The Claus That Refreshes

At the beginning of the 1930s, the burgeoning Coca-Cola company was still looking for ways to increase sales of their product during winter, then a slow time of year for the soft drink market. They turned to a talented commercial illustrator named Haddon Sundblom, who created a series of memorable drawings that associated the figure of a larger than life, red-and-white garbed Santa Claus with Coca-Cola. Coke's annual advertisements — featuring Sundblom-drawn Santas holding bottles of Coca-Cola, drinking Coca-Cola, receiving Coca-Cola as gifts, and especially enjoying Coca-Cola — became a perennial Christmastime feature which helped spur Coca-Cola sales throughout the winter (and produced the bonus effect of appealing quite strongly to children, an important segment of the soft drink market). The success of this advertising campaign has helped fuel the legend that Coca-Cola actually *invented* the image of the modern Santa Claus, decking him out in a red-and-white suit to promote the company colors — or that at the very least, Coca-Cola chose to promote the red-and-white version of Santa Claus over a variety of competing Santa figures in order to establish it as *the* accepted image of Santa Claus.

This legend is not true. Although some versions of the Santa Claus figure still had him attired in various colors of outfits past the beginning of the 20th century, the jolly, ruddy, sack-carrying Santa with a red suit and flowing white whiskers had become the standard image of Santa Claus by the 1920s, several years before Sundlom drew his first Santa illustration for Coca-Cola.

All this isn't to say that Coca-Cola didn't have *anything* to do with cementing that image of Santa Claus in the public consciousness. The Santa image may have been standardized before Coca-Cola adopted it for their advertisements, but Coca-Cola had a great deal to do with establishing Santa Claus as a ubiquitous Christmas figure in America at a time when the holiday was still making the transition from a religious observance to a largely secular and highly commercial celebration. In an era before color television (or commercial television of any kind), color films, and the widespread use of color in newspapers, it was Coca-Cola's magazine advertisements, billboards, and point-of-sale store displays that exposed nearly everyone in America to the modern Santa Claus image. Coca-Cola certainly helped make Santa Claus one of the most popular men in America, but they didn't invent him.