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.



The Japanese mission was numerically the most But where did this policy come from? The tools The final ingredient is Italy and the Catholic successful to an already literate people that the for a radical approach to inculturation were built Humanism of the Collegio Romano. It is Church has witnessed since the first six centuries into the Jesuit system, but they were brought significant that so many of the key figures in Alessandro Valignano would guide the Society in with Japanese and Chinese culture. The crown initiative were Italians—Valignano himself, painted series of Francis the most extraordinary attempt at inculturation of the system was put in place in China when Ruggieri, Ricci, Soldi, Pasio, Longobardo, and Xavier's life shows how the of the Christian faith to be undertaken between Valignano came into contact, first through Martini, among others. Whatever else Italians Apostle to the Indies used the 9th and the 20th centuries. He was able in Ruggieri and Ricci, with a classical culture that of the 16th and early 17th centuries were, they Japan, and even more spectacularly in China, to was comparable to Graeco-Roman culture, were not conquistadors. It was the Collegio develop Christian missionary activity free from indeed that surpassed it, because Chinese culture Romano in the period 1570 to 1620 that confinement in European forms to allow the had a monotheistic origin according to Ricci's educated the majority of these key Italian Jesuits. Christian message genuinely to enter Japanese interpretation of 'original Confucianism.' When and Chinese society and culture and to develop we add to this that the very goal of Confucian Japanese and Chinese forms. This process was education and philosophy was personal and not one of the kernel becoming clothed in a new civic virtue— which was also the goal of the husk while remaining untouched, but a genuine Catholic Humanism the Jesuit schools played attempt to translate the Gospel from one culture such a major part in shaping—we have found

another key element in the equation.

— Andrew C. Ross in
The Jesuitis: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773

display paintings of Christ the

Normally he would stand on

the street with his interpreters,

Savior, the Apostles Peter and

Paul, or the Virgin and Child,

and attract the attention of

bystanders with his catechesis

and simple sermons.



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

his engraving depicts Pope Gregory XIII receiving four youthful Japanese emissaries who traveled to the kingdoms of Italy, Spain and Portugal on a mission arranged y 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.

truggling 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 panese 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.

young men traveled to Italy, Spain, and Portugal amidst 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

The Seminary of Painters



Some of the most imaginative of these screens depict knights and battles from Western history,

again derived from prints and atlases but

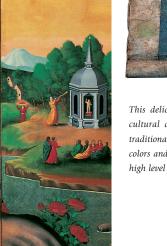
painted in brilliant Japanese colors.

The Jesuits considered Japan to be the jewel in the crown of their Niccolò's school was not intended as a hothouse for hybrid art, worldwide missions, which was one reason why they founded it did address the iconographic needs of its Japanese audience, the largest Catholic art academy in Asia there in 1583. Known and as an increasing number of Japanese and Chinese students as the Seminary of Painters, this giant workshop of up to forty swelled its ranks these artists brought their own styles and artists and apprentices was directed by the Neapolitan Jesuit artist techniques into their mission art commissions, creating a delicate Giovanni Niccolò, a master painter and sculptor. Nearly all of balance of East and West. The Seminary also had an extraordinary the artists in the academy were Japanese or Chinese, and their impact on Japanese art outside the mission community, where traditions made a profound impact on the art produced there. a vogue for European exoticism inspired many mainstream Japanese artists to train there and incorporate their new The Seminary became a center for the diffusion of European techniques and imagery into the secular art they produced for





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



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.



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 watercolors and partially gilded, it is an eloquent testament to the high level of artistic activity at the Jesuit school.



