

BIOGRAPHY



Thomas Nast

When the notorious political boss William Marcy Tweed was accused of having a corrupt hold on political elections in New York, he snarled, “As long as I count the votes, what are you going to do about it?” Thomas Nast, a reformer and a talented cartoonist, decided what he would do about it. He sat down at his drawing table and took pen in hand.

As you read, consider why Thomas Nast’s cartoons had such a powerful effect on people.

Drawing was Thomas Nast’s salvation. Born in Germany in 1840, he arrived in New York City at the age of 6 and was enrolled in one of its first public schools. Although he was a poor student, he took a great interest in drawing. At age 12, he enrolled in an art school, where he demonstrated great talent. When he was only 15, he won a job illustrating news stories for a popular magazine.

Nast’s hatred of injustice and government corruption showed through in his drawings. A friend encouraged him to move beyond mere illustration. Why not caricature evil-doers in cartoons, he urged, to make people recognize and resent their wrongdoing? Nast eagerly turned his talents in this direction and created the modern political cartoon.

In 1870, Nast took on the Tweed Ring operating out of New York’s Tammany Hall. He created a ferocious tiger to symbolize Tammany’s power and ability to attack weaker opponents. He caricatured Boss Tweed as a vulture preying on the city and as an overfed, bejeweled thief of public money. The cartoons quickly worried Tweed. He protested that he didn’t care what the press printed about him—his voters couldn’t read anyhow. But they could see “them d___ pictures.”

Tweed offered Nast \$500,000 to stop his attacks, but the cartoonist turned him down and continued.

Tweed next threatened Nast’s publisher, *Harper’s Weekly*. Because the Harper Company also published textbooks, Tweed ordered the Board of Education to throw out all Harper texts and to buy no more. Nast caricatured this move by showing Tweed as a big bully grabbing books from frightened little schoolchildren. Nothing worked for Tweed, including threats on Nast’s life, and the relentless cartoon assault eventually resulted in Tweed’s political defeat and conviction.

Although Nast is best remembered for helping to bring Tweed down, he also created many familiar symbols that live on. For example, he originated the Republican and Democratic symbols of the elephant and the donkey. In his illustrations for Clement Moore’s *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* he created the jolly, fat Santa Claus image.

Although Thomas Nast made a great deal of money throughout his life, he was bedeviled by bad investments and beset by money troubles. Hoping to assist him financially, his admirer President Theodore Roosevelt named him consul general to Ecuador where he died of fever in 1902.

Questions to Think About

1. How did Thomas Nast help to bring about Boss Tweed’s downfall?
2. What lasting symbols did Nast leave to modern America?
3. **Testing Conclusions** An old Chinese saying holds that “A picture is worth a thousand words.” How did Nast prove this with his cartoons?