

ARCHIVES

OF

PEDIATRICS & ADOLESCENT MEDICINE

WWW.ARCHPEDIATRICS.COM

DECEMBER 2004



Jan Steen (1626-1679), *The Feast of St. Nicholas* (circa 1665-1668). See page 1104.

PROJECTED ECONOMIC COSTS DUE
TO TEENAGERS' LOSS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

RATES AND RISK FACTORS FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE
AMONG ADOLESCENTS

COMPLETE TABLE OF CONTENTS ON PAGE 1099

JAMA
&
ARCHIVES
JOURNALS
American Medical Association

Jan Steen (1626-1679)

The Feast of St Nicholas (circa 1665-1668)

EACH YEAR, BOYS AND GIRLS ALL OVER HOLLAND look forward to December 5 with eager anticipation. It is the night called *Sinterklaas*, named after the patron saint of children and sailors, a venerated figure in this seafaring land. St Nicholas arrives from the sea wearing an embroidered, jewel-studded robe and bishop's miter, riding a white horse, carrying a crooked staff, and accompanied by his faithful servant, Black Piet. On the night of December 5, they scamper about the rooftops of Holland, dropping gifts and goodies down the chimney into shoes and stockings left near the fireplace. Often, children leave carrots or hay in their shoes as a snack for the bishop's horse. With a little help from their parents, wise old St Nick knows which boys and girls have been good and which have been naughty or lazy during the year, and he gives what he thinks each child deserves.

Artist Jan Steen was the father of 6 children and almost certainly painted several of his own brood into *The Feast of St Nicholas*.¹ The prettily dressed girl in the foreground, who may be Steen's daughter Catarina, clutches a new doll and carries a pail full of sweets and toys on her arm as Mother reaches toward her. Meanwhile, the crying boy at the far left, possibly son Thaddeus, has seen a birch switch—used for spanking a youngster who has misbehaved—poking out of the heel of his shoe, which is being displayed by the older girl behind him. Adding to his woes, a younger brother to Mother's right laughs and points mockingly at the tearful boy's misfortune. Far in the background, however, Grandma beckons for him to look behind the curtain of the four-poster bed, hinting that another happier surprise may await him there and that his tears will soon dry. Off to the right, 2 other boys sing carols or shout thanks up the chimney to their departed benefactor, and the baby in the arms of the older boy holds a gingerbread St Nicholas. In the middle of it all, Grandpa looks on calmly despite the bustle around him. Tucked away in the painting's lower corners are little still lifes of breakfast cakes, holiday breads, and marzipan apples soon to be enjoyed.

Even 17th-century Holland had its grinchers, though. The golden age of Dutch painting was also a time of religious turmoil. One Calvinist preacher railed against a Catholic holiday that “fools children from their earliest days into believing that Klaes throws all that stuff through the door or chimney, or sticks it in shoes or stockings by night, while the parents know better . . . and thus the children are spoon-fed with lies, superstition, and idolatry.”^{2(p156)} Religious discord was one factor that



eventually drove some Dutch families across the Atlantic to America. They brought their holiday traditions with them to the cultural melting pot, where *Sinterklaas* and the British Father Christmas melded, becoming Santa Claus.

The Feast of St Nicholas is still a favorite painting in the Netherlands, partly because the traditions captured in Steen's pictorial narrative remain much the same more than 3 centuries later. Today, *Sinterklaas* is celebrated in nearly every Dutch household, irrespective of religious beliefs. Despite the long, dark December nights and cold “St Nicholas weather,” it is a time that brings families together to share the delight of children and to pass along the legend of the kindly bishop from one generation to the next.

Thomas Koepsell, MD, MPH

Correspondence: Dr Koepsell, Department of Epidemiology, F-216F Health Sciences, Box 357236, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-7236 (koepsell@uwashington.edu).

1. Chapman HP, Kloeck WT, Wheelock AK Jr. *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; 1996.
2. Westermann M. *The Amusements of Jan Steen*. Zwolle, the Netherlands: Waanders Publishers; 1997.