

Namban Art in Japan: The Case of Japanese Christian Paintings from Momoyama to the early Edo Period

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ABSTRACT

As surviving testimonies of the first contact between the West and Japan, Namban Art is a theme that fascinates both scholars and collectors around the world. However, Western research on Namban art objects is relatively limited to the surviving examples in Western museum collections and in the auction art market, which mostly consists of lacquered objects and Namban folding screens. There is a considerable lack of information on the diversity of Namban art collections in Japan. Moreover, although research on the subject has been comparatively more extensive in Japan, there seems to be no straightforward definition of the concept.

This research aims to clarify the lack of information regarding Namban art collections in Japan and to discuss measures for a better understanding of concept, through the example of Japanese Christian paintings.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Namban art” is commonly used as an umbrella term for Japanese art with Western culture influences produced during the decades of Portuguese and Spanish presence in Japan. In Japanese literature however, it often includes imported European art as well. Part of this reason seems to be because the 1955 *Kōjien* dictionary definition of “Namban paintings” established by professor Izuru Shinmura (新村 出, 1876/10/4 – 1967/8/17) is still being used as the basis of classification, making it particularly difficult to distinguish Western-style Japanese paintings from imported European paintings in the same collections. Hence, it is important to define criteria for the definition of Namban art and identify all possible typologies according to surviving examples in Japanese museum collections. In addition, there exists barely known sub-categories such as Japanese Christian paintings that can be valued and appreciated as unique Japanese creations like the rest of Namban art objects, instead of being confused with other European paintings.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed field research on Namban art exhibitions and data collection through the execution of inventory cards in both English and Japanese as the primary methodology. Bibliographical research, analysis and interpretation of conservation reports were also made to corroborate my findings.

The limitations of this research were mainly linked to the lack of accessibility to Japanese museum collections. Additionally, this study faced some challenges due to the

inconsistency of classification practices among various Namban art collections and the difficulty in identifying some Japanese productions of Namban art.

For the purpose of this research, I had to develop a more concise definition of “Namban Art” and establish parameters based on bibliographic and the curatorial information that I collected from when I was working on the inventory cards.

2.1. Definition of the concept

Namban art is a relatively confusing category of art, due to the artistic disparity of objects that are classified under the same term. In Western literature, Namban art has mostly been associated with Momoyama and early-Edo period Japanese folding screens depicting Southern European merchants in Nagasaki, also known as “Namban screens”, and 16th-17th century Japanese lacquered objects made for the Portuguese and Spanish market. These objects almost entirely represent most Western collections of Namban art, such as the Namban art collections of the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon, the Asmolean Museum in Oxford, etc. Japanese collections of Namban art, on the other hand, display a much greater diversity of objects, and although the understanding of the concept in Japanese literature is broader and more inclusive, identification and classification practices are also less objective and more idiosyncratic.

One of the first official definitions of a Namban art object was provided by Prof. Shinmura in the *Kōjien* dictionary (新村, 1955: 1627), in which he defines “Namban paintings” as imported Western paintings brought during the Momoyama period as well as the Japanese imitations. Influential Namban art collector Hajime Ikenga (池長 孟, 1891/11/24 – 1955/8/25) defined the term “Namban art” only as the works of art produced in Japan of Western influence (池長, 1955: preface). Both definitions, albeit a bit contradictory, are still applied in current classification practices of Namban art publications in Japan.

In order to develop an objective and transparent inventory of Namban art in Japanese museum collections, I have developed the following characteristics as the primary identification markers in the definition of Namban art objects in relation to my findings:

1. Namban art only refers to artistic works (therefore excluding historical documents);
2. The objects were made in Japan by Japanese artists (therefore excluding imported paintings and artifacts);
3. The objects need to have Western motifs or aesthetics inspired by contact with the Portuguese and Spanish merchants, and Jesuit missionaries;
4. The objects were produced roughly between mid-16th century to mid-17th century, when the Southern European influence was most felt in the Japanese arts (therefore excluding Dutch-influenced Japanese art);
5. They were created with a clear aesthetic intent and an objective categorical function (therefore excluding mass-produced objects with no aesthetic value to the owner, as well as repurposed objects that lost their original purpose or were used for obscure intentions, such as the case of many objects associated with the forbidden activity of *Kakure Kirishitan*).

