THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON ASIAN ART

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As Europeans and Asians traded across oceans, cultural diffusion between the different ethnic groups led to the widespread adoption of Christianity across traditionally Shinto, Buddhist, and Hindu nations. With the Christian faith making its way into the Asian belief systems, transformations in the arts and culture soon followed, fusing traditional artistic methods of the East with the tales and characters of Western religion.
Through this exhibit, we will explore 3 questions:

01 How have western figures been transposed into Asian art mediums?

02 Has the introduction of the Christian belief system impacted artists’ motivations for creating these art pieces?

03 Might the portrayal of Christian figures in various Asian art styles have played a role in the widespread adoption of Christianity across Asia?
Origin: India or Sri Lanka, circa 1550-1650

This miniature statue of the Christ Child holding the globus cruciger originates from South Asia. Carved out of rock crystal, this depiction of an infant Jesus is adorned with a base of gold and encrusted with rubies and sapphires. The Christ Child is seen holding a golden globus cruciger in one hand and the other hand raised in benediction.

photo taken by Ava Celeste
CHRIST CHILD

Tracing its origins to India or Sri Lanka, this statue of the Christ Child encompasses both significant Christian and Buddhist symbolism. The statue’s right hand, raised in benediction, is a common Christian sign of blessing and divine guidance. However, the pose is also reminiscent of the Buddhist vitarka mudra, a hand gesture symbolizing transmission of dharma and the teachings of Buddha. The head of the statue shows the Christ Child with his eyes closed, paralleling portrayals of Buddha in meditation, but perhaps also symbolizing a Christian’s eyes closed in meditation on God’s word. The globus cruciger, held in the statue’s left hand, originates in the medieval era and signifies Christ’s authority over the Earth. The parallels of symbolism in Christianity and Buddhism incorporated by the artist may have allowed Western religion to more easily incorporate into local customs.
FOOD ITEM:
PORCELAIN TEAPOT

Origin: China, circa 1750
This porcelain teapot was made by an unknown artist in Jingdezhen, China. Invented during the Yuan Dynasty, teapots became a defining feature of Chinese culture, acting as a method for steeping the tea leaves used for medicinal purposes in ancient China. This teapot was made around 1750 and depicts the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/45783
Combining a traditional Chinese invention, the teapot, with the western culture of Christianity, this porcelain teapot represents the mixing of Christianity and Asian culture. As shown, the teapot depicts the crucifix of Christ, a significant part of the Christian religion, as it reminds Christians of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, along with the other sinners, is depicted with a pronounced stomach, consistent with traditional representations of Buddha. This detail shows the biblical impact, however, the Asian artwork still maintains its heritage and dignity. Teapots have traditionally represented friendship and a time to share stories and confide in one another. Having a biblical symbol painted on a teapot would work as a method of spreading the Christian faith throughout Asia. The graphic image on the teapot acts as a conversation starter, allowing friends and family to discuss the new religion. Like family or a childhood friend, teapots provide comfort and reassurance to those who use them on a daily basis. This comfort further develops the importance of the crucifix being depicted, since many Christians find comfort and peace of mind in knowing Jesus died for them.
This three-dimensional portrait depicts Thomas(ine) Hall, a gender-fluid individual born in Virginia. The Chinese artist Amoy Chinqua crafted this piece in the early 1700s in either Guangzhou, China, or Chennai, India. Chinqua used unfired clay, paint, silk, and Asian hardwood to craft the figure.

Origin: Guangzhou, China and Chennai, India; circa early 1700s

http://explore-art.pem.org/object/asian-export-art/AE86368/detail
In this piece, the artist Chinqua portrays the Western figure, Thomas Hall in Asian-style garments. Hall is shown clothed in silk and resting on Asian hardwoods, thus demonstrating the adoption of Western ideas into East Asian culture. Chinqua crafted this sculpture to mock the gender fluidity of Thomas(ine). Traditionally, the most dominant religion in China, Buddhism, did not condemn sexual identification and expression outside of male and female. However, when the colonization and the invasion of western Christianity took place in Asia, this changed. Chinqua’s art reflects this change by demonstrating the Christian prejudice that instilled itself in Asian culture. Showcasing a Christian prejudice in an Asian-style figure would have helped to normalize the Christian condemnation of gender fluidity in the eyes of Asian peoples at the time, despite the idea being counter to their native religions.
FURNITURE: PORTABLE SHRINE

Origin: Japan, circa 1597

In a Jesuit Seminary, workshop artists from the School of Giovanni Niccolò in Kyushu, Japan crafted this portable shrine. The shrine, made of oil on wood panel, is encased in a lacquered wood and mother-of-pearl inlay made by both Western missionaries and Japanese artists. It depicts the classic Christian image of Mary and her baby Jesus.

https://www.pem.org/explore-art/asian-export-art/portable-shrine-about-1597#second
As Christianity spread East amongst merchants and others in contact with European sailors, fusions between Eastern and Western religion became bountiful. Household shrines were originally utilized in Buddhist or Shinto-Buddhist religious practices, whereas Christian services were usually observed in a church building. However, this shrine depicts both, showcasing Western religion in Eastern context and the idea of private or mobile worship. This Eastern-style worship mobility might even have provided a reminder of Christianity’s “Great Commission,” the idea that Christians should “create disciples of all nations.” With the intersections between Christian and Shinto style worship, it’s no wonder Christianity spread so quickly in new lands.
The merging of European and Asian art styles in these depictions of scenes and figures from Christianity contributed to the rapid adoption of the faith in Eastern countries. These effects of the cultural diffusion spanning the 16th through 18th centuries can be seen today: Christianity is the dominant religion of the Philippines and the largest minority religion in Korea and Japan. Artifacts such as the teapot and portable shrine incorporated Christian imagery into daily life, while the Christ Child statuette and the portrait figure of Thomas(ine) Hall demonstrate the cultural exchange between Asian and European cultures. By incorporating Christian and European figures into various Asian art styles, the faith became part of the local culture and distanced itself from the Western imperialism that brought it there.
THANK YOU FOR COMING TO OUR EXHIBIT!

