

The Jesuits in Japan

The Mission to Japan

St. Francis Xavier founded the Japan mission in 1549. Although his knowledge of Japanese was basic, he was able to spread his message using the visual arts, thanks to a chest full of paintings and other religious items brought from Europe. His method involved setting up a painting of the Madonna and Child or of the Salvator Mundi on a pole in a public place where it could be seen by a crowd. Then he would stand in front of it and preach with the assistance of a Japanese interpreter inventing simple rhymes and tunes to help his audience remember the points he was making.



Figure 1. Andre' Besson, Francis Xavier Preaching in Goa, 1619. Oil on canvas, 37.8 x 61.8 inches. London, São Roque.

The Japanese "Embassy" to the King of Spain and Pope Gregory XIII

This engraving depicts Pope Gregory XIII receiving four youthful Japanese emissaries who traveled to the kingdoms of Italy, Spain and Portugal on a mission arranged by Alessandro Valignano, in 1582, to acquaint the youths with the culture of the Christian West so they might share their impressions upon their return to Japan. At the same time, Valignano hoped to provide Europeans direct experience with the Japanese. The mission was a great success. The emissaries were celebrated throughout Europe and afterward in Japan.

This was the first time that people from the other side of the world were actually seen in Europe. Everyone wanted to be near these young Japanese students and to question them, and to satisfy this universal curiosity a whole series of books were published in six countries and re-printed in the 20 years that followed.

Struggling against hostile colonial authorities, Alessandro Valignano mounted a spectacular public relations stunt between 1585 and 1590 to obtain from the Pope the rights to Japan for the Jesuits, to make Europe known to the Japanese, and vice versa, and to demonstrate Japanese readiness for the priesthood. Valignano's insistence on training an indigenous priesthood is perhaps the most telling aspect of his policy of inculturation and a radical move which contrasted sharply with policies in the Americas and India, and which resulted in the first Japanese ordinations during 1601-3.

These young men traveled to Italy, Spain, and Portugal amid great jubilation. They were received by Pope Gregory XIII, and remained in Rome long enough to attend the installation of Pope Sixtus V.

Valignano charged his embassy with bringing back to Japan a European printing press and movable type. Although the Japanese had used a printing press for a thousand years, the process of wood engraving then in use in Japan was limited. The European press brought back by the embassy produced the first examples of printing from movable type in Japan and secured a place for them in the world history of printing.

Figure 2. The Japanese Ambassadors are Received in Rome by Pope Gregory XIII and the Cardinals with Great Joy. From Cornelius Houten, *Historical History of the Whole World* (Amoy, 1667).

Some of the most imaginative of these screens depict knights and battles from Western history, again derived from prints and atlases but painted in brilliant Japanese colors.



Figure 3. Anonymous, Western Nobles. Byōbu screen of four panels, 63.8 x 181.2 inches. Colours and gold on paper, end of the 16th century. Kobe City Museum.

The Jesuits considered Japan to be the jewel in the crown of their worldwide missions, which was one reason why they founded the largest Catholic art academy in Asia there in 1583. Known as the Seminary of Painters, this giant workshop of up to forty artists and apprentices was directed by the Neapolitan Jesuit artist Giovanni Niccolò, a master painter and sculptor. Nearly all of the artists in the academy were Japanese or Chinese, and their traditions made a profound impact on the art produced there.

The Seminary became a center for the diffusion of European visual culture throughout Asia, as well as—in a more subtle way—fertile ground for cultural adaptation and assimilation. Although

Niccolò's school was not intended as a hothouse for hybrid art, it did address the iconographic needs of its Japanese audience, and as an increasing number of Japanese and Chinese students swelled its ranks these artists brought their own styles and techniques into their mission art commissions, creating a delicate balance of East and West. The Seminary also had an extraordinary impact on Japanese art outside the mission community, where a vogue for European exoticism inspired many mainstream Japanese artists to train there and incorporate their new techniques and imagery into the secular art they produced for Japanese lords.

—Carrin Alexander-Rubley, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (Plymouth Press Limited, 2003)

Figure 4. Anonymous, Western Genre Scene with Musicians. Byōbu screen of six panels, 40.4 x 123.3 inches. Colours and gold on paper, early 17th century. Shimonaka, Meiji Gallery.

Another kind of screen popular among Japanese patrons, stylistically closer to Western art, featured pastoral scenes of priests, monks, musicians, and other European figures against Western cityscapes taken from atlases as background. Some of these screens had hidden Christian meanings.



Figure 6. Madonna of the Statues. Oil and pigments on paper, 6.7 x 4.7 inches. Nagasaki, Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum.

This delicate painting is now the best-known example of cultural convergence on the Jesuit missions in Japan. A traditional hanging scroll on paper painted in Japanese water-colors and partially gilded, it is an eloquent testament to the high level of artistic activity at the Jesuit school.

The Seminary of Painters



Figure 5. Daruma. Oil on paper, hanging scroll, 30.3 x 14.5 inches, first half of the 17th century. Kobe City Museum.

A particularly fascinating brand of hybrid art deriving from the Jesuit mission encounter in Japan are portraits of Zen Buddhist figures, especially the Indian missionary Daruma (Bodhidharma), which use European conventions of modeling and color, some of them in the European medium of oil. Several of them are signed by the Japanese-Christian artist Nobukata (fl. 1590s–1620s), who was sought after by Christians and non-Christians alike for his mastery of Western painting techniques. These paintings typically portray their subject as a bust portrait, and they emphasize the large noses and eyes of Westerners.

