

The Historical Fun Fact Christmas Calendar

Samples from my social media for fun posts

December 2nd. What can we learn about mermaids from medieval illuminations? They're talented, beautiful, fashion forward, good mothers, and unafraid to go for what they want (the succulent flesh of sailors).

There's overlap between mermaids and sirens, so some mermaids can sing sailors to sleep before they eat them.

Melusine is a fresh water spirit, very similar to mermaids except she can appear as a mortal women when not in water. As part of her transformation, she sometimes has two tails. In a handful of European folktales, noblemen accidentally marry Melusine (or *a* melusine), and she has to forbid them from ever seeing her in water - which never works, because Melusine seriously underestimates the desire human men have to see their new wives in the bath. These stories are usually on Melusine's side, the moral being that if your wife is stunning and kind and brings you luck and prosperity, you shouldn't ask too many questions.



December 4. Have you ever found a loose mint in your pocket?

From the 1850s to 1880s, Potassium chlorate was popularly sold in pastille form to soothe sore throats, whiten teeth, and help with a variety of other ills. There was only one small problem - the chemical compound is extremely flammable and can even spontaneously combust if it gets into contact with any combustible material, such as pocket wool or household dust. And so, it sometimes did.

Impactical!



It's December 9th! The pre-Raphaelites, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti, were obsessed with wombats!

DG, his famous poet-sister Christina Rossetti, and their brother William (the organizer of the group) discovered the joys of wombats after Regent's Park Zoo opened their wombat exhibit in 1847, and DG famously declared that "the Wombat is a Joy, a Triumph, a Delight, a Madness!" How true that would turn out to be.

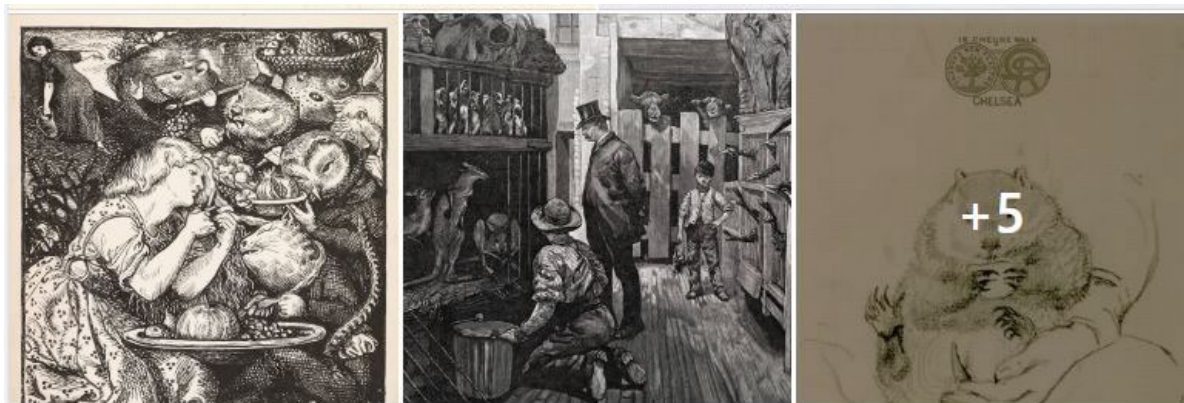
DG became a frequent visitor to the wombat exhibit, often inviting his friends to meet him there, with the result that when DG, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones were hired to paint the Oxford Union Murals in 1857, all they painted at first on the white-washing of the windows were wombats.

Now, DG was a great artist, but hardly a particularly responsible man, which you will know if you know anything about him.

When his wife and muse Lizzie Siddal died in 1862, he needed a distraction, aside from other women, so he moved to Chelsea and started collecting exotic animals. You could buy almost any kind at Jamrach's Animal Emporium in the East End, and he did. DG got a white Brahmin bull, armadillos, monkeys, two kangaroos, peacocks, a racoon, an assortment of owls, an Australian kingfisher, dormice, a Pomeranian puppy, an Irish wolfhound, hedgehogs, parakeets, chameleons, lizards, salamanders, marmots and a mole - and in 1869, he got the wombat Top.

Top was much loved, but being fed on entirely too many cigars and ladies' straw hats, he sadly died after only a few months with the Rossettis. DG had him stuffed and mounted in the entrance hall of his house. The next wombat he got lasted only two short weeks, at which point DG must've understood wombat ownership was not for him.

Many of his animals died, btw, causing a complete racket in the neighborhood along the way, but his armadillos escaped into a neighbour's garden, survived a poison attempt, and made their way out of the neighborhood - perhaps founding a small population of naturalized British armadillos somewhere in the South of England.



December 14 🦇🦇🦇

"One day Victor sent his fiancé a carefully folded and pinned paper package. Thinking it contained some precious flowers, she opened it carefully - and a bat flew out. She became very frightened and did not forgive him until she saw what was written on the paper."

This is from Adèle Foucher's 1863 biography of her husband, Victor Hugo, and describes the time he sent her a live bat wrapped in and illustrating his newest poem, 'The Bat'.

From 'The Bat' (1822)

Yes, I know you, I've seen you in my dreams,
Sad bird! lurking over me, although useless it seems.
I fear not the uneven circles of your dark flight;
its omens delivered already by the ghosts of the night;
So go! You make me feel neither guilt or delight.



December 14. Peter the Great had a social club called the All-Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters. It consisted of Peter himself and several of his best friends. Common activities included: taking over traditionally church-led christmas caroling several years in a row and turning it into a farce, initiation rites, bacchanalian rituals, the kissing of breasts in a ritual manner, and Peter writing and rewriting the rules of the club with as much gusto as he put into matters of state

Members had mock religious titles, such as Prince-Pope and Arch-Abbess, and Peter titled himself with the lowest rank of Deacon.

Notable events include:

- the dedication of a member's new house to Bacchus, formalized by the crossing of two smoking tobacco pipes

- a burlesque wedding thrown for the court fool Jakov Turgenev, which involved wearing costumes made from tree bark and mice skins and the couple riding into Moscow on a camel.

- and a grand funeral thrown for Peter's favourite little person, with six black ponies pulling a sled with the coffin and a whole procession of people with dwarfism behind it, who Peter had organized by size.

Source: Zguta, R. (1973). Peter I's "Most Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 21(1), 18–28.

