

Why are red and green the colors of Christmas?

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As Thanksgiving passes and the calendar turns to December, the iconic red and green colors of Christmas emerge. These two colors flood shopping malls and living rooms around the world, adorning nearly every ornament, string of lights, and sweater on store shelves. The season is inextricably linked to this color combination—but why?

It is said that Coca-Cola has something to do with this, but there are other explanations as well.

Legend has it that when the soft drink icon advertised around the holidays in the 1930s, the company created an image of Santa Claus dressed in a red suit next to a green tree. These images are enough to show how red, green, and Christmas go together.

However, long before Coke was sold as Santa's favorite drink, red and green were Christmas colors. For example, an 1896 newspaper article mentioned that, "*The Christmas colors, red and green, have dominated the most original and effective decoration of the halls ever seen.*".

While there may not be a firm consensus on how this color scheme came to be, there are some interesting candidates for the official answer.

Tree of Heaven

Perhaps the most obscure theory is that red and green may have originated from the 'paradise plays,' which were traditional plays performed on Christmas Eve about Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. The story couldn't be re-enacted without trees, so stage decorators around the 12th century said that '*there were many different trees there*' (and since it was winter, any pretty tree could have been an evergreen). You also needed some fruit to hang from it—like a red apple or a pomegranate.

It is often said that when the plays of paradise disappeared, the tree remained – and transformed into the modern Christmas tree. It is believed that the red of the fruit and the green of the tree linked the two colors in people's imaginations with the Christmas season.

The Paradise Play was not the only biblical play performed during the Middle Ages. One of the most famous was the Second Shepherd (or Shepherd; title unknown), which combined a farce about sheep theft with the story of the Nativity. One of the gifts presented to the baby Jesus was a cherry. (Not a holly tree, but a cherry.) Some historians believe this suggests that the association between red and green and Christmas dates back centuries.

Holly

Speaking of holly: This is another popular candidate for why green and red are associated with Christmas. Religious studies professor Bruce David Forbes theorizes that medieval Europeans were looking for something to do in the bleakness of winter. So, why not party?

And that party 'will feature evergreens, as signs of life when everything else seems dead, along with other plants that are not only evergreen but also bear fruit in midwinter, like holly or mistletoe.' (Mistletoe berries are actually white.) Bright reds and greens in midwinter might make them natural candidates for Christmas colors.



Cross veil

The nave was an integral part of Western churches until around the time of the Reformation. Its purpose was to separate the nave (where the people sat) from the sanctuary (around the altar, where the clergy would sit) and was elaborately carved with local saints, patrons, or other figures.

According to Bucklow, common color combinations were red/green and blue/yellow, with one pair of aquamarine (blue or green) and one pair of chromatic (yellow or red). Bucklow argued that these colors were part of a representational "fence"—separating the more worldly parishioners from the more spiritual altar and sanctuary.

By the time of the Reformation, cross screens had largely fallen out of use in England. In later years, they were either vandalized or abandoned because of decay. Centuries later, according to Bucklow, the Victorians began restoring these screens and noticed the red/green combination. They may have adapted this red and green color scheme for another boundary: when one year ended and the next began.

Bucklow even cites a 13th-century Welsh story collection to support his argument that the red and green combination represents a boundary. He said in a 2011 Cambridge Newsletter: 'One example, the red-green colour code appears in the Mabinogion, a 13th-century Welsh story collection, but is almost certainly based on an oral legend that dates back to the Celts many centuries before Christ. Here the hero comes to a tree that is half red, half green to mark a boundary.'

While no one has a concrete explanation for our preference for red and green at Christmas, it's clear that this isn't a recent development. Instead, as Bucklow explains, the connection between the holiday and these festive colours may hide a '*deep and long-forgotten history*'.

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