

# SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

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*A Namban Bible Stand (Shokendai) — Japan, Momoyama to Edo Period, ca. 1580–1620*



### A NAMBAN BIBLE STAND (*SHOKENDAI*)

Wood, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, gold and gilt copper

Japan, Momoyama to Edo Period, ca. 1580–1620

Dim.: 35.0 × 31.0 × 29.0 cm (opened)

50.0 × 31.0 × 3.0 cm (closed)

F1268

Provenance: Spanish collection

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The bible stand is formed by two lacquered articulated wooden sections and decorated with a golden composition of floral and foliage elements combined with an exuberant insignia of the Society of Jesus — a new religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534 and officially recognized by the Pope Paul III in 1540.

The Jesuits were the first Christian missionaries in Japan, concentrating their action firstly on the Japanese elite and later on lower social classes, having converted, by end of the sixteenth century, more than 300,000 Japanese to Christianity. With the Portuguese arrival in the East and the intense missionary program that followed, a necessity to erect churches and produce locally objects used on the European context arose.

Furniture and other liturgical objects in lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay, such as this lectern, were made by the hands of local artisans oriented by Portuguese masters following European prototypes yet using regional materials and techniques. These lecterns (*shokendai*) were commissioned by Jesuits missionaries to be used on devotional services to hold the sacred text. This specific type of portable folding lectern is related to Baroque carved wooden prototypes produced in Goa, albeit its articulated mechanism, formed by two crossed boards, follows well-known

Islamic models. With a slight modification to the original Islamic lectern model, this adapted prototype allowed the bible to rest on an almost vertical position, as the Western book-rest form, in opposition to the horizontal position used for the reading of the Koran.

Made of Japanese cypress wood (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) and coated with black lacquer (*urushi-e*), the lectern is richly decorated with gold and silver motifs (*maki-e*), as well with mother-of-pearl inlaid work (*raden*) a decoration very common in Momoyama (1568-1600) and also in the following Edo period<sup>1</sup>.

The large central medallion, composed of two rings, bears the 'IHS', the Jesuits' monogram, and the symbols of Christ's crucifixion. The outer ring is fully decorated with a marvelous mother-of-pearl inlaid work combined with golden and silver strips in a beautifully composition of sunrays, shining light to the Jesuits insignia.

This pattern consisted of inlaid work in the form of radiant beams can also be found on small *namban* boxes, resembling an open fan.

On the ground of the front panels, a profuse floral decoration takes place consisting of a Japanese cherry tree blossoms (*sakura*) on the superior panel, and a leaf pattern with orange-fruits on

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<sup>1</sup> See Teresa Canepa, *Silk, Porcelain and Lacquer. China and Japan and their Trade with Western Europe and the New World, 1500–1644*, London, Paul Holberton publishing, 2016; and Alexandra Curvelo, 'Namban Art: what's past is prologue', in Victoria Weston (ed.), Portugal, *Jesuits and Japan. Spiritual Beliefs and Earthly Goods* (cat.), Chestnut Hill, MA, McMullen of Art, 2013, pp. 71-78.







the lower panel. A decoration of scrolling wine with grapes, and a Japanese camellia (*tsubaki*) tree adorn the on the upper and lower back panel, accordingly.

The front panels are framed with an ornamental border of a scrolling and interlacing tendrils. Protecting the lectern, iron mountings with cherry trees engravings were added to the superior corners and feet.

Lecterns, such as the present example, were common to most Jesuit churches. As a result of the persecution of Christians under the leadership of Tokugawa Iemitsu (1623–1651), these objects

are today extremely rare. This one of few example of the *namban* liturgical lacquers that have survived to the present day, illustrating the cross-cultural interaction between the East and the West in Japan during the Momoyama Period (1573–1615).<sup>2</sup>

Similar examples can be seen at the Namban Bunkanan Museum in Osaka, the Arte Antiga National Museum in Lisbon, the Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales in Madrid, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts. ✨ HC

<sup>2</sup> See Maria Helena Mendes Pinto (éd.), *Arte Namban. Os Portugueses no Japão* (cat.), Lisbon, Fundação Oriente, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 1990, pp. 48–49, cats. 35–39; and Idem, *Lacas Namban em Portugal. Presença portuguesa no Japão*, Lisbon, Edições Inapa, 1990, pp. 60–63.

