



The Christmas Dinner at the Inn by Cecil Aldin, ca. 1937

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Just about everyone is familiar with the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” with its repetitive cadence and lavish assortment of gifts bestowed by an anonymous “true love.” First published in England in 1780, the song is believed to have originated in France. The now familiar tune associated with the verse, was arranged from a traditional English folk melody in 1909. But what exactly are the Twelve Days of Christmas?

Christianity has many denominations, and the Christmas season is observed differently among different branches of the religion. Traditionally, the Twelve Days of Christmas begin with the birth of Jesus on December 25, and end on January 5, or Twelfth Night. January 6, marks Epiphany, an important holiday celebrated throughout much of Latin America and Spain as Three Kings Day. It is the day on which the Magi, or Three Kings, visited the infant Jesus in Bethlehem.

The Twelve Days of Christmas were first proclaimed in the year 567, by the Council of Tours, with the preceding weeks marked as the advent of the Christmas feast. Today, December 25, is the most important day of the Christmas season for those who observe the holiday.



Jan Steen, Twelfth-Night Feast, 1622
Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
1951 Purchase Fund

This painting by the 17th-century Dutch master Jan Steen, depicts a family enjoying a Twelfth Night feast. At first glance, the scene does not appear to have any connection to the Christmas season. Christmas trees and lavish decorations were not part of Dutch culture at that time. The only suggestions of the holiday are the three candles on the floor in the foreground, representing the Three Kings, and the baby on the table wearing a crown.