

The Immaculate Conception with Saints Francis and Anthony
in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki: Notes on its Author and Dating*

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In 2010 Sylvie Morishita published an unusual picture of the *Immaculate Conception*, the so-called *Notre-Dame du Japon* from the period of the first Christian mission in Japan (late-16th to early 17th centuries), then preserved in heavily damaged condition in the Franciscan convent of the Capuchins in Paris (fig. 1).¹ It is painted in watercolor and guache on paper of moderate size,² and depicts the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception, two standing saints, Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Anthony of Padua, and three unidentified female figures in the foreground. Today the picture is treasured in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki.³

Morishita reconstructed the extraordinary history of this picture, since it was painted in Nagasaki, an important center of the early Christian mission in southern Japan, by an anonymous painter probably in the 17th century. During Japan's long period of the prohibition and persecution of Christianity, it was secretly kept by hidden Christians in the Shitsu village (Sotome district), north of Nagasaki.⁴ In June 1865 the picture was shown by its owner to the French fathers of the Missions étrangères de Paris, Joseph-Marie Laucaigne (1838–1885) and Bernard-Thadée Petitjean (1829–1884). It then migrated to France under not completely known circumstances, first to the small village of Saint-Clément-des-Levées, near Saumur,⁵ then it was given to the Capuchins in Angers, and eventually it was transferred to the convent of Capuchins in Paris where it was seen by Morishita in 2009. The picture has now proved to be one of the rare pictorial testimonies of the Franciscan mission in Japan in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries. The present paper aims to supplement Morishita's research by adding some observations on the picture and provide further thoughts on its author and dating.



fig. 1 Anonymous, *The Immaculate Conception with Saints Francis and Anthony of Padua*, early 17th century, Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki

Painting Style

How can we describe the general characteristics of the pictorial style of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception*? In this painting, there seem to co-exist two entirely different modes of painting. Looking at the faces of the female figures, especially the one in the lower center (fig. 2), we clearly see underdrawing in black ink,⁶ drawn fluently with the tip of Japanese brush. This detail seems to suggest that the artist may have had some experience in Japanese traditional drawing/calligraphy technique. On the other hand, the heavy-looking folds of the clothes of the female figures (fig. 3) have nothing to do with Japanese way of representing drapery. Rather, they seem

to reveal the artist's efforts to imitate the Western approach, i.e. the three-dimensional modelling of drapery. However, the result is quite crude and clumsy, and reveals the artist's lack of proper training in the Western technique of depicting folds. Consequently, the painter is likely to be a Japanese amateur artist trying to partially imitate Western painting techniques, most probably without proper training.

It is widely known that in the late 16th century the Jesuit missionaries in Japan set up a sort of painting studio in Nagasaki, headed by the Italian painter Giovanni Niccolò, and a considerable number of paintings in westernized style were produced by artists trained at this atelier.⁷ One typical example is the *Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus and Her Fifteen Mysteries, Saints Ignatius de Loyola and Francis Xavier* (Harada Family version / fig. 4).⁸ In this painting, as well as in other similar

examples, painters of this 'Jesuit school of painting', albeit inevitable stylistic hybridity, more or less display their ability to adapt Western-style modelling through shading techniques.

Then, another, quite different stylistic category of painting related to the early Christian mission in Japan is represented by the group of hanging paintings of sacred subjects ('okake-e') that survive in good number on the Ikitsuki Island in northern Nagasaki prefecture (fig. 5).⁹ These works were produced by hidden Christians during the long absence of guiding missionaries. They usually retain essential components of Christian iconography, while their painting style as well as the depicted figures' clothing are transformed into such entirely Japanese modes that at first glance they look nothing like Christian images.

Comparisons with these known types of early Christian painting in Japan indicate that the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception* belongs to neither of these two stylistic categories. The painter of the Nagasaki work does try to imitate European pictorial convention, but without proper training. It is unlikely that the painter of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception* learned painting techniques in the Jesuit painting studio. So far as I know, among the known sacred images from the early Christian mission period, the only work stylistically comparable with the Nagasaki picture is the *Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary with Saints John the Baptist, Francis and Anthony*, formerly in the Urakami Church in Nagasaki and destroyed during the World War II, but known through photographs.



