

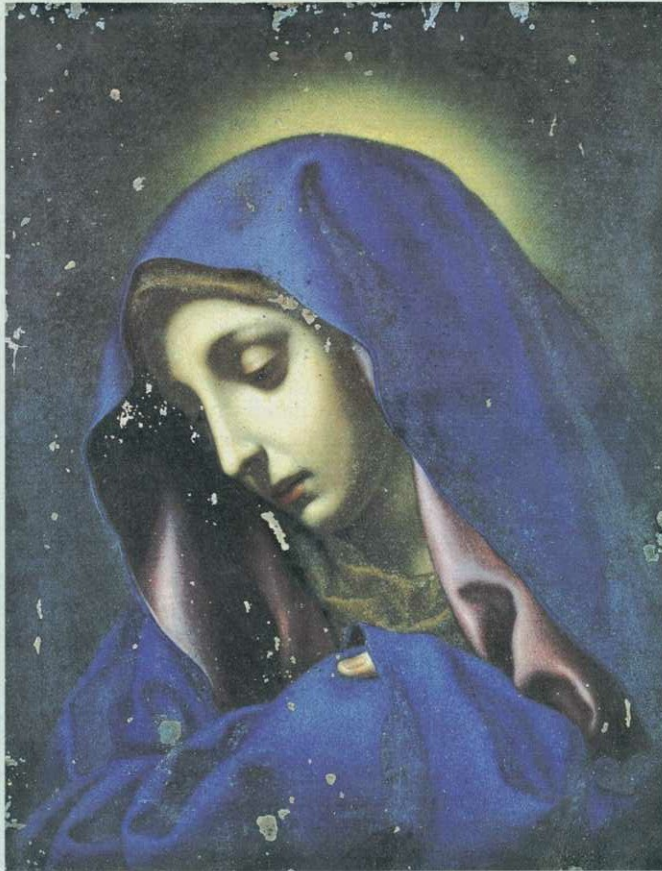
The Madonna from Florence

By Okabe Masayuki

Located in the southern reaches of Japan, Yaku is an almost circular island a little under 30 kilometers across, 60 kilometers south of Sada Head in Kagoshima, one of the southern provinces of Kyushu Island. Yaku is dominated by an 1,800-meter mountain range. The area around is densely forested with ancient indigenous cedars and is sparsely populated. In fact, people only occupy a small corner of this island where nature dominates in a formidable way. It was on this isolated isle, however, that an event of some significance took place in the summer of 1708.

Most of the islanders were engaged in some way in fishing. Being a small community, everyone knew the faces of the fishermen and any stranger was sure to be recognized. The stranger who came among them that summer, however, was stranger than most. With his hair appropriately arranged and dressed in a local weave, he was to all intents and purposes a fisherman. But because of his height and deep-set eyes below a prominent forehead, it was obvious to anyone that he was a European. This foreigner who had effected a secret landing on Yaku posing as a Japanese fisherman was taken into custody the next day. His arrest, however, caused less of a commotion than the majestic and dignified bearing of this individual.

He was Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1667-1714), a 41-year-old Italian priest who claimed to be an envoy from Rome. By this time, it was almost a



Virgin of the Thumb, 17th century; oil on copper, 24.5 x 19.6 cm, Tokyo National Museum

hundred years since edicts suppressing Christianity had been issued in 1614, and more than 70 years had elapsed since final exclusion policies had been enacted in 1639 and Japan had closed its doors to the world. Before this religious ban had been imposed, the number of Christians in Japan had risen to more than seventy-thousand, due mainly to the missionary work by Jesuits and Franciscans. During the first half of the 17th century, however, efforts made by the Dutch and English to prevent Portugal and Spain from monopolizing Asian trade

were proving successful; and with foreigners excluded from Japan at the convenience of the ruling Shogunate, some Italian missionaries who had been sponsored by the King of Portugal were deported. Some missionaries were, from time to time, able to secretly enter the country and continue their work after 1639 but they were all massacred and ended their lives as martyrs.

