

The Festive Wreath



Culture and Origins

The first wreaths can be traced back to 150 BC. For the Roman Empire, wreaths demonstrated power, pride, and strength; for the Greeks, they symbolized success and accomplishment. Wreaths were worn around one's head as an adornment.

In ancient Israel, wreaths were made to celebrate Shavuot's spring festival and other festive occasions before Jesus' birth. When Judah and the Macabees reconquered the Temple in 164 BCE, they rededicated the Temple and decorated the front with wreaths.

In the Persian Empire, wreaths were a sign of authority; adorned with jewels, they were often worn by royalty.

Later, wreaths were used to decorate homes, generally as a table decoration, and provided hope during the harsh winters; they served as a gentle reminder that spring would arrive, and sunshine and warmth would again return.

Wreaths celebrate other holidays such as Ramadan, a holy month observed by Muslims. The end of fasting is marked by a three-day celebration called Eid al-Fitr; door wreaths are displayed during this time.

Seasonal wreaths communicate different messages. For example, spring and summer wreaths symbolize new life and growth; an autumn wreath represents abundance and the coming harvest.

The Season of Advent and the Wreath

During Advent, we reflect and look forward; the word Advent has Latin roots that mean "coming." Christians use this time to prepare for the birth of Jesus; it is also a time of repentance and meditation in preparation for Christ's second coming.

Advent wreaths were used by Germanic Christians as far back as the 16th century. Four candles are placed around the wreath, symbolizing the four weeks in the liturgical calendar; one candle is lit each week before Christmas.

What do the candles in an Advent wreath represent?

Each candle is symbolic; depending on the week of Advent, they represent hope, preparation, joy, and love's culmination. The fifth and final candle is lit on Christmas Eve and represents Christ's birth. It symbolizes purity, light, and victory.

Wreaths and Christmas Trees

Germans are historically credited with the Christmas tree tradition. Excess tree limbs (cut from the tree for uniformity) were woven into wreaths. Beyond shaping and using every part of the tree, there was a spiritual significance to this Christian practice. Trees were trimmed in the shape of a triangle, representing the Trinity. Saint Boniface, a monk, used the three points of the tree to explain the Trinity's concept in the 7th century. Christmas wreaths initially served as Christmas tree ornaments, not a door decoration.

Wreath Symbolism

Wreaths can be made from any element. Typically, wreaths are in the shape of a circle and contain flowers, leaves, and twigs. The circle represents God, for whom there is no end or beginning, and is a reminder of God's unconditional love for humanity, a love that renews hope amidst adversity.

Common elements:

Evergreen: survival and endurance despite hardships; immortality and eternal life

Holly and red berries: strength; sharp leaves represent the crown of thorns worn by Jesus during his crucifixion. Red berries represent Christ's blood.

Yew pine: immortality; eternal and everlasting life

Laurel: steadiness and strength over suffering; victory

Cedar: endurance, eternal life, immortality; healing after pain

Pinecones, nuts, seeds: the birth and rebirth of Christ; eternal life