

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, c. 1610. Oil on canvas, 37.8 x 61.8 inches. London, São Roque.

The Japanese mission was numerically the most successful to an already literate people that the Church has witnessed since the first six centuries of the Christian era. In Japan and China, Alessandro Valignano would guide the Society in the most extraordinary attempt at inculturation of the Christian faith to be undertaken between the 9th and the 20th centuries. He was able in Japan, and even more spectacularly in China, to develop Christian missionary activity free from confinement in European forms to allow the Christian message genuinely to enter Japanese and Chinese society and culture and to develop Japanese and Chinese forms. This process was not one of the kernel becoming clothed in a new husk while remaining untouched, but a genuine attempt to translate the Gospel from one culture into another.

But where did this policy come from? The tools for a radical approach to inculturation were built into the Jesuit system, but they were brought into action only as a result of the encounter with Japanese and Chinese culture. The crown of the system was put in place in China when Valignano came into contact, first through the 9th and the 17th centuries, that was comparable to Graeco-Roman culture, indeed that surpassed it, because Chinese culture had a monotheistic origin according to Ricci's interpretation of 'original Confucianism.' When we add to this that the very goal of Confucian education and philosophy was personal and civic virtue— which was also the goal of the Catholic Humanism the Jesuit schools played such a major part in shaping—we have found another key element in the equation.

The final ingredient is Italy and the Catholic Humanism of the Collegio Romano. It is significant that so many of the key figures in this primary stage of Valignano's inculturation initiative were Italians—Valignano himself, Ruggieri, Ricci, Soldi, Pasio, Longobardo, and Martini, among others. Whatever else Italians of the 16th and early 17th centuries were, they were not conquistadors. It was the Collegio Romano in the period 1570 to 1620 that educated the majority of these key Italian Jesuits.

—Andrew C. Ross in The Jesuits: Culture, Science, and the Arts, 1540-1773 (University of Toronto Press, 1999)

This episode from the earliest painted series of Francis Xavier's life shows how the Apostle to the Indies used pictures when he preached. Normally he would stand on the street with his interpreters, display paintings of Christ the Savior, the Apostles Peter and Paul, or the Virgin and Child, and attract the attention of bystanders with his catechesis and simple sermons.



Figure 2. Alessandro Valignano, Japanese Embassy to the King of Spain and Pope Gregory XIII, 1582. Engraving on paper, 17.8 x 11.2 inches. Rome, Vatican Museums.

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.

—Andrew Brossard, Sixteenth Century European Printed Works on the First Japanese Mission to Europe (U.S. Brill, 1973), and Gavin Alexander Rulley, Art on the East Mission in Asia and Latin America (University of Toronto Press, 1999)

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



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.

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 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.

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.

—Gavin Alexander Rulley, Art of Colonial Latin America (Phaidon Press Limited, 2003)

The Seminary of Painters

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.

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

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

