

Portuguese Naus on Namban Screens: A study of the first European ships on paintings from the late 16th to early 17th centuries in Japan

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Abstract

Namban screens, a well-known Japanese art form, were painted by skillful Japanese artists from the late 16th century to the 17th centuries. Approximately 90 of these screens have been handed down up to the present. Not only they show some important historical scenes of European commercial activities in the Far East for the first time, but they also depict representational pictures of Portuguese ships during the Age of Discovery. Although the ships' images on the screens are roughly acceptable, the details are often strangely anachronistic. The same images could be found in some Western maps in the 16th century. Judging from the similarity, perhaps, Japanese painters, who had never seen actual ships themselves in ports, did manage to copy the images from ones on those maps, which were brought to Japan by the wellknownTensho embassy. This was the first Japanese embassy that was sent to Europe; the diplomats left Japan in 1582 and arrived at Portugal in 1584. They met with Pope Gregory XIII and his successor, Pope Sixtus V, in Rome, and then returned back to their homeland in 1590. In the following year the embassy members succeeded in seeing HideyoshiToyotomi, who was the leading political ruler in Japan at that time. They gave him some souvenirs from Europe, including the maps. It seems that some official court painters had a chance to see those gifts, from where Japanese artists could have obtained an idea of the ships' images that appear in the Namban screens.

Keywords:Namban Screen, Japan, Portugal, Ships, Naus,

Introduction

In the early 14th century, Japan was introduced to the European world as an Island of Gold by the Venetian explorer Marco Polo. Portuguese sailors finally reached these far away lands in 1543, more than 200 years after Marco Polo's first publication and the introduction of Zipangu. In the following century, Portuguese merchants enjoyed the lucrative Japanese trade. Today, we know a lot about this first interaction between the Europeans and Japanese from both contemporary Latin and Japanese chronicles and journals; however, among all primary sources, the most intriguing and visually-pleasing information appears on Namban screens, a famous Japanese art form, which was

produced at the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th century in Japan (Fig. 1).

Namban screens are regarded as the first Japanese artworks that depicted Europeans and their ships visiting Japan. The original goal of the author's research was to identify the Portuguese ships that travelled to the



Far East and to illuminate their nature and the details of their upper structures.

Fig. 1 Namban Screen: Version A of Kyushu National Museum (Important Cultural Property). Top is Right Panel and Bottom is Left Panel (154.5 X 363.2 cm each). (M. Sakamoto)

However, during this research, the author recognized that the ships that were depicted on many of the screens were implausible representations of oceangoing ships, and that some of the ships represented on the screens looked very similar to the ships represented in contemporary European art. While considering these facts, the author realized that one important historical event might be the 16th century link between Japan and Europe.

Namban Screens

Namban screens were produced by various artists from the end of 16th century and throughout 17th century (Sakamoto, 2008). The word “Namban” was derived from the old Chinese worldview. In ancient China, its inhabitants considered their country to be the center of the world, and the only civilized nation on earth. Chinese people called surrounding regions “Hokuteki”, “Toui”, “Seikai”, and “Namban”; or Northern Savages, Eastern Savages, Western Savages, and Southern Savages (Sakamoto, 2008). By the 16th century, these terms were also in use in Japan, and the Europeans who came to Japan from the southern sea were called Namban people.

The Namban people first met the Japanese in 1543, when three Portuguese merchants drifted into one of the southwestern small islands of Japan on a Chinese junk. Soon after the discovery of Marco Polo's legendary islands, European merchants and missionaries began to visit Japan regular bases. This interaction with the Western World caused cultural changes far beyond the introduction of firearms. One important realm where European influence can be observed is that of the Japanese art. New trends in Japanese art appeared at the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th century (Sakamoto, 2008). In addition, many Japanese artists drew Portuguese people and ships in their paintings. Namban screens were a part of this. More than 90 screens survive, produced primarily between the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th century. Some of the earliest screens were painted by well-known artists, known as the Kano-school (Sakamoto, 2008). In 2008, the most complete inventory so far was published in a book, *NambanByobu Shusei* (Sakamoto, 2008).

