



Franz Xaver Winterhalter, Portrait of the Royal Family, 1846. Oil on canvas, Royal Collection Trust

O TANNENBAUM

The German Christmas carol “O Tannenbaum,” has a long and varied history. Based on an old German folk tune, it began as a tragic love song, and was later changed to include the familiar words we know today. The popular version of the song was written in 1824, by Ernst Anschütz, a Leipzig schoolmaster and organist. However, Anschütz never intended for “O Tannenbaum” to be a Christmas carol. The German word *tannenbaum* literally translates to “fir tree.” In the song, the tree represents constancy and faithfulness. As Christmas trees gained in popularity throughout the 19th century, and given the Christian symbolism of evergreens, “O Tannenbaum” eventually became part of the canon of traditional Christmas carols.



The popularity of Christmas trees has long been credited to Prince Albert, the husband and consort of England’s Queen Victoria. It is true that Albert was raised in Germany and would have been familiar with the practice of having a decorated tree in the house. However, according to royal historian Elizabeth Jane Timms, Christmas trees were first introduced to England by Victoria’s grandmother, Queen Charlotte. In 1800, Charlotte held a party at the Queen’s Lodge at Windsor Castle for the local children in the village. In the center of her drawing room was a large yew tree in a tub, decorated with sweets, fruits, and toys, and illuminated with candles. Queen Victoria herself wrote about the decorated Christmas trees at Kensington Palace in her diaries as a teenager. Outside of the palace, however, the custom of Christmas trees was still relatively unknown in England.



Thomas Gainsborough, Queen Charlotte, ca. 1741
Oil on canvas, Royal Collection Trust

When Victoria married Albert in 1840, the attractive young couple became a media sensation. Nearly every detail of their lives was reported in the newspapers at the time. In 1848, an illustration of the royal couple with a Christmas tree appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, and the custom was quickly adopted by middle-class families who wanted to emulate the lifestyle of aristocrats.

In America, Christmas trees can be traced as far back as the 18th century. However, as in England, the practice would not become widely popular until after the publication of news stories featuring the Christmas celebrations of England’s royal family.



Engraving of the royal family with a Christmas tree, 1848