

On the European Luxury Objects in the 16th and 17th Century Japan, and their Use by the "Kirishitan"

Yoshie Kojima

Contact between Japan and the West was initiated in the middle of the 16th century with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1543 at Tanegashima Island near Nagasaki. Relationships were especially intense during the second half of the 16th century and the 17th century, and during the period of Christianization by Western missionaries which lasted until 1639 when the Japanese government forbade the Christian religion and officially ordered to close all ports to the West, except in a few cases.

In this period various sorts of "luxury" items were shipped from the West to the East and vice versa. In long distance trade between completely different worlds, exoticism of itself implied some decisive luxury value quite apart from mere physical value. At this presentation I will survey at first what could be luxury and exoticism in the case of both Western products for the Japanese and Japanese products for the Europeans, and subsequently I will examine how this sense of luxury functioned for the Christianization of Japan and the persecutions of "Kirishitan" ("Christians" in old Japanese) in the following period, taking into consideration several liturgical objects brought by missionaries from Europe. And finally I will refer to some art works of extremely high quality, hidden for centuries and still conserved by "Kirishitan" families, on which I am currently undertaking research.

1

(fig.1) Through the Namban Screens it is possible to see how Western people seemed exotic to the Japanese at the time¹. These folding screens represent the Namban at

¹ For the Namban culture, see in particular: 坂本満「南蛮文化文献目録」『ポルトガルと南蛮文化展 めざせ、東方の国々』（展覧会カタログ）1993, pp. 249-252; C. ボルジェス・デ。ソウザ「Bibliography」Ibid, pp. 253-252; 坂本満、井出洋一郎、越智裕二郎、日高薫編

the port of Nagasaki, the principal gate for the foreign world. the word Namban means Southern Barbarian in Japanese, that is Western people arrived from the South, such as Siam or India. (fig. 2) A multitude of Namban Screens were produced and diffused during the 16th and 17th centuries because of the curious, strange and simply exotic appearance of the people arriving from what was almost another world. Here we can note not only their luxurious costumes, but also a singular view of the three-mast ship where seamen are represented as if they were acrobats. (fig. 3) Moreover, the feature differences are also accentuated in their height, oversized eyes and gigantic noses. Behind them a commercial house exposes foreign articles transported by the Namban. It is remarkable not to find any Western luxury items on their counters.

As a matter of fact, the main trade articles shipped by Western merchants to Japan were manufactured in China, India, and other places in South Asia, like silk fabrics and ceramics. To pay for them, an enormous amount of silver was exported from Japan, so this was an intermediate trade in which luxury items were not a main object at all for the intercontinental commerce, probably because of the object's scarce quantity. Nonetheless diverse objects, considered a luxury for their rarity and exoticism together with their material preciousness, had considerable weight in some circumstances. Several cases will be outlined herein.

(fig.4) First we see the Goudleers, produced mainly in Holland in the 17th

「南蛮文化主要文献目録」『国立歴史民族博物館研究報告（南蛮美術総目録：洋風画篇）』

第 75 集 1997, pp. 370-376. See also : 岡崎市美術博物館編『家康の生きた時代 東と西の

出会い』 1997; 神戸市博物館編『南蛮美術セレクション』 1998; 東武美術館編『大ザビ

エル展』 1999; 京都市博物館編『異国の風 -江戸時代 京都が見たヨーロッパ-』 2000;

堺市博物館編『南蛮 東西交流の精華』(展覧会カタログ) 2003; Yoshitomo Okamoto, The

Namban art of Japan, translated by Ronald K. Jones, New York – Tokyo 1972; Arte namban : influencia española y portuguesa en el arte japonés siglos XVI y XVII, Exhibition catalogue: Museo del Prado, Madrid 1989; Pedro Canavarro, Maria Helena Mendes Pinto, Art namban : les Portugais au Japon, Bruxelles 1989; Portugal und Japan im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert : die Nanban-Kultur, Frankfurt am Main (IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation), 1998-2000.

century, which were prized for the design's rarity. A Goudleer is made of tanned leather gilded with silver, varnished, then embossed and colored. (fig.5) In Europe it was used as wall cloth, while in Japan it was cut into little pieces to form cigarette cases or parts of saddles. (fig. 6) It is interesting to note that also the habit of smoking was imported by the Namban in this period.

(fig. 7) In the reverse case of export from Japan to Europe, lacquered wooden objects for European everyday goods designed to appeal to European tastes proved successful. As we see here, in these kind of crafts the surface is flat, covered by thick decorative motifs, and disseminated with mother-of-pearl inlays. (fig.8) This crowded decoration is definitely different from the traditional Japanese lacquer work, where blank space is valued and the motifs are sober. However that way it acquired a certain trade value. (fig. 9) European merchants transmitted European tastes to Japanese craftsmen who, on their side, sufficiently understood what they were expected to produce. It is possible to see how Japanese craftsmen responded successfully to the requests of European merchants in this writing desk, decorated with pompous lacquer painting of which the upper and side faces were concealed by mother-of-pearl and silver tacks, typical Portugal-Indian decorations of that period. The taste of this lacquer desk is sumptuous and was also exotic to European eyes, though it wasn't traditional Japanese.