Ships

Portuguese Nau

The most important element relevant to this study that can be seen on Namban screens are the European ships, the main subject of the present research. The ships on the screens represent Portuguese merchantmen; Portuguese naus was probably the most common type of European merchant ship to sail in Asia at that time, and were employed in the China and Japan trade (Okamoto, 1955; Sukeno, 1960).

Naus grew in size during the 16th century and were engaged on the East India route. By the beginning of the 17th century the overall size of the East India naus was larger than ever, at about 1,100 tons of displacement, while bow and stern castles were lowered for better sailing performance (Castro, 2005).

Ships on the Namban Screens

From the 90 surviving Namban screens, we can discern several different typologies of ships. As often happens in the art of the western world, it appears that Japanese artists sometime drew their Namban ships based on ships that they saw on other Namban screens, rather than from seeing the actual ships (Russell, 1983). An analysis of the collection of screens suggests that through a sequence of copying older images, the accuracy and detail of the Namban ships gradually deteriorated. Fortunately, several

scholars of Japanese Art History and connoisseurs of Japanese art have studied all known Namban screens and completed brief timelines of screen production (Sakamoto, 2008). The timelines are based on the screen's historical accounts and the styles of painting.

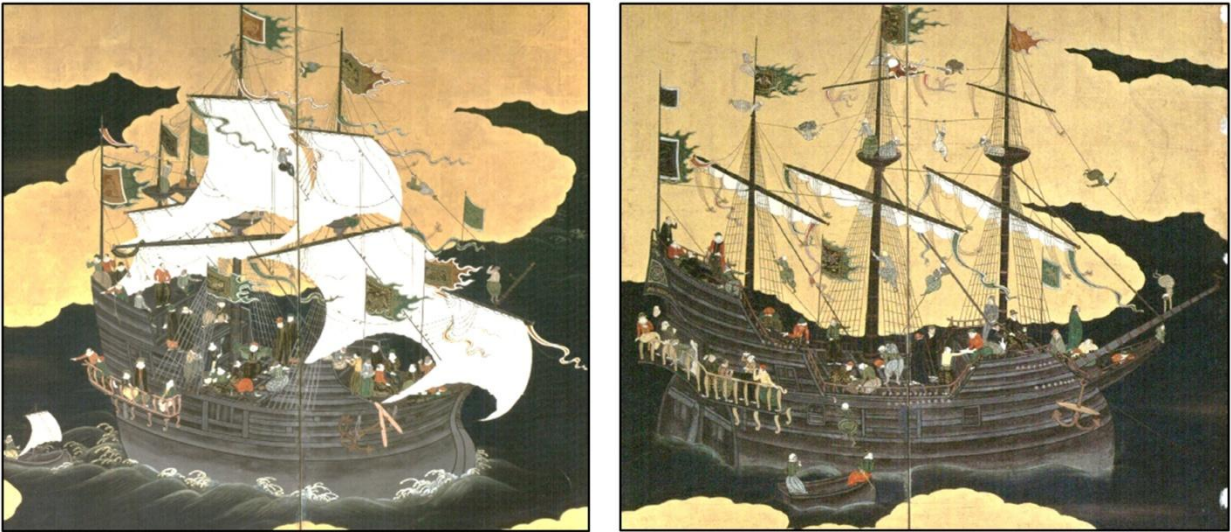


Fig. 2 Namban Ships on Namban Screen (Version of Kobe City Museum, Naizen Version [Late 16th – Early 17th century] by Kano Naizen). (M. Sakamoto)

When analyzed in this light, most images of ships on the screens seem to be copies of previous images, often from other screens. The author made a catalog of all 73 ship images known, and classified them according to their quality and date of production. Fifteen groups or families were identified, seemingly 15 strings of copies of 15 original images. Once it was completed, this catalog allowed the author to make a surprising statement: none of these 15 ship types seems to have been painted directly from observation of actual European vessels in Japanese ports.

Questions

Question1: Why are the Depictions of the Ships so Inaccurate?