fig. 2 Detail of fig. 1 (female figure in the center foreground)



fig. 3 Detail of fig. 1 (upper body of the Virgin Mary)



fig. 4 Anonymous, *The Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus and Her Fifteen Mysteries, Saints Ignatius de Loyola and Francis Xavier* (Harada Family version), detail, early 17th century, Kyoto University Museum



fig. 5 Anonymous, *The Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus*, privately owned, Ichibu, Ikitsuki Island, Nagasaki prefecture

The Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries*

This painting (fig. 6) is said to have been lost when the Urakami Church was hit by the atomic bomb in 1945, but Tei Nishimura's pioneering study of the painting of the period, *Nihon Shoki Yoga no Kenkyu* [Study of the Early Western-style Painting in Japan] published in 1945, contains several reproductions of the work, both entire image and certain details.¹⁰ Further, no less than nine glass plate negatives of details are conserved in the National Museum of Japanese History in Sakura, which provide high-resolution images of nine scenes from the Mysteries.¹¹

The Fifteen Mysteries are arranged in three registers. The composition is similar to that of the panel painting attributed to Goswijn van der Weyden in the Metropolitan Museum in New York,¹² but, unusually, the Mysteries start from lower right (the *Annunciation*) and end at top left (the *Coronation*). Below, the presence of Saints Francis and Anthony of Padua leaves no doubt that this picture was produced in the context of the Franciscan mission in Japan, and notably, the figures of these saints are near-identical with those painted in the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception*. The provenance of the Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries* is also closely parallel with that of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception*: in fact, it was shown to Father Petitjean by a hidden Christian in Shitsu village in September 1865.¹³

Thanks to the glass plates of the Urakami work, we can closely observe the idiosyncrasy of its author's manners of painting, and we now clearly see that its characteristics are so close to those of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception* as to make it certain that the authors of these two works are one and the same.¹⁴ Besides the near-identical figures of the two standing Franciscan saints in both of the works, there are numerous points in common: the sketching manner seen in the eyes, nose and mouth of the faces of the Virgin annunciate (*Fifteen Mysteries*) and of the Immaculate Virgin; the upper bodies of the Virgin annunciate (*Fifteen Mysteries*) and the female figure in the center foreground in the Nagasaki work (figs. 7 and 8); the rendering of the clouds in the *Coronation* scene (*Fifteen Mysteries*) and those under the feet of the Immaculate Virgin; the profile shape of a figure in prayer in the *Ascension* scene (*Fifteen Mysteries*) and the kneeling female figure in profile in right foreground in the *Immaculate Conception*. One can juxtapose further details like Christ's profile head (the scene of the *Agony in the Garden* in the *Fifteen Mysteries*) and the head of the same female figure (figs. 9 and 10), or the legs of Archangel Gabriel (the *Annunciation* scene in the *Fifteen Mysteries*) and those of Saint Francis in the *Immaculate Conception* (figs. 11 and 12).

These two pictures, therefore, that are the only known paintings surely executed in Japan for the Franciscan mission, were painted by the same painter. So, when?



fig. 6 Anonymous, *The Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary with Saints John the Baptist, Francis and Anthony of Padua* (destroyed), early 17th century, formerly Urakami Cathedral, Nagasaki



fig. 7 Detail of fig. 6 (*Fifteen Mysteries*, the Virgin annunciate)



fig. 8 Detail of fig. 1 (*Immaculate Conception*, female figure in the center foreground)



fig. 9 Detail of fig. 6 (*Fifteen Mysteries*, Christ's head in the Agony in the Garden)



fig. 10 Detail of fig. 1 (*Immaculate Conception*, head of the female in the right foreground)



fig. 11 Detail of fig. 6 (*Fifteen Mysteries*, legs of Archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation)



fig. 12 Detail of fig. 1 (*Immaculate Conception*, legs of Saint Francis of Assisi)

The Dating of the Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries*

Nishimura roughly suggested c. 1607–1624 as the plausible date of execution of the Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries*.¹⁵ His thoughts were partially based on the observation that some illustrations in a religious book printed by the Jesuit press in Nagasaki in 1607 seem to have served as

visual sources for some of the compositions of the Mystery scenes in the Urakami picture.¹⁶ The book in question is the so-called ‘Supiritsuaru Shugyo’ [Spiritual Exercises], which contains the Japanese translation of the book on the meditation on the Mysteries of Holy Rosary, written by the Jesuit theologian Gaspar Loarte, *Instruicam & avisos pera meditar os mysterios do Rosairo da sanctissima Virgen Maria* (1587).¹⁷ In the copy of this translated edition, now in the Archdiocese of Nagasaki, Loarte’s texts are accompanied by six engraved images: the *Annunciation*, the *Visitation*, *Christ among the Doctors*, the *Flagellation*, the *Ascension*, and the *Assumption*.

