2 Early Western-Style Paintings in Japan
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Impact, influence, and cultural contribution are terms notoriously difficult to assess, as regards both quantity and quality, when studying transcultural relations between two civilisations. To make one’s point, there is always a tendency to exaggerate the effect that a culture has had upon another society, to see ideal results that perhaps were not nearly so significant as might be fondly supposed. Such a danger is certainly present in the study of nanbanjin, or the Southern Barbarians, as the Japanese unflatteringly dubbed the early Spaniards and Portuguese who came to their country.

The early Christian missionaries in Japan sent back an immense quantity of letters, reports and writings. Many of these are of considerable historical value for they offer a comparative insight into things Japanese, but their sheer number may give the mistaken impression that the sun rose and set on European activity in Japan, that the European presence made itself felt throughout the country and in every aspect of Japanese life. To counteract this view, it is well to bear in mind that the early Europeans, both missionaries and merchants, in Japan were few in number, that many Japanese never once caught a glimpse of them, let alone were in any way influenced by them. Additionally, it is surely significant that references to the Europeans living in or visiting the country are few and scanty in Japanese official records and private writings of the time.

It would be a mistake, however, to go to the other extreme and believe that the Westerners left no mark at all during their nearly a hundred years of residence in Japan. They certainly did so in the religious sphere, for despite extended and relentless persecution Christianity continued to exist, at least in attenuated form, in outlying regions for centuries after all the missionaries had been expelled or martyred. And in a peculiar but limited way Western painting made a small contribution to the cultural scene in that for a limited period some local artists painted in the Western style. Although this artistic phenomenon was short-lived, it has at least left behind some examples as proof positive that the Western cultural tradition did manage to obtain a tenuous foothold on Japanese soil for a brief time. This daring experiment was cut short by political factors and not allowed to mature, put down roots and flourish. But thanks to the examples that
have fortunately survived to the present day, it is impossible to hold that the West made no cultural impact at all on Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A word of clarification is perhaps needed here. Nanban bijutsu, or Southern Barbarian art, can be divided into two general categories. The first includes screens (or byōbu), usually sixfold and in pairs, that depict European missionaries, merchants and ships, and sometimes even the foreign port, that is, Goa, from which they embarked for their voyage to Japan. Some sixty of these fascinating screens are extant, both in Japan and elsewhere, and they are painted in purely Japanese style, usually by artists belonging to the Kanō school. These works are classified as nanban bijutsu simply because of their exotic content, not because of their artistic style. The second general category embraces works painted in the Western style by Japanese artists, who for the most part produced copies based on European exemplars. The present chapter deals with this second category.

MISSIONARIES

At the end of the thirteenth century Marco Polo included a brief hearsay description of the legendary island of Zipangu (as he called Japan) in his celebrated book of travels through Asia.1 His account of the mysterious country would have probably gone unnoticed except that the author mistakenly dwelt on the abundance of gold in Zipangu, a fact that aroused the interest, not to say cupidity, of European merchants. But it was not until 1543 that three Portuguese traders were shipwrecked off the small island of Tanegashima, to the south of Kyushu, and thus unwittingly inaugurated the century of Western relations with Japan.

Only six years later Francis Xavier and two Jesuit companions sailed into Kagoshima determined to bring the country into the Christian fold. Although this dream was never realised, Xavier's successors achieved some remarkable results in view of their exiguous numbers, and within a matter of 30 years some 100,000 Japanese had been baptised. As the Jesuit mission in the country became better organised and administered, more and more churches were inaugurated throughout Kyushu and parts of Honshu (especially Kyoto). Many of these foundations, however, were probably little more than houses converted for the purpose. Those that were especially built were constructed in typical Japanese style, as can be seen in Kanō Motohide's fan-painting of the church in Kyoto.2

As Buddhist temples were often generously decorated with statues and paintings, so the missionaries too wished to embellish their own places of