

A Time of Innocence

By Nobuo Tsuji

Japan's first recorded encounter with a European was in 1543 when a Chinese junk with Portuguese merchants drifted ashore at Tanegashima Island off the southern coast of Kyushu. This initial contact was followed very shortly thereafter by all kinds of Europeans, primarily Portuguese and Spanish, come to trade and preach.

To Japanese eyes these Europeans with their great height, big noses, deep-set blue eyes and strange costumes were as alien as men from another planet. They were referred to as *namban-jin*, "southern barbarians," because they made their way to Japan via Southeast Asia. Wherever groups of Europeans went there followed a fascinated crowd of Japanese adults and children, jeering and sometimes even throwing stones. For the most part, however, samurai and commoner alike were fairly well-disposed toward the Europeans, for they had a religious belief that those who had come aboard ships from distant lands brought with them wealth and happiness for the Japanese.

Around the beginning of the 17th century a variety of folding screen bearing colorful *namban* motifs became popular.

Some 70 of these screens are still extant. The pair shown here by Kano Naizen (1570-1616), an artist of the Kano school patronized by the Toyotomi and the Tokugawa, are typical *namban* screens.

Lavishly embellished with gold leaf, the left screen (below) shows a European ship sailing from a foreign port to Japan. The artist took some liberties in portraying the foreign town—perhaps Goa—filling it with gorgeously tiled palaces and church-like buildings which he could not possibly have seen himself. Giving free rein to the imagination was nothing new in Japanese art. In fact, Japanese artists had for centuries painted scenes of India and China based purely on legend and myth.

On the right screen the ship has arrived in Japan and European missionaries and merchants make their way to the town carrying with them strange animals and products of all kinds. Near the upper right-hand corner of the screen is shown a temple-like building which was probably converted into a Christian church and which may also have been where the foreigners resided.

Kano Naizen was probably commis-

sioned to paint these screens by a wealthy *daimyo* lord. Perhaps for this reason it is a sophisticated rendition with little exaggeration. Obviously, however, the considerable stature of the European missionaries shown in the painting made a strong impression on the artist, as must have the ship's crew scrambling up and down the masts like acrobatic monkeys.

Wary of Christian proselytizing, the Tokugawa shogunate eventually banned the entry of all foreigners into Japan. The kind of scene depicted in the *namban* screens was not to be seen after the 1620s. When the Japanese were willing once again to expose themselves to Western influences after a long isolation, they had already lost the refreshing innocence and naivety with which they had welcomed the foreigners more than two centuries earlier.

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Left screen of *Namban-byōbu* by Kano Naizen, 17th century, Kobe City Museum.



Right screen (detail) of *Namban-byōbu* by Kano Naizen, 17th century, Kobe City Museum.