Although Nishimura did not discuss this relationship in detail, visual comparisons allow us to confirm that three of the print compositions are very close to those depicted in the Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries*: the *Annunciation* (figs. 13 and 14), the *Flagellation*, and the *Ascension* (figs. 15 and 16). Contextually, these resemblances seem to attest to the essential validity of Nishimura’s suggestion about the painting’s dating: the painter of the *Fifteen Mysteries* could consult some of the engravings made for the Japanese edition of Loarte’s book, and so the *terminus post quem* of the execution date of the Urakami work should reasonably be considered as c. 1607. The stylistic closeness of the Urakami *Fifteen Mysteries* and the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception* makes it plausible that these two works were produced in approximately the same period.

Visual Sources of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception*

An interesting iconographic feature of the Nagasaki *Immaculate Conception* is that the figure of the Virgin is encircled by the knotted cord of Saint Francis. This detail makes it highly probable that the painter used as his model a plaquette image of the Immaculate Virgin, produced in Spain or in the Netherlands around 1600, which features the same encircling cord (fig. 17).¹⁸



fig. 13 Detail of fig. 6 (*Fifteen Mysteries*, the *Annunciation*)



fig. 14 *The Annunciation*, engraving, from the so-called *Supiritsuaru Shugyo* (Japanese translation of Gaspar Loarte’s *Instruicam & avisos pera meditar os mysterios de Rosairo ...*), Jesuit Press of Nagasaki, 1607, Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki



fig. 15 Detail of fig. 6 (*Fifteen Mysteries*, the *Ascension of Christ*)



fig. 16 *The Ascension of Christ*, engraving, from the so-called *Supiritsuaru Shugyo*, Jesuit Press of Nagasaki, 1607, Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki

It seems that derivative casts of this plaquette were imported in Japan in large number in the early 17th century, and several casts, both in rectangular and oval formats, survive in Nagasaki, Ikitsuki and elsewhere. This kind of plaquette was often secretly treasured by hidden Christians and used for their prayers.¹⁹

Hitherto the visual source for the two Franciscan saints has not been identified, nor that for the three female figures in the foreground. The female figure to the left was considered by Father Petitjean as Saint Clare, as she kneels just below Saint Francis, but the vessel she holds is not a monstrance but a chalice. They lack any attribute to identify specific female saints. Although the three women were originally all haloed, I suppose they may possibly be intended as the three theological virtues, i.e, Faith holding a chalice, Charity in an expressive gesture, and Hope looking upward in prayer.

Here I would note that the varied poses taken by these three females in the foreground may have been adapted from one print image: the *Pentecost* by Jean V Leclerc (Jean Leclerc le Jeune), published by the Parisian publisher Jean IV Leclerc (fig. 18).²⁰ In fact, the three poses seem to have been borrowed from the poses of the Virgin, of the man in the right foreground, and of the woman to the right of the Virgin in the print. In fact, the publisher Jean Leclerc has something to do with the history of the early Christian missions in Japan. About one century ago, objects used by Christians for worship were discovered hidden in the stucco wall of a storehouse in Fukui, and among them were several devotional prints published by Jean Leclerc.²¹ They are now in the collection of Tokyo National Museum. As Nishimura observed, one among them, the *Crucifixion* engraved by Leonard Gaultier and published by Jean Leclerc in 1602, was used by our anonymous painter when he depicted the *Crucifixion* in the *Urakami Fifteen Mysteries*.²²

Conclusion

Unlike the Jesuits, Franciscans in Japan do not seem to have attempted to organize an educational system for the production of religious artworks. However, the *Urakami Fifteen Mysteries* and the *Nagasaki Immaculate Conception* testify that at least there was one Franciscan ‘artist’ during that order’s enthusiastic missionary efforts. The iconographic schemes of these paintings are not simple, and the painter consulted a series of visual models to adapt for his own compositions. If so, these compositions could not have been invented by the painter alone. He must have been advised or given general schemes to be depicted by knowledgeable missionaries. Consequently, it is plausible that the two Franciscan devotional paintings would have been produced during the period when Franciscan missionaries could be openly active and the Franciscan church and convent were being built in Nagasaki, from c. 1608 until 1614, the year of



fig. 17
The Immaculate Conception, plaquette, Spain or the Netherlands, c. 1600, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



fig. 18 Jean V Leclerc, *The Pentecost*, engraving, c. 1606, published by Jean IV Leclerc, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

the edict of the general banishment of missionaries.