It was clear, however, that Giovanni Battista Sidotti was no ordinary envoy from Rome, simply because of what he brought with him. He carried a small painting, which he always kept with him. It was an image of the Madonna measuring 24.5 cm. by 19.6 cm. done in oils on copper, framed in black wood, covered with a protective sheet of glass and carefully wrapped in cloth. There could be no doubt that he was a missionary. Father Sidotti was taken to the Nagasaki Magistrate's Office, which dealt with

contemporary breaches of a diplomatic nature. The picture was put in storage there and, almost 200 years later in 1874, it was placed in the care of the Tokyo National Museum where it has remained to this day, going under the title of the *Oyayubi no Maria* or literally the *Virgin of the Thumb*.

It was not unusual for a missionary to carry an image of the Holy Mother on their travels. It is known that Francisco Xavier, who was the first to do missionary work in the archipelago, carried such an image.

There are also a number of contemporary renderings which were either painted in Japan or brought into the country that are similar to the *Virgin and Child* in the Tokyo National Museum. But historically speaking, there are a number of things about the *Virgin of the Thumb* which should be mentioned. First of all, we are sure of its history. Its was a highly influential work. It is also possible to prove or at least to speculate who painted it and who the original artist was. Finally, it must be pointed out how fine a piece it really is.

Research up to now has revealed that it is an excellent copy of the work of the portrait artist, Carlo Dolchi (1616-1686), whose highly detailed and sentimentalized style was popular in 17th century Florence. Furthermore, it has been generally accepted that it most closely resembles a painting in the Borghese Gallery. Done later in his life, it is thought that the model for this painting was Dolchi's second wife. Based on more recent research into the development of Dolchi's style on the other hand,



Madonna Addolorata, 1655; 82.5 x 67 cm, Trafalgar Galleries, London

12 paintings resembling the *Virgin of the Thumb* have now been identified. But out of all of these the *Madonna Addolorata* in the Trafalgar Galleries in London has been verified as being the most similar. It is now clear that the picture in Tokyo is not consistent with Dolchi's later works but belongs to a relatively early period of his career, resembling work done when he was about 40. Artists who are well-known for having copied Carlo Dolchi's style are Bartolommeo Manicini (active from 1630) who was one of his apprentices; and Dolchi's daughter, Agnese Dolchi who died in 1686. Comparing the rendering of the *Virgin* in Tokyo with the *Madonna Addolorata* in London, we find that the former is considerably smaller, making it more portable. Also, although the rendering of the clasped hands has been somewhat simplified by changing such things as the position of one of the thumbs, it becomes plain how faithful it is to Carlo Dolchi's original. It seems plain, therefore, that unbeknown to many researchers in the West, one of the best copies of Carlo Dolchi's work anywhere in the world found its way to Japan.

In November 1709, a year after he arrived on Yaku, Father Sidotti was taken to Edo under orders from the Shogun and subjected to questioning on four occasions by Arai Hakuseki, a Confucian scholar close to the Shogun, at a prison especially set aside to deal with Christian problems at Kohinatadai. The resulting two-volume verbatim record which Hakuseki compiled marked the start of studies of Western culture in Japan and became the fountainhead of modernization and led to the subsequent opening of the country. What really dispelled Hakuseki's long-held preconceptions and made him realize in no uncertain terms the importance of the general parameters of Western civilization was the *Virgin of the Thumb*. In fact, he was so



Virgin and Child, oil on copper, 21.8 x 16.6 cm, the end of the 16th century through the first half of the 17th century, Tokyo National Museum

impressed that he made a sketch of the painting.

Four years after this when it became clear that the prison governor and his wife had converted to Christianity as a result of the Father's teaching, the Shogunate was forced to levy serious charges and Father Sidotti was buried alive. Fearing that this might stimulate concern among those who hid their faith or that martyrdom might bring more Western missionaries into the country, it was publicly announced that he had died of an illness.

The purple of the cloth worn by the Madonna expresses mourning. The single tear barely visible amidst the unblemished features of the inclined face of this Madonna in mourning also recounts the fate of the original owner of the work, who was caught between the scattered fragments of the history of Eastern and Western civilization.

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