The first and biggest question about the origin of the Namban screens pertains to the inaccuracy of the ship representations. The most conspicuous mistakes are the implausible widths of the hull planks, which when scaled properly sometimes reach approximately two meters in width (Fig. 2). No less inconspicuous are the rigging arrangements. Although most ships display masts, yards, sometimes sails, and most times some standing rigging supporting the masts, the quality of the rigging

representations is always bad and diminishes in time. For instance, ships represented after the 1630s rarely display ratlines. Running rigging is rarely represented, and in a few cases ships do not even have masts and yards.

Other interesting mistakes can be observed on the representations of gun ports. By the 16th century, most European merchant ships were armed. The primary weapons of these vessels were heavy guns, since naval battles were shifting from hand-to-hand combat into bombardment battles, and indeed many of ships display cannons. However, these are represented as simple pipes protruding from the hull planking, instead of the muzzles of cannons and gun ports represented in contemporaneous European iconography.

These are gross mistakes that are in obvious contrast with the quality of the representations of houses, trees, or persons, in the same screen. Namban ships seem to be depicted with less attention to accuracy than many other features in these screens. Most Japanese scholars explain this lack of accuracy by saying that Namban ships were not an important portion of the screens and that artists might stylize the ships because it did not really matter much for the end result (Okamoto, 1955; Sakamoto, 2008). However, this explanation is not acceptable because all other features on the screens were depicted in minute detail, as we can see for instance on people's faces, houses, trees, and even the waves of the sea. Moreover, many of the early screens were produced by the Kano school, one of the most famous groups of artists in Japanese history. The Kano school was composed predominantly of the master Kano's lineage. Their painting techniques and styles were only taught to close family members and other relatives (Matsuki, 1994; Takeda, 1995). The Kano school appeared in the 15th century and continued until the 19th century. During these 400 years its artists produced many works of art that have been labeled National Treasures and Important Properties of Japan (Yamashita, 2004). Kano school masters served many Tennou, Daimyo, Taiko, Shogun, and other powerful authorities in each period of Japan's history. The fame of the Kano school reached its peak in the Azuchi-Momoyama Era (1567-1600), when Nobunaga Oda and Hideyoshi Toyotomi ruled Japan. The Japanese culture of this era was named the Azuchi-Momoyama Culture, and the paintings produced by Kano school artists represent masterpieces of Azuchi-Momoyama arts

(Kano, 2007). The Kano school's art is characterized by precision and attention to details, and precisely for this reason it is interesting to analyze the reasons behind the poor representations of ships on their screens.

Question 2: Anachronism: Beginning of the Production

Another relevant question that arose during the analysis of the Namban screens concerns the period of their production. Specialists believe that one of the earliest pieces may have been produced as early as the 1590s. Nonetheless, the Portuguese had begun their Japanese trade in the 1550s, and there are good documental sources that suggest that they used Portuguese-built ships. In the later part of 16th century, the Portuguese visited Nagasaki and Hirado annually, sometimes even other ports around Kyushu. Japanese people, including artists, had many opportunities to see actual Portuguese vessels. Nobody knows why there are no contemporary depictions of European ships by Japanese artists until the Namban screens appeared. Moreover, most of the surviving Namban screens were actually produced between the 1620s and the 1640s. By this time more than half of foreign trading vessels had been replaced by Japanese Shu-in Ships, and Chinese cargo carriers. Both Japanese and Chinese merchants used junk-type vessels on this trade (Nagazumi, 2001). The conception, structure, and configuration of the junks were very different from those of European vessels (Green and Kim, 1989; Green and Burningham, 1998). Moreover, when Ieyasu opened his country to foreign trade, he concentrated it in Nagasaki and Hirado, in order to manage all the incoming and outgoing vessels. This fact certainly limited the number of people who actually saw European ships at anchor with their own eyes, even though large numbers of Namban screens were produced during this period. Several more screens were painted after the third Shogun Iemitsu prohibited all foreign trade, except that with Dutch and Chinese merchants at Dejima.

Originality of the Ships on Namban Screens

These circumstances suggest that the ships represented in Namban screens were not drawn from the real ships, but copied from illustrations of ships. The later representations seem to have been largely copied from earlier, similar screens, but the origin of the earlier depictions, represented on the screens produced by the Kano school in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, are harder to pinpoint. For the reasons

exposed above, it seems likely that Portuguese ships were a rare sight in Japanese harbors most of the time. By the time they were