According to Thomas Uyttenbroeck, O.F.M., around 1610 there were ten principal Franciscan churches in Japan (Edo, Kyoto, Fushimi, Osaka, Sakai, Wakayama, Shishido, Uraga, Nagasaki, and Fuchu). The church in Nagasaki, dedicated to Saint Francis, seems to have been established around 1608, and in 1610 the Superior was Blessed Pedro de la Asunción (martyred in Omura in 1617).²³ The church was destroyed in 1614, and Sakura-machi Prison was erected on the site.

The same author cites the 1628 report of Fr. Diego de San Francisco on the situation just after the edict of banishment.

Fr. Diego explains how he attempted to stimulate the Christian spirit there [Nagasaki]. The Gospel says, “when they shall persecute you in this city, flee to another.” (Matt. 10, 23) Following this instruction of the Lord, a year after the banishment of the missionaries [1614–15], a great many earnest Christians left Nagasaki and went to safer places. Time and again the missionaries advised the remaining Christians of Nagasaki to do likewise and to avail themselves of the rather mild rule of Gonroku [Hasegawa Fujimasa, Governor of Nagasaki] to abandon their business and leave the city. Fierce persecution might start some day and then it will be too late to leave the city and escape the hands of the persecutor.²⁴

These vicissitudes may explain how the Franciscan devotional pictures, probably executed in the convent of Nagasaki, were saved and brought to the small village of Shitsu, where they would be secretly treasured by hidden Christians for 250 years.

* This paper is a summarized version of my article in Japanese, “Observations on the So-called *Our Lady of Japan* in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki: from an Art-Historical Perspective”, published in *Bulletin of Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture*, vol. 12 (March 2018), pp. 17–43. I am grateful to the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki for offering me this research opportunity. My special thanks go to Ms. Haruko Ito and Mr. Takahisa Kato of Nagasaki Prefectural Government, and to Prof. Junichi Okubo of National Museum of Japanese History, Sakura, for their help. I am also grateful to Dr. Martha J. McClintock who kindly edited my text.

Notes

- 1 S. Morishita, “*Notre-Dame du Japon: Un tableau Kirishitan retrouvé à Paris*”, *Études Franciscaines*, nouvelle serie, vol. 3 (2010), pp. 125–137.
- 2 Paper size: 62.5×40 cm; mount size: 71.9×48.8 cm. Inscribed on the mount: “Don de Mgr Petitjean”.
- 3 The picture was donated to the Archdiocese of Nagasaki in 2014.
- 4 Morishita cites a letter of Petitjean whose date she thought as June 27, 1867, saying “Mr Laucaigne reçoit d’un vieillard de Oustekema une image de Notre-Dame ...” (Morishita, *op. cit.*, p. 131). However, as Mihoko Oka pointed out, the correct date of this letter is June 27, 1865, and the written name of the village is “oustihc”, that is (read in reverse), “chitsuo”. So, the owner of the picture was an old man in Shitsu village. See M. Oka, “Nagasaki Daishikyo-ku Shozo *Seibo Maria no Goe ni Tsuite* [On the *Sacred Picture of Our Lady* in the Archdiocese of Nagasaki]”, in *Seibo ga Mimamotta Kiseki* [The Miracle under the Gaze of Our Lady], exh. cat., Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture, 2015, pp. 24–26 (in Japanese).
- 5 Oka plausibly supposed that the picture may have been given or entrusted by its unknown owner to the missionary Father Jean-Baptiste Poirier, and eventually sent to his uncle Father Pierre David in Saint-Clement-des-Levées after Poirier’s death in Nagasaki in 1881. See Oka, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 6 In many parts, especially in the figures’ faces, the underdrawing in thin brush lines is exposed and clearly visible.

