

SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

A Namban Reliquary Cross — Japan, late-16th – early-17th century



A NAMBAN RELIQUARY CROSS

Copper alloy, lacquer and gold
Japan, late-16th – early-17th century
Dim.: 15.0 × 10.0 × 2.5 cm
F1281



A rare Momoyama period Namban *Sawasa* reliquary cross, most certainly commissioned under the patronage of Japan's Jesuit Community.

*Sawasa*¹ are formed by *shakudō* — copper alloy with gold, silver and arsenic — subsequently lacquered in black *urushi* and mercury gilt.

The latin cross shaped reliquary is composed of two hinged plaques that close, on opposite sides, the identically shaped container that hides in its interior eleven compartments with relics of saints fixed in wax. The two hinged sections are locked into place, in three of the cross's arms, by finely turned spiralled-head screws, while the top section is fitted with a ring for suspension.

On one face a delicate low-relief depiction of the Crucified Christ crowned by a star-shaped radiant halo and surmounted by a label inscribed 'INRI', acronym for *Iesus Nasarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews). The Christ's facial features are defined by elegantly designed eyes, nose and mouth, as well as by a moustache, beard and long hair strand falling over the right shoulder. It bears a crown of thorns and a loincloth tied on the right, the wounds blood realistically dripping from hands and feet.

At His feet a skull over two cross bones alluding to the 'place of the skulls', the Mount Golgotha where Christ was crucified, in an allegory to Resurrection — the Victory of life over death.

On the opposite face, at the intersection of the two cross bars, a low-relief Eucharistic Chalice surmounted by the Holy Communion Wafer with the image of the Crucified Christ.² It is flanked by angels in adoration, suspended amongst stylised clouds of clear Japanese artistic character.

Above the chalice a depiction of the Holy Spirit Dove and below the inscription 'LOVVADO SEJA O SANCTISS O SACRAMC O' (Praised be the Most Blessed Sacrament) of the Eucharist, through which Jesus words were spread: 'My flesh is real food and my blood real drink (JO. 6, 55) — a most relevant inscription that certifies that Namban reliquary crosses were produced at the time of the Portuguese presence in Japan, rather than, as some historians suggest, the later Dutch period. The decorative composition is completed at the lower section by a palm from which emerge flowers and fruits, in a metaphor of renewal and joy.

The lateral cross faces, forming the relic's case, are filled by a continuous peripheral frieze of entwined foliage and floral motifs.

Such reliquaries, of clear Japanese artistic production and for exclusive use of Christians (*Kirishitan*), were destined to both the Japanese converts and the 'Southern Barbarians' (the *Nambanjin*), particularly the Portuguese, that wore them hanging from the neck as a repository of rare and precious minute relics

¹ *Sawasa* is the Japanese name given to objects made by Asian artists and craftsmen who adopted European models and associated them with Japanese materials. They feature decorative patterns in gold relief on a glossy lacquered surface.

² During the Eucharist, we proceed to the sacrament of bread and wine: bread symbolises the body of Christ and wine his blood. Le Concile de Trente (1543–1563) a donné le nom de 'transsubstantiation' à ce miracle eucharistique. Cf. Congregation of Trent, Session XIII, Chap. IV, n.º 877.





from Saints. The cult of relics was strongly reinforced in a postulate issued by the Council of Trent (1543–1563), that imposed on the faithful the respecting and honouring of martyrs, and other holy bodies relics, as they were living arms of Christ, through which God operates His extraordinary grace and which must, one day, resuscitate for eternal life³.

These reliquary-crosses reflect *devotio moderna*⁴ practices directly related to the Society of Jesus. The Eucharistic piety and the devotion to the Cross of Christ, symbols reflected in this cult object, are two important aspects that dominate Jesuit spirituality⁵, hence suggesting the Society as the most likely client for this reliquary.

Examples such as this are extremely rare, two being recorded at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London,⁶ one at the Tokyo National Museum and one at the Singapore Museum, the latter formerly at the São Roque collection, all closely similar, suggesting a common production workshop.

The cross herewith described is unquestionably a Namban production masterpiece, a rare example from a small and precious group that has so far been recorded. For its obvious quality, defined by the preciousness of the materials and the rare and expensive relics it encases, this reliquary cross was most certainly commissioned by a high Catholic hierarchy dignitary in Japan, perhaps as a diplomatic gift by the Company of Jesus to a convert Japanese regional *Daimyō* — local warlord and landowner — court member. Its manufacture is possibly still dated to the late 1500s, or to the very early-17th century, considering that the edit prohibiting the practice of Christianity was issued in 1614.

Contrary to past assumptions, it is now evident that the earliest production of *Sawasa* pieces for exporting predates the Dutch arrival in Japan, as it is confirmed by these Jesuit reliquaries, particularly this specific example featuring a Portuguese inscription, a detail that endows it with a most valuable element in dating and classifying similar objects.

It was in Japan, where Saint Francis Xavier arrived in 1549, that the Jesuits recorded their greatest successes as missionaries by skilfully focusing their converting strategy on the social elites. The main assumption was that by persuading the *Daimyō* to conversion, their subjects would follow suit under the threat of severe reprisals. As such it was essential for the masses to display their alignment with power and to become identified with the new religion by displaying the symbols of the new faith. This new market niche was identified by the local artisans that, almost immediately, embraced a continuous production of crosses, rosaries, reliquaries and all other paraphernalia related to Christian iconography. ✍ TP

³ Francisco Portugal Guimarães, 'Proprium Sanctorum: o culto, as suas relíquias e os seus relicários', in *População e Sociedade*, CEPESSE, Oporto, vol. 20, 2012, pp. 53–67. p. 57.

⁴ The *Devotio Moderna* focuses on prayer and the development of the personal inner life.

⁵ Fausto Sanches Martins, 'Culto e devoções das igrejas dos Jesuítas em Portugal', Oporto, University of Oporto. Faculdade de Letras in *Colóquio Internacional A Companhia de Jesus na Península Ibérica no séc. XVI e XVII*, 2004, p. 99. Cf. <https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/handle/10216/8707>.

⁶ Max de Brujin, Johannes Bastiaan, *Sawasa — Japanese Export Art in Black and Gold, 1650–1800* (cat.) Amsterdam — Zwolle, Rijksmuseum — Uitgeverij Waanders, 1998, p. 24, no. 29.