In 1617 English trader William Adams wrote in a letter: «I have been at Meaco [City of Kyoko] and talked with the makeman [of lacquer works], who hath promised that in short time he will have done. He hath fifty men that worketh night and day; that, so far as I seem he doth his endeavour »². From this testimony one can see that in Kyoto at that time there was a relatively large scale lacquer workshop that energetically handled the Western merchant's orders.

(fig. 10) In addition to these craft products, true art works, scarce in quantity, were brought from Europe into Japan. It's likely that they were not trade articles but used as congratulatory gifts to dominant classes, quite apart from religious art objects brought by missionaries. In this instance, besides rarity and exoticism, factual esthetical beauty implied luxuriousness. This tapestry represents Diana and Actaeon, Greek mythology figures that didn't seem to be understood by the Japanese at the time. (fig.11) Five pieces of the same series of tapestries have reached us in Kyoto up to now. Since the 17th century they have been used to decorate parade floats of the Gion Festival, a Shinto festival in

² Diary of Richard Cocks : cape-merchant in the English factory in Japan, 1615-1622, with correspondence, edited by Edward Maunde Thompson, 2 voll., New York 1964, vol. I, p. 23 (correspondence from William Adams).

Kyoto. Here, Kyoto citizens have decorated their religious floats with Greek mythological tapestries without knowing the meaning of their scenes.

2

Now we will discuss how the particular sense of luxuriousness of European items in Japan functioned for the Christianization of the country³.

The history of Christianity begun in 1549 when Francis Xavier, one of the original seven members of Ignatius's small army, arrived in Kagoshima in the southern part of Japan. The Jesuits first began converting the elite of the society and then worked their way down to the common people. Missionary work was brought forward successfully and it is generally accepted that at the beginning of the 17th century there were approximately 300,000 Christians in Japan. They were called "Kirishitan", that is "Christians" in old Japanese. Nagasaki basically became Jesuit territory. In the very beginning not a few Japanese thought this "new" religion was just another Buddhist sect. In due course, the missionaries adopted simplified teaching of the Christian religion. Through their missionary experience in other Asian countries, they had devised a basic

³ On the history of Christianization in Japan in the 16th and 17th century and the persecutions of Christians" in the following period, see: 岡田章雄『キリシタン信仰と習俗』

思文閣出版 1983; 高瀬弘一郎『キリシタンの研究 ザビエル来日から「鎖国」まで』岩波

書店 1993; 松田毅一『キリシタン研究 第二部』風間書房 1975; 宮崎賢太郎『カクレキ

リシタンの信仰世界』東京大学出版会、1996; Johannes Laures, *Kirishitan Bunko: a manual of books and documents on the early Christian missions in Japan : with special reference to the principal libraries in Japan and more particularly to the collection at Sophia University, Tokyo* 1940; C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, Univ. of California 1951, Manchester 1993; Stephen Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan : a study of their development, beliefs and rituals to the present day*, Richmond 1998; Andrew C. Ross, «Alessandro Valignano and Culture of the East», in *The Jesuits. Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts 1540-1773*, ed. by John W. O'Mally et al., Tronto 1999, pp. 336-351; Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in early modern Japan: Kirishitan belief and practice*, Leiden 2001.

three-stage catechetical process that outlined the order of the teachings: pre-evangelization, catechumenism, and formation. Japanese priests were also canonized with only essential and elementary instructions, responding to a great demand for Baptism administration.

The first ban on Christianity was in 1587 by Shogun Hideyoshi, but there was a period of relative freedom from harassment until the time between 1633 and 1639, when another Shogun, Hidetada Tokugawa, issued a series of edicts which ultimately closed off Japan from the outside world, and the major impetus for these drastic measures was to rid Japan of Christianity. The oppression of Christianity was carried out with thoroughness, consistency and cruelty until the second half of the 19th century. But, despite this great severity – in many cases agonizing torture was inflicted - a small group of Japanese maintained their faith underground. They were called “Kakure-Kirishitan”, that is concealed or crypto-Christians. Their faith became gradually so remote from orthodoxy, amalgamating with indigenous animism and ancestor worship, that numerous of them refused to return to orthodoxy when, in the second half of the 19th century, newly arrived western missionaries tried to convert them.

Later we will examine how the sense of luxury functioned during the Christianization of Japan and the persecution of "Kirishitan" in the following period, taking into consideration several liturgical objects, sacred pictures and sculptures used in the following three ways:

first, for the Christianization of Japan by the Western missionaries, who, with these objects, successfully converted a large number of Japanese, especially those of high social rank;

second, by the Japanese government to identify and expose clandestine Christians ("kakure-Kirishitan"), especially through “e-bumi” (picture trampling. During the persecution period all Japanese were forced to trample a sacred images);

third by the "Kirishitan" to maintain their concealed faith that, as we have seen, in certain cases became far from orthodox, being totally isolated for about three centuries. In this case, the luxuriousness itself of liturgical objects and sacred images could have had some religious or spiritual significance.

