

# Vincenzo Ragusa and His Wife Tama

By Masaaki Iseki

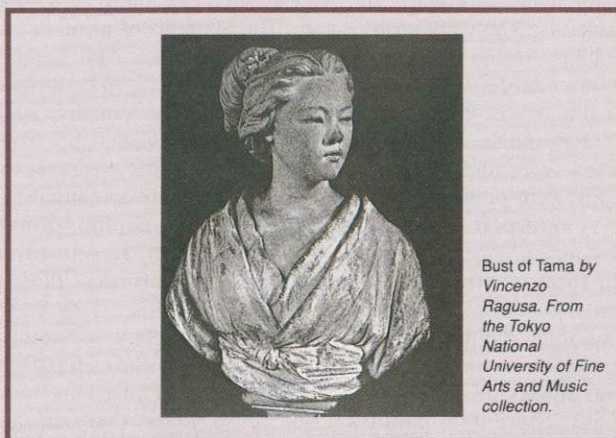
Although the introduction of Western paintings in Japan predates the Meiji Restoration, as I mentioned in the previous issue, the teaching of Western painting techniques was not formally used until 1870 at the Koku Art School established by the Meiji government. At that time the sculptor who was hired to teach along with the Italian painter Antonio Fontanesi was another Italian by the name Vincenzo Ragusa.

The development of modern Japanese sculpture was quite different from painting. By the Edo era, for example, only crafts such as *netsuke* and *inro* (seal case) were well developed. Wood sculptures that were unique to Japan declined rapidly along with the decline of Buddhism, and Japan began the Meiji era without any imports of Western-style sculpture.

Ragusa, before coming to Japan, had studied sculpture at Palermo in Sicily and was becoming rather famous locally. In 1875 he entered a contest sponsored by the Italian government for a chance to visit Japan and won first prize. While teaching Japanese students he also made effigies of elder statesmen of the Meiji government and was even asked by the Meiji Emperor to do an effigy of Napoleon. He also created numerous works of images of ordinary people such as *kabuki* actors, carpenters and women.

While the painter Antonio Fontanesi left Japan after his two-year stay, Ragusa stayed on for three more years after his contract had expired before he returned to his home in 1882. Because he developed a deep interest in Japanese traditional crafts, he took back with him numerous lacquerware, ceramics, dyed pieces and dolls he had collected over the years. These pieces are now in the National Museum of Rome.

Ragusa decided to start an arts and crafts school in Palermo with his own money and invited his Japanese friend Hidenosuke Kiyohara, Kiyohara's wife Chiyo and Chiyo's younger sister Tama to teach with him. At that time, Kiyohara was a lacquerware artist, Chiyo an embroidery artist and Tama, a painter and Ragusa's disciple.



Bust of Tama by Vincenzo Ragusa. From the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music collection.

Although the school was very popular and later converted into a municipal school, due to the high expense of imported lacquer and failures in cultivating the product locally, the school was forced to cancel its lacquer-technique course and the Kiyoharas returned home. Tama stayed on to continue with her career and five years later married Ragusa. Ragusa devoted his life to running the school and died in Palermo in 1927 at the age of 85. Before his death, he told Tama that he wanted to visit Japan just one more time.

Just how did Ragusa get to know Tama, this woman who made it successfully as the first Western-style Japanese painter in Europe? When in Japan, Ragusa, who loved taking walks, one day stopped in front of a house and saw a young lady painting in the corner of a room. The family of this young lady, seeing that this foreigner was looking so intently, decided to invite him in and this was the beginning of his relationship with the family. Ragusa decided to take Tama on as a disciple and taught her Western-style sketches with great enthusiasm. Tama also greatly improved her skills and came to respect Ragusa very much. Sometimes she served as his model and, after learning Italian, also helped as an interpreter.

They first met when Tama was 17 and after years of study as a painter she participated in many exhibitions in Palermo and won numerous prizes. Eventually she established herself as one of a handful of well-known women painters in Italy.

When Ragusa died, Tama was 63. Not being able to forget her native country, she thought of returning to Japan and decided to consult the Japanese consul general in Rome. She was shocked to learn that she no longer remembered her native language and to discover, because of her marriage, she was no longer considered a Japanese citizen.

Five years later she made up her mind and returned to Japan in 1933 after a lapse of 53 years. In Tokyo she had a studio built for her at her parents' house where she continued her painting career until she died in 1939.

According to Mario Oliveri, the disciple who wrote Ragusa's biography, Tama was a wonderful woman who, as a woman, wife and painter, made Ragusa a very happy man during his lifetime.

In this way we can catch a glimpse, through the encounter and union between Ragusa, this foreign artist, and Tama, this Japanese woman artist, of the typical type of character, courage and love of a Japanese woman over a century ago. It was also interesting to read Tama's recollections; by observing the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars from the outside, she was surprised that Japan was gradually gaining power as an international nation.

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Omoide no Nihon-musume (A Japanese Girl in Memory), Elenora Ragusa (née Tama Kiyohara). From the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music collection.