Halloween

Etymology

The word Halloween or Hallowe'en dates to about 1745 and is of Christian origin. The word "Hallowe'en" means "Saints' evening". It comes from a Scottish term for All Hallows' Eve (the evening before All Hallows' Day). In Scots, the word "eve" is even, and this is contracted to e'en or een. Over time, (All) Hallow(s) E(v)en evolved into Hallowe'en. Although the phrase "All Hallows'" is found in Old English "All Hallows' Eve" is itself not seen until 1556.

History

Gaelic and Welsh influence

Today's Halloween customs are thought to have been influenced by folk customs and beliefs from the Celtic-speaking countries, some of which are believed to have pagan roots. Jack Santino, a folklorist, writes that "there was throughout Ireland an uneasy truce existing between customs and beliefs associated with Christianity and those associated with religions that were Irish before Christianity arrived". Historian Nicholas Rogers, exploring the origins of Halloween, notes that while "some folklorists have detected its origins in the Roman feast of Pomona, the goddess of fruits and seeds, or in the festival of the dead called Parentalia, it is more typically linked to the Celtic festival of Samhain, which comes from the Old Irish for 'summer's end'."

Christian influence

Today's Halloween customs are thought to have been influenced by Christian dogma and practices derived from it. Halloween is the evening before the Christian holy days of All Hallows' Day (also known as All Saints' or Hallowmas) on 1 November and All Souls' Day on 2 November, thus giving the holiday on 31 October the full name of All Hallows' Eve (meaning the evening before All Hallows' Day). Since the time of the early Church, major feasts in Christianity (such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost) had vigils that began the night before, as did the feast of All Hallows'. These three days are collectively called Allhallowtide and are a time for honoring the saints and praying for the recently departed souls who have yet to reach Heaven. Commemorations of all saints and martyrs were held by several churches on various dates, mostly in springtime. In 609, Pope Boniface IV re-dedicated the Pantheon in Rome to "St Mary and all martyrs" on 13 May. This was the same date as Lemuria, an ancient Roman festival of the dead, and the same date as the commemoration of all saints in Edessa in the time of Ephrem.

Symbols

Development of artifacts and symbols associated with Halloween formed over time. Jack-o'-lanterns are traditionally carried by guisers on All Hallows' Eve in order to frighten evil spirits. There is a popular Irish Christian folktale associated with the jack-o'-lantern, which in folklore is said to represent a "soul who has been denied entry into both heaven and hell":

On route home after a night's drinking, Jack encounters the Devil and tricks him into climbing a tree. A quick-thinking Jack etches the sign of the cross into the bark, thus trapping the Devil. Jack strikes a bargain that Satan can never claim his soul. After a life of sin, drink, and mendacity, Jack is refused entry to heaven when he dies. Keeping his promise, the Devil refuses to let Jack into hell and throws a live coal straight from the fires of hell at him. It was a cold night, so Jack places the coal in a hollowed out turnip to stop it from going out, since which time Jack and his lantern have been roaming looking for a place to rest.

In Ireland and Scotland, the turnip has traditionally been carved during Halloween, but immigrants to North America used the native pumpkin, which is both much softer and much larger – making it easier to carve than a turnip. The American tradition of carving pumpkins is recorded in 1837 and was originally associated with harvest time in general, not becoming specifically associated with Halloween until the mid-to-late 19th century.

Costumes

Halloween costumes are traditionally modeled after supernatural figures such as vampires, monsters, ghosts, skeletons, witches, and devils. Over time, in the United States, the costume selection extended to include popular characters from fiction, celebrities, and generic archetypes such as ninjas and princesses.

Dressing up in costumes and going "guising" was prevalent in Scotland and Ireland at Halloween by the late 19th century. A Scottish term, the tradition is called "guising" because of the disguises or costumes worn by the children. In Ireland the masks are known as 'false faces'. Costuming became popular for Halloween parties in the US in the early 20th century, as often for adults as for children. The first mass-produced Halloween costumes appeared in stores in the 1930s when trick-or-treating was becoming popular in the United States.

Eddie J. Smith, in his book Halloween, Hallowed is Thy Name, offers a religious perspective to the wearing of costumes on All Hallows' Eve, suggesting that by dressing up as creatures "who at one time caused us to fear and tremble", people are able to poke fun at Satan "whose kingdom has been plundered by our Saviour". Images of skeletons and the dead are traditional decorations used as memento mori.

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