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This is the first in a monthly column about patents which are interesting in themselves or which are in the news. With over 50 million to choose from it will take some time for the well to run dry, and of course more are being published all the time. With the Christmas season let's look at one which is topical. The free Espacenet® covers much of this patent material, and the "Simple text" search box lists sixteen patents with Santa Claus in their titles of abstract summaries. One of these is the intriguing "Santa Claus detector", US 5523741. The abstract provided by the inventor, Thomas Cane of San Rafael, California, states that "It is useful for visually signalling the arrival of Santa Claus by illuminating an externally visible light source having a power source loaded within said device".

This is an Adobe Acrobat link to the main [drawing](#) of the patent, from which you can navigate to other parts of the eight page patent specification. It shows a fireplace with such a stocking hung up beside it. Cane states that the custom is that Christmas presents are there to reward children for being good during the year. The lit stocking indicates that Santa has indeed paid a visit, and [another drawing](#) shows an illuminated Santa Claus as a possible variant within the stocking.

Absurd as this invention may sound, its existence and how it can be found illustrate the well organised nature of this patent database. Not everything will be found in a free database, as they are simpler than priced sites, but much will be available for further searching on the topic. Of course no database will cover all patent specifications, if only because the application is published 18 months from the first filing date, so that many will be awaiting publication when a search is done. The indexing may also leave something to be desired. Nevertheless, this particular example gives some possibilities. The bibliographic record for the patent provides coded information which is not easy for the novice to decipher. The "IPC classification" of G08B23/00 is provided by the US Patent Office to define what is new about the idea. It stands for "Alarms responsive to unspecified undesired or abnormal conditions". Unfortunately the International Patent Classifications (IPC) provided by this patent office is often not very accurate (as they are based on computer concordances from US classification) but it can be used in the main search page (accessible from the bibliographic record by clicking on the binoculars icon. Often more useful are the "IC" hyperlinks given below it. These are classifications applied by European Patent Office examiners at The Hague which are based on the ECLA classification. This is a more detailed version of the IPC. By clicking on each hyperlink, a definition of the inventive step is provided.

The first, A47G33/00, is defined as "Religious or ritual equipment in dwelling or for general use". The second is F21S8/00P. The letter P at the end indicates that it is not a normal IPC class (which always end in numbers) but rather a more detailed ECLA only breakdown of the idea. The definition here is "Devices intended for fixed installation: for decorative purposes", with the "for decorative purposes" being the ECLA specific breakdown. It is possible to navigate around within these classes and to click on a more appropriate or interesting classification. In each case a hierarchy then appears, using dots to show how the idea is a subsection of the class above it.

All three possibilities are intriguingly reasonable as definitions of the inventive step involved in the patent. It

