

# Valentine's Day

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

*also called St. Valentine's Day*

day (February 14) when lovers express their affection with greetings and gifts. Although there were several Christian martyrs named Valentine, the day probably took its name from a priest who was martyred about AD 270 by the emperor Claudius II Gothicus. According to legend, the priest signed a letter to his jailer's daughter, whom he had befriended and with whom he had fallen in love, "from your Valentine." The holiday also had origins in the Roman festival of Lupercalia, held in mid-February. The festival, which celebrated the coming of spring, included fertility rites and the pairing off of women with men by lottery. At the end of the 5th century, Pope Gelasius I replaced Lupercalia with St. Valentine's Day. It came to be celebrated as a day of romance from about the 14th century.



American Valentine card, c. 1908.

Formal messages, or valentines, appeared in the 1500s, and by the late 1700s commercially printed cards were being used. The first commercial valentines in the United States were printed in the mid-1800s. Valentines commonly depict Cupid, the Roman god of love, along with hearts, traditionally the seat of emotion. Because it was thought that their mating season began in mid-February, birds also became a symbol of the day.

Traditional gifts include candy and flowers, particularly red roses, a symbol of beauty and love. The day is popular in the United States as well as in Britain, Canada, and Australia, and it also is celebrated in other countries, including France and Mexico. It has expanded to expressions of affection among relatives and friends. Many schoolchildren exchange valentines with one another on this day.

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