

★ FEATURE

LIGHT IT UP! A SHORT HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS TREES

LONDON, ON

They are the scented sign that the winter holiday season is nigh: evergreens for sale at the local grocer or retailer.

The modern practice of decorating evergreens during a winter religious festival began in Northern Europe sometime in 15th or 16th century.

In its earliest incarnation, the Christmas tree was, and remains associated with Protestant Christianity, although the pairing has caused some controversy over the centuries.

Certain denominations discouraged the decoration of an evergreen during the Christmas holiday – or “holy day” – since ornamenting conifers was a well-known part of ancient pagan rituals.

Pope John Paul II introduced the Christmas tree tradition to the Vatican in 1982, and although initially criticized by some Catholics, the tree has become an important part of the church’s holiday observances.

American author Sheryl Ann Karas explored the story behind the world’s most celebrated evergreen in her 1998 book, *The Solstice Evergreen: History, Folklore and Origins of the Christmas Tree*.



CHRISTMAS TREES ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD

Recently she spoke to SCENE about the earliest uses of evergreen conifers in cultural and religious festivals.

“The use of the evergreen in winter solstice celebrations occurred in multiple places around the globe. They all predate Christianity by quite a bit, but I have not come across what culture was earliest,” Karas said.

“It is primarily associated with Europe, and the use of a tree at Christmas most certainly comes from that region – most likely Scandinavia and Germany,” she said.

“But use of evergreen trees in pagan ritual happened wherever they are one of the most significant features of the local landscape, including in North America, Asia and elsewhere,” she added.

In the lead up to Christmas, evergreens are frequently given as gifts between municipalities or states to acknowledge a friendship or long-standing debt of gratitude.

Nova Scotia sends a tree to the city of Boston every year in recognition of aid and resources Americans sent after the 1917 ammunition explosion that devastated Halifax and surrounding communities.

Norway sends a tree to Washington annually, in acknowledgement of the help received from the US during World War II. Until the tree is decorated, it’s still an evergreen conifer. It’s in the process of decorating the evergreen that it is transformed into a Christmas tree.

In the 18th and 19th century, trees were illuminated with candles. But for the last hundred years or so, electric lights have been used instead.

Garland, tinsel, dolls, baubles, candy canes and fruits are also popular decorations, and the tree is usually topped with a star, angel, or Santa Claus ornament.

“The origins of using ornaments came from multiple regions as well,” Karas said.

“In Greece and Rome, little masks of [harvest god] Bacchus were hung on the trees to encourage fertility. Other gods and goddesses were honored by draping trees in cloth or garlands of flowers,” she said.

“In China, people placed red banners with words of praise and thanksgiving. In Europe, druids tied apples and other food offerings and lighted candles in the branches of fir trees.

That tradition is most closely related to our own,” Karas said.

“When the tree was adopted by Christianity, the apples were said to represent the apples on the ‘Paradise Tree’ [a combination Tree of Life / Tree of Knowledge] in the center of the Garden of Eden,” she added.

On occasion, the Christmas tree has been maligned a symbol that excludes or threatens those who do not celebrate the religious holiday with which it is associated.

In 2006, the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport removed all of its Christmas trees in the middle of the night rather than allow a Jewish rabbi to put up a menorah near the largest tree display.

An initiative to rename Boston’s Christmas spruce a “holiday tree” in 2005 met with such vocal public opposition that the decision was quickly reversed.

These situations represent the exception rather than the rule. For the more part, evergreen trees have become a fully recognized part of both secular and religious celebrations of Christmas.

Their ubiquity during the holiday is a reminder that peace and goodwill can prosper despite adversity, like evergreens that thrive despite winter’s chill.

~ Chris Morgan

