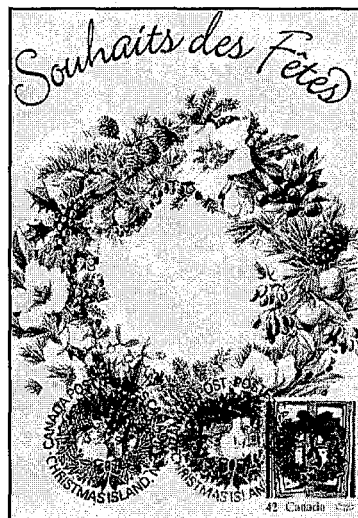
The feast of Nativity replaced a popular pagan Roman celebration of the winter solstice (or Yule). During these celebrations they used fire (i.e. bonfires, hearth fires, candles & lanterns) as a key element that symbolized the warmth and light of the sun. The custom of lighting a Christmas tree has its origins in medieval Germany. People set up this tree into their homes and decorated it with cookies, dried fruit, and above all with candles. The custom gradually spread all over Europe. European immigrants carried the tradition to North America, where it was readily adopted. The first Christmas tree with decorative electric lights was erected in 1882 by Edward Johnson (a colleague of Thomas Edison) in his New York home. In Canada, the first Christmas tree with electric lights was erected in 1896 in the town of Westmount (of Greater Montreal). The custom spread quickly to many homes. Eventually the tradition was carried outdoors the streets, trees (see stamp Cover M.C.), and particularly buildings in urban areas (and later in rural areas), sparkled with bright colored lights during the festive Christmas season.

I still remember vividly, when some thirty years ago - a newcomer then to Canada - I took the train from Montreal to Sudbury, Ont. to celebrate Christmas there. The train passed through snow-capped forests and meadows and small towns and villages, that looked to me like a picture perfect Christmas card. But what impressed me even more was when travelling at night and seen those rural houses lit all around with a myriad of outdoor lights, that seem to transform the cold of that winter's night into a pleasant warmth of the soul.

The season of Christmas in Canada is also the start of many outdoor Winter activities, such as skiing (for example, most major Canadian cities are only an hour's drive from many ski resorts); or skating (for example, in Ottawa the Rideau Canal is transformed into a 4 1/2 -mile skating rink). Hockey, Canada's most popular sport, was invented here. These outdoor winter activities and winter landscapes are portrayed in many Canadian Christmas stamps, as shown in the Maximum Cards of *Figures 5 to 8* and the M.C. on the *Cover*.

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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 1) 'GIFTS FROM THE WISE MEN (MAGI)' (on stamp), MADONNA AND CHILD AND THE THREE WISE MEN OFFERING GIFTS' (on card). Issue: Oct. 13, 1965. For: Christmas 1965. Cancel: First Day, Ottawa, Ontario. (Figure 2) 'THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT' (on card: painting by Vittore Carpaccio at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). Issue: Nov. 3, 2000. For: Christmas 2000. Cancel: First Day, Montreal, QC, special illustration. (Figure 3) 'PRAYING HANDS' engraving by Albrecht Durer. Issue: Oct. 22, 1966. For: Christmas 1966. Cancel: Jan. 25, 1967, Brantford, Ont. (Figure 4) 'DECORATIVE WREATH OF HOLLY & BERRIES'. Issue: Nov. 2, 1987. For: Christmas 1987. Cancel: Jan. 3, 1995, Christmas Island NS, concordant illustration (triple).



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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 5) 'THE ICE CONE, MONTMORENCY FALLS' c.1845 by Robert C. Todd at National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON (Montmorency Falls are located just East of Quebec City). Issue: Nov. 1, 1974. For: Christmas 1974. Cancel: Aug. 14, 2001 (late cancel), Ottawa, ON (place kept). (Figure 6) 'VILLAGE IN THE LAURENTIAN MOUNTAINS' c.1924 by Clarence A. Gagnon, at National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON, (The Laurentian Mountains are located just North-east of Quebec City). Issue: Nov. 1, 1974. For: Christmas 1974. Cancel: May 22, 1992, Ottawa, ON (place kept). (Figure 7) 'CHAMPS-DE-MARS, IN WINTER' 1892 by William Brymner at the Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts, Issue: Oct. 26, 1989. For: Christmas 1989. Cancel: First Day, Montreal, QC (place kept). (Figure 8) 'SNOW II' 1915 by Lawrence S. Harris (a founding member of the Group of Seven; this austere winter landscape represents Canada's Northland) at National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON. Issue: Oct. 26, 1989. For: Christmas 1989. Cancel: May 22, 1992, Ottawa, ON (place kept).

