

Sinterklaas a hotly debated tradition

Sinterklaas is a popular calendar feast that is celebrated in various European countries, on 5 and 6 December. In recent years a discussion is growing about one element of the celebration: the helper of Sinterklaas with his black-painted face, Zwarte Piet (Black Pete).

In this brochure the background of the Dutch Sinterklaas celebration is outlined, as well as the role of Zwarte Piet and the different views connected with this subject within Dutch society.



Photographs: Nationale Beeldbank



nowadays children are fond of Zwarte Piet. Whenever Sinterklaas has difficulties handling modern techniques, Zwarte Piet helps him out.

Since the sixties and seventies of the last century there has been a growing criticism. According to the critics Zwarte Piet is a stereotype of coloured people in a subservient role, with in his costume several elements that refer to the slavery past of the Netherlands. The objections do not only concern his black-painted face, but also the clearly hierarchical relation between him and Sinterklaas. As far as his appearance is concerned there are objections against the frizzy hair, the thick red lips and the earring, as reminiscences of the slavery past. As a seafaring nation the Netherlands has played an important role in the international slave trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a fact that is getting more attention lately. This is also demonstrated by the unveiling of the National Monument Slavery Past in Amsterdam on 1 July, 2002.

Investigation

In an exploratory investigation on behalf of the Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed (Dutch Centre of Intangible Cultural Heritage,

VIE for short) a precise identification is made of the most important values that supporters and critics attach to the Sinterklaas celebration and which elements of Zwarte Piet provoke discussion. The interviewed were also asked for their views on the future of the Sinterklaas feast in the Netherlands. Most Sinterklaas supporters state that Zwarte Piet has nothing to do with racism. The exploratory investigation shows a growing understanding for the objections of the critics. The major part of the interviewed agrees that changes take time and cannot be imposed from the top. Because the public

celebration is organised at a local level, this – according to many of the interviewed – offers possibilities for experiments from the bottom up. The Netherlands has almost 800 private, local arrival committees, each of them designing their own Sinterklaas entry. The families determine how Sinterklaas is celebrated at home, for instance with or without poems, with or without Zwarte Piet.



Colophon

The Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed (VIE) is the national knowledge centre for intangible cultural heritage. It coordinates the National Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage, following the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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The feast in the Netherlands

The Sinterklaas celebration is the feast of giving and sharing. It is mostly celebrated at home, within the family circle. On behalf of Sinterklaas presents are given to each other, Sinterklaas songs are sung and Sinterklaas sweets are scattered all over the floor. Already in

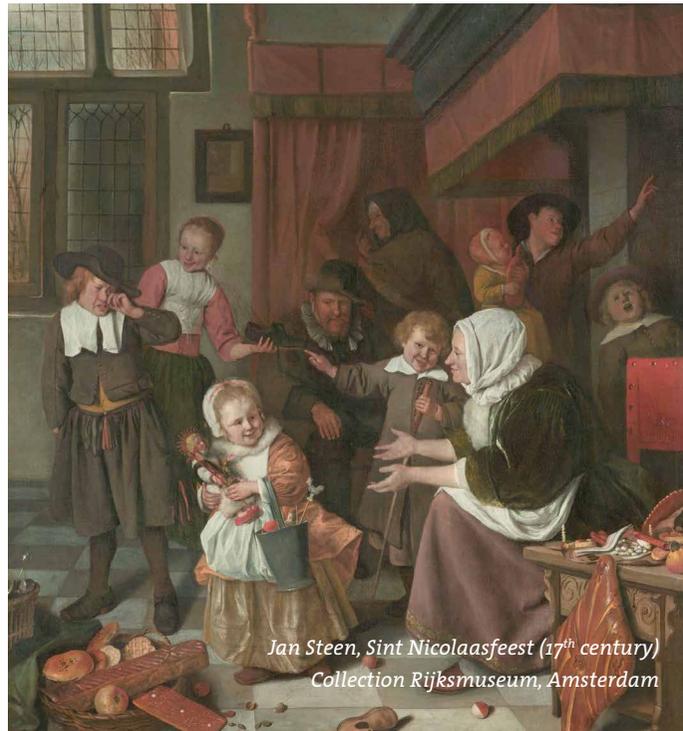
November the preparations start with the festive entry of Sinterklaas. In almost every municipality the Saint arrives by boat or another means of transport and he is officially welcomed by the local authorities and a large group of children with their parents. From that moment on children are allowed to 'put their shoe', to find small presents in it the next morning. The 'national arrival', each year in another municipality, is broadcasted live on television in the Sinterklaas News Broadcast that keeps up with the latest items on Sinterklaas from November to 5 December. The presents are often wrapped in a special way, as a surprise. There should be a poem too, in which the members of the family hold up a (mild) mirror to each other.

The Netherlands has a lot of private arrival committees organising the entry in their place of residence. They often get support from the authorities because of the major social and cultural importance connected to the Sinterklaas celebration. Schools play an important part as well. They help with the making of surprise wrappings and teach the children to sing Sinterklaas songs.

History

Saint Nicolas has been a popular saint in the whole of Europe from the early Middle Ages. His feast is celebrated throughout Europe, for instance with Saint-Nicolas fairs. In the catholic south the emphasis lies more on the reli-

gious aspect, the protestant north took on a more worldly interpretation, as a family party with presents for the children. The naughty ones got the rod, as already shown on the paintings by Jan Steen in the seventeenth century. Surprise wrapping and writing poems for each other were added around 1900. Since that moment official arrivals of Sinterklaas have been organised and the holy man gets surrounded by a growing number of helpers, dressed in exotic page-costumes and with black-painted faces. This turned the Sinterklaas celebration into a masquerade, like there are many in the world. Since 1900 the development has not ceased. Whereas in earlier days Sinterklaas could be like a bogeyman, who threatened naughty children with the rod, after 1960 he is above all a wise old man, who no longer punishes but is friendly and caring towards the children in the first place. Zwarte Piet is no longer a bogeyman either.



Jan Steen, *Sint Nicolaasfeest* (17th century)
Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Sinterklaas and his helpers in other European countries

Sinterklaas celebrations exist in other European countries too, in many variations. The Flemish Sinterklaas feast looks the most like the Dutch one, although it kept more of its children's feast character instead of a family feast, like in the Netherlands. In Flanders as well Sinterklaas is accompanied by a servant with a black-painted face. In some parts of Germany, Austria and France Sinterklaas has a savage-looking assistant. In Germany this figure is known under the name Knecht Ruprecht, in France as Père Fouettard. Ruprecht wears brown or black clothes most of the time. Père Fouettard dispenses lumps of coal to naughty children or flogs them, whereas Sinterklaas gives presents to children who have been good. Père Fouettard is much more a bogeyman than the Dutch Zwarte Piet. He looks sinister with his grubby-combed hair and his red cloak.

Zwarte Piet

Most people in the Netherlands consider Zwarte Piet to be an indispensable part of the Dutch Sinterklaas celebration. He is the cheerful and approachable companion of the somewhat rigid, wise and above all honourable Sinterklaas. Whereas he could provoke fear in the past,