2.2. The case of Japanese Christian paintings from the Momoyama- early Edo period

Following the aforementioned identification markers, classification of Namban art objects became more accessible with the exception of one small group of Namban paintings: the Japanese Christian paintings. This is a group of paintings that seemingly resulted (directly or indirectly) from a workshop taught by Jesuit artist Giovanni Niccolò, who was sent from Venice to Japan in 1583 to teach Western painting and particularly oil painting techniques to Japanese students (坂本, 1997: 17). However, due to their artistic similarities with European Christian paintings imported to Japan by Jesuit missionaries, which may have been used as teaching subjects for oil painting lessons at the Niccolò workshop, classification practices of Namban art in Japan often do not consider the difference between paintings made by Japanese students and the imported European paintings; in fact, Namban art publications and collection catalogues often regard imported European paintings as “Namban paintings” as well. There is a staggering lack of research on Christian-themed paintings made by Japanese artists; however, a few conservation reports where scientific analyses were conducted in three of these paintings show relevant information that may help distinguish Japanese productions from European imports.

A comparative analysis of two oil paintings entitled *Three Saints* (Tokyo National Museum collection) shed a light on the material differences (歌田; 渡辺, 1992: 4-20). In one of the paintings, the “original” is believed to have been imported to Japan or made by Giovanni Niccolò, while the other painting, the “copy”, is believed to have been painted by a Japanese student at his workshop. X-ray analytical techniques, cross-section and chemical analyses revealed that the original painting was executed in the traditional European Renaissance technique,¹ while the “copy” was executed in what seems to be a mix of *nihonga* techniques and oil painting.² Another conservation report on a Japan-produced painting, the *Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary* (Kyoto University Museum collection) revealed similar characteristics to the aforementioned “copy” painting; however, the most important difference in this painting is the presence of lead-tin yellow Type I and Type II pigments in the Latin letters located in the middle of the composition. This is a significant fact since these pigments, although common in 16th and 17th century Venetian and Bohemian paintings, did not exist in Japan during this period (神庭, 1998: 188).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I have identified two-hundred eighty-seven Namban art objects from forty-seven different Japanese collections, the inventory of which include eighty-one paintings, of these, forty being of Western-style or Western-themed Japanese paintings (inc. Japanese Christian paintings) and thirty-six being Namban folding screens, and an additional eight other

¹ The “original” painting contained a bluish black colored *imprimatura* over the kaolinite and oil-based white ground, a chromatic layer and a finishing varnish layer. The painting technique summarized to a very solvent-resistant, thin chromatic layer with thicker paint layers in brighter areas. (歌田; 渡辺, 1992: 10).

² The “copy” painting contained a ground layer made from mixing lead white pigment with *nikawa* (animal glue), sized by an alum solution (probably *dōsa* ドーサ引き). The chromatic layer was flat with no thickness in the brighter areas, comparatively weaker to solvent action and there was no varnish layer. It was also detected a *sumi* (ink) underdrawing (歌田; 渡辺, 1992: 10).

Namban paintings that do not fit the previous categories. In terms of decorative arts, I have made two-hundred six inventory cards, of which include one-hundred forty-one Namban lacquer objects, while the remaining sixty-five refer to other decorative arts (ceramics, metalwork and non-lacquered wooden objects). The biggest Namban art collections belong to the Namban Bunkakan Museum in Osaka (eighty-three objects inventoried) and the Kobe City Museum (forty-nine objects inventoried). The catalogue compiled in this research and outlined criteria allow a more straightforward understanding of the quantitative production and artistic tendencies of Namban art during the Momoyama and early-Edo period.

The lack of distinction between imported paintings and Japanese paintings is the most illustrative example of why it is important to update the Namban art definition in modern research. In my inventory catalogue, I have included the few known Christian paintings in Japanese museum collections that are believed to have been produced by Japanese artists, but excluded those that were made by European artists (therefore, I did not include the “original” *Three Saints* painting, but I did include the “copy”). However, there are still a number of paintings from museum collections that have inventoried in other sources which may have been produced in Japan, but due to lack of research, it is impossible to confirm their production origin.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Japan holds the biggest and most diverse Namban art collection in the world, and this research can serve as a guideline to anyone interested in the subject of Namban art. However, the lack of distinction between imported European paintings and Christian-themed paintings made by Japanese artists during the Momoyama-early Edo period in Japanese literature and museum cataloguing undermines the national and international appreciation of early Western-style Japanese paintings. There is still a significant lack of awareness regarding Japanese artists who began experimenting with oil painting decades before the term *Yōga* (洋画) was coined in the Meiji period, and many Japanese people are not even aware that the *Portrait of Saint Francis Xavier* (Kobe City Museum collection) that is printed in their history textbooks was in fact, made by a Japanese artist.

Furthermore, there were important findings made in some of these paintings, such as the unique layer composition and the discovery of both types of lead-tin yellow pigments, that are of interest to Art History and Heritage Conservation studies; however, these findings may be overlooked if Japanese Christian paintings continue to be put in the same basket as imported European paintings.

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