

Art and Design

Western Influences on Japanese Art: Nanban Period

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Often, focus is drawn to the influences of Japanese art and culture on the Western tradition. Though Japanese art continues to play a role in the development of Western art, originally Western culture shaped some aspects of Japanese works. Through the introduction of Christianity, the growth of trade, and expansion of European art education, Japanese art forms have developed from indigenous and European cultures. Western influences on Japanese art during the 16th and 17th centuries came through trade and Christian influence.

During the 16th century both the Spanish and Portuguese recognized a profitable opportunity in Japan. The nations weakened government and trade ties with China resulted in the European nations seeking trade relations with the Japanese in order to exploit its vast natural resources and establish a successful, profitable trade system. Europeans were mainly interested in the abundance of gold, silver, copper, porcelain and lacquer that they were able to buy cheaper in Japan than anywhere else. In turn, they would resell these resources at a much higher price or used the goods to trade, collecting more than they were originally worth in Japan. Through the trade system the Japanese were introduced to Western novelties that shaped their culture and made appearances in art, specifically images of the wealthier and nobler. Japan catered to Portuguese art, their first partners in trade, by creating domestic furniture using Japanese techniques of lacquer and white pearl inlay and adorning them with Portuguese motifs.

Typically, the desired furniture of the time produced by the Japanese were drop-front cabinets and domed coffers. Though Grassley argues that the Portuguese influence on Japanese furniture was mainly for the production of exports, it is agreed that cultural exchange occurred between small crafts and dishes that contain exotic Portuguese subjects and motifs (Chapter II: Pre-Meiji Export Furniture and Its Historical Context). Grassley also notes the introduction of house furniture of Western-Origin was subtly introduced through trade into Japanese culture motifs (Chapter II: Pre-Meiji Export Furniture and Its Historical Context).

In the middle of the 16th century, the first introduction of Western art to Japan was brought by Christian missionaries, who flocked to the country when the Spanish and Portuguese traders arrived. One of the most noted missionaries was Francis Xavier of Spain. Xavier brought with him various European paintings depicting religious scenes, in hope to introduce Christianity to the people of Japan. One of the iconic images he put on display was of the Madonna and the Madonna and Child. At the time, the realistic depictions and use of oil in the European paintings were exceedingly dissimilar from the traditional ink paintings of Japan. Though much different in appearance, Tamon Miki found that noblemen such as Takahisa, the lord Shimazu, greatly admired Western paintings and sought out reproductions and commissioned pieces (380). Despite the fact that Buddhism was Japan's prominent religion, Christianity flourished, especially in areas that welcomed trade. As Christianity spread, the demand for European religious paintings and ritual objects increased beyond supply. Accounts of Xavier's messages to the Pope claim that sacred images were a very effective means of introducing Christianity, according to Miki, is a more successful method than simply the presence of a small number of missionaries (381). The valued Japanese resource, lacquer, became even more popular during this time, as the need for shrines, lecterns, sacrament boxes and other religious objects grew as a result of the success of conversion of the Japanese people.

With the growth of Christianity during the Nanban period, Japanese artists began recreating religious paintings, since needed commissions from European artists exceeded what they could produce. Miki suggests that as a result, woodblock prints were introduced as a copy system to meet demand (381). The addition of oil paint as a medium allowed more accurately replicated European style paintings. During the Nanban period, Japan's government was not strong; many civil wars broke out as well as disease that plagued the nation, this left unskilled, lower ranking artists to create the work. Along with the religious commissions, many Nanban artists used Western techniques such as realism and woodblock printing to create images of ordinary, everyday events. This proved to be valuable documentation of the era from the perspective of lower class Japanese citizens. Most of the works of the time were created by anonymous or artists that had little established recognition. Grassley suggests that the surviving works reveal information about how the Japanese experienced the new cultural European influences and the political upheaval happening within the nation (Grassley, Tanya).

It became clear to the European missionaries that Western art education and religious schools were necessary in Japan. The lack of skilled artists and the pressure for the need to spread Christianity made way for the advancement

of education in Western art. A cultural center with a Jesuit educational institute was introduced in Japan as a part of Jesuit education systems. Because of the conflicting religious parties within the country, however politically strong Buddhist monasteries pushed the newly founded Jesuit school to change locations a number of times. Thereafter, four Japanese converted-noblemen of the embassy made a trip to Rome to visit the Pope. Upon their return used their influence and support to further Western art education.

Along their journey through Rome, Spain and Italy the men had collected art works, books, musical instruments, scientific instruments and more specifically Roman woodcut prints, calculators and globes. Miki suggests the idea that the art objects that the four noblemen brought back became the primary examples of European art that inspired the creation of new works in Japan in the years that followed. The introduction of woodcut prints impacted the Japanese culture and created an art form that is vastly used in Japan to depict religious and non-religious scenes. Because of their religious beliefs and the Christian based art works they brought back from their journey, they were able to strengthen the influence of Christianity and Western art within Japan culture.

In 1614, Christianity was banned from Japan and much of the Western art influence remained stagnant. Trade between nations originally was the source that brought Christianity to Japan, and the spread of Christianity then brought Western art education resulting in a cultural and artistic influence upon Japan. Though the Western influence on Japan was cut off when Christianity was banned the Western influence during the Nanban period is not altogether lost. No one knows of what the culture of Japan would have been like in modern times if the Western influences on art had continued. But the temporary ban in the 16th century of trade and Christianity allowed for a reversal of influences. In the 19th century, Japanese art became a pivotal impetus for Western artists.

Works Cited

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