According to the analyses conducted by Yasuhiro Hayakawa and Seiji Shirono, remnants of lead white pigment are found in the faces of female figures. So, the present state of the faces does not mean that they are unfinished, but rather that the faces were originally covered with white paint. See Y. Hayakawa and S. Shirono, *Katorikku Daishikyo-ku Shozo Mugenzai no Seibo-zu: Kogaku Chosa Hokokusho* [*The Immaculate Conception in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki: Report of Optical Examinations*], Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, 2019, pp. 58ff.

- 7 On the Jesuit school of paintings, there is an extensive bibliography in Japanese. Here, I cite only a few recent publications in English: G. A. Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1999, pp. 58–81; R. Arimura, “Nanban Art and its Globality: A Case Study of the New Spanish Mural *The Great Martyrdom of Japan in 1597*”, *Historia y Sociedad*, no. 36 (2019), pp. 21–56 (with extensive bibliographic information).
- 8 The painting is in the collection of the Kyoto University Museum. See Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 77 (further bibliography on this work is in p. 218, note 130).
- 9 For the devotional pictures of hidden Christians on Ikitsuki Island, see S. Nakazono, “Kakure Kirishitan no Go-shintai [Objects of Worship of Hidden Christians]”, in T. Nakajyo and K. Tanigawa (eds.), *Kakure Kirishitan no Sei-ga* [Sacred Paintings of Hidden Christians], Shogaku-kan, Tokyo, 1999, pp. 131–146.
- 10 T. Nishimura, *Nihon Shoki Yoga no Kenkyu* [Study of the Early Western-style Painting in Japan], Zenkoku-shobo, Osaka, 1945, pp. 140–147, with one color and six B/W plates (unpaginated).
- 11 The nine glass plates are: the *Annunciation*, the *Agony in the Garden*, the *Flagellation*, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, the *Crucifixion*, the *Resurrection*, the *Ascension*, the *Assumption*, and the *Coronation*. These images are available at the Museum’s website: https://www.rekihaku.ac.jp/education_research/gallery/webgallery/webgallery_fo.html#g
- 12 Inv. no. 1987.290.3a-p. See G. C. Bauman. “A Rosary Picture with a View of the Park of the Ducal Palace in Brussels, Possibly by Goswijn van der Weyden”, *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 24 (1989), pp. 135–151. For the image, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437216>
- 13 Letter of Petitjean dated September 17, 1865, in the Archives des Missions étrangères de Paris, vol. 569. See Morishita, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
- 14 Morishita already commented: “la ressemblance est si forte que la question se pose immédiatement de la source commune ou de l’auteur commun des deux tableaux.” (Morishita, *op. cit.*, p. 133) I reached the same conclusion independently (that is, before reading Morishita’s comment).
- 15 Nishimura, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 17 For the Japanese edition of Loarte’s book, see Y. Kojima, *Kirishitan-ban Supiritsuaru Shugyo no Kenkyu* [Study of the Kirishitan Edition of the So-called *Spiritual Exercises*], Kasama-shoin, Tokyo, 1989.
- 18 For this plaquette, see I. Weber, *Deutsche, Niederländische und Französische Renaissanceplaketten 1500–1650*, 2 vols., München, 1975, p. 410, no. 1040; J. Warren, *Medieval and Renaissance Sculpture. A Catalogue of the Collection in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford, 2014, pp. 1046–1048, under no. 506.
- 19 Nakazono, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–132.
- 20 The print is one of the four plates series of the *Christian Feasts*, engraved by Jean V Leclerc and published by Jean IV Leclerc (1560–1621). See the online catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb42694375b>
- 21 See *Illustrated Catalogue of Tokyo National Museum. Kirishitan Objects: Christian Relics in Japan 16th-19th Century*, Tokyo National Museum, 2001, pp. 163–165, nos. 46–65. Among them, nos. 47, 50, 56–58 and 64 are those published by Jean IV Leclerc. Others are those published by Thomas de Leu and Nicolas de Mathonière.
- 22 Nishimura, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
- 23 T. Uyttenbroeck, O.F.M., *Early Franciscans in Japan*, Missionary Bulletin Series, vol. VI, Himeji, 1959, pp. 50–52.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Illustration sources

Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki / photo by Tomoko Araki (figs. 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12); Nishimura 1945 (figs. 4, 6); Nakajyo and Tanigawa 1999 (fig. 5); National Museum of Japanese History (figs. 7, 9, 11, 13, 15); Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki (figs. 14, 16); Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 17); Bibliothèque nationale de France (fig. 18)