Regarding the first issue there are several interesting testimonies of missionaries. Xavier at the time of his first mission in Japan asked for an audience with the Japanese emperor but in vain because he was poorly dressed and bore no gifts. His next visit, which was to a daimyo, or local lord, of Yamaguchi, found him dressed in an impressive costume, and he presented the daimyo with such exotic gifts as a clock, spectacles, a musket, a brocade, and mirrors. In return the daimyo publicly proclaimed Xavier's right to preach in his domain. In due course, Francisco Cabral, mission superior

from 1570 to 1581, reversed the early ascetic and adaptive tendencies of Xavier and had Jesuits return to wearing their black robes worn also by Japanese of commensurate position. (fig. 12) As we see in the Namban screen, the missionaries dressed in a very traditional Western way, depicted by Japanese painter Kano Naizen as exotic and somehow pompous. These impressions were successfully designed to attract the Japanese, particularly those of high social class, to the Western religion, as attested by Xavier and Cabral.

(fig. 13) Religious articles, especially liturgical objects, also played an indispensable part in the faith of the early converts. (fig. 14) The missionaries distributed these articles to remind the Christians of their beliefs, and to encourage steadfastness in their religious duties. (fig. 15) Some Japanese Christians would walk miles to obtain rosary beads. The rosary became so popular that Alessandro Organtino, Jesuit missionary in Japan from 1579 to 1603, said "I don't know if there is another nation in the world that esteems and venerates as much the holy beads".

(fig. 16) In the meantime, Alessandro Valignano, another Jesuit in Japan from 1570 and the founder of the first Christian Seminary at Azuchi, recognized the importance of "magnificenza" for Jesuit institutions in such an "aristocratic" country, and in a letter written in 1577 Organtino asked Valignano to try to obtain paintings and other adornments from rich sea captains. (fig. 17) The images we see here are not those to which these missionaries referred, but just reference works that could have been used in similar situations. Today it is nearly impossible to ascertain the provenance of all the Christian articles transported from Europe to Japan in the 16th and 17th century.

It is remarkable that not a small part of the now existing luxury crafts or art works brought from Europe in that period are related to religious use. Taking into consideration that religious articles would have disappeared easily because of the Christian persecution, it's more than probable that considerable part of the luxury crafts and art works were transported to Japan to be utilized for the Christianization of the country. That is to say, the luxury and exotism, and beauty of these objects could imply some symbolic power, as they were brought from opposite sides of the world.

(fig.18) It is possible to notice a similar phenomenon in the case of the "Fumi-e".

In the "Fumi-e" ceremony begun in 1633, the government of Nagasaki forced its citizens to affirm their abjuration from Christianity each January by walking on plaquettes of Christian devotional images. The plaquettes that had been originally produced in the Western world and then were copied repeatedly in Japan, had at one time belonged to "Kirishitan" families. This ceremony began when the "Kirishitan" community was still very large, and astonishing numbers of people preferred death to symbolic abjuration. The procedure lasted for two more centuries. We shall see now several

examples of plaquettes. (figg. 19-24) The Western original manufacture shows high quality art works – they maybe originated from Italy. In other plaquettes made in Japan the expression is somewhat simplified and stylized. Several plaquettes show highly evidence of usage, having been trampled on for centuries. This act of the Nagasaki police was an implicit acknowledgement of the symbolic power of the images. This same power inspired several groups of concealed-Christians (the “Kakure-Kirishitan”) in the Islands west of Kyushu and in the steep and craggy mountains in the district of Ibaraki situated between Kyoto and Osaka. In these places such images were preserved and secretly worshiped against all odds for two and a half centuries, until the Japanese relaxed their attitude toward Christianity following the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

3

(fig. 25) Finally I will refer to several objects found recently in the roof of Kakure-Kirishitan families in the mountains of Ibaraki. This area was dominated by powerful Kirishitan Daimyo (Christian local lord) Ukon Takayama, between 1585 and 1612, which is near Kyoto, old Japanese capital, and Osaka the most important commercial center at that time. (fig. 26) Probably because of this location, several marvelously accomplished European art works have been preserved. It's likely that these objects originally belonged to a high-class Kirishitan, for example Takayama. This embossed lead plate represents the Madonna of Loreto, an Italian sanctuary to which it is said the house of Mary flew from Nazareth, and belonged to Jesuits until the Order's suppression, probably because the notion of the symbolic transfer of such a sanctuary would have some use in their missionary works. I attribute this piece to the school of Jacopo Sansovino, Italian mannerist sculptor. (fig. 27) We can situate this Crucifixion in similar circumstances: in my opinion it can be attributed to Giambologna, another Italian manierist sculptor, a nearly identical Crucifixion of which was made for the sanctuary of Loreto. The fact that Organtino, a Jesuit from Brescia, was headmaster of the Jesuit seminar in Loreto before he went to Japan surely has some relation with this. Currently I'm researching these issues about which I hope I will be able to talk on another occasion. However, in closing, I'd just like to reiterate how these splendid objects have descended until now in the deep mountains just due to their value as luxury items on so many levels.