



ALL GENRES

Exhibit highlights early ties to Christian Europe



Fondazione Trivulzio – Milano

"Portrait of Ito Mancio" (1585) by Domenico Tintoretto

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The Yomiuri Shimbun

An exhibition of paintings and documents related to Japanese envoys who visited Europe in the 16th century is under way at the Tokyo National Museum in Ueno, Tokyo.

The highlight of the exhibition is a portrait of Ito Mancio (ca 1569-1612), who arrived in the Republic of Venice on June 26, 1585, accompanied by three other key members. The envoys were still in their teens when they were dispatched by three Christian daimyo of Kyushu.

Mancio, who was from Hyuga Province (now part of Miyazaki Prefecture), represented Otomo Sorin of Bungo Province, an ancient region that now includes Oita Prefecture.

Documents preserved in Italy and Japan state that the group was warmly welcomed, and they stayed in Venice for about 10 days. A parade was organized for the group and the envoys were also presented with precious textiles and handcrafted glassware.

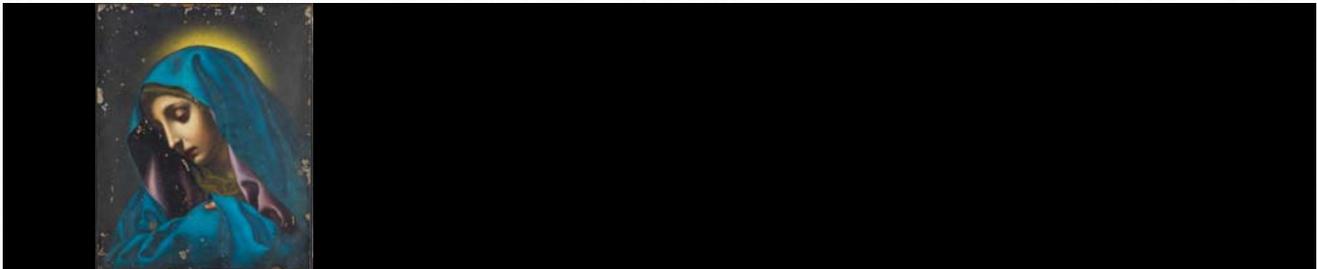
According to a letter written by a member of the party dated June 30, the Venetian Senate commissioned portraits of the members to “the best painter.” Another document referred to the painter as Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto (1519-94).

But while such historical records existed, there was no evidence to substantiate the claims, until recently.

Mancio's portrait was discovered in 2009, when Paola Di Rico, an archivist of the Trivulzio Foundation of Milan, found a 54- by 43-centimeter oil painting when sorting through a private collection. Di Rico traced the painting's origins back to Tintoretto's studio.

Further research revealed that the painting had apparently been touched by the brush of Tintoretto's son, Domenico (1560-1635). X-rays showed that a small ruffled collar was later redrawn larger, reflecting the changes in fashion around the turn of the century. It is currently believed that the portrait was commissioned to Jacopo and completed by Domenico.

The exhibition under way at the Tokyo National Museum, titled “The Newly Discovered Portrait of Ito Mancio, a Japanese Ambassador to Europe,” is the first to show this historically significant portrait.



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Tokyo National Museum

"Madonna (Madonna of the Thumb)" (late 17th century)



In addition to the painting, a book titled “Concerning the Voyage of Four Young Japanese Men to Rome,” published in Italy in 1585, is also on display. The book records the one-month period after the arrival of Mancio's embassy in the Italian port city of Livorno, and how they were enthusiastically greeted wherever they went. The book is designated an important cultural property.

The mission returned to Japan safely in 1590, but the climate surrounding Christianity had drastically changed, with the purge of Jesuit missionaries in 1587 and the banning of Christianity in 1614.

From that perspective, “Madonna (Madonna of the Thumb),” a portrait of the Virgin Mary, another important cultural property, also being shown at the exhibition, is equally significant. The portrait was brought to Japan in 1708 by an Italian missionary, Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1667-1714), while Christianity was still proscribed.

Sidotti was arrested and confined in a designated mansion until he died there. Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), a government official and academic who interrogated him, kept a record of their dialogue, which reveals how the two began to respect each other.

The exhibition will continue until July 10 at the Tokyo National Museum. Visit www.tnm.jp for further information.

Mancio's portrait will also be exhibited at the Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture in Nagasaki from July 22 to Aug. 31, and at the Miyazaki Prefectural Art Museum in Miyazaki from Sept. 9 to Oct. 16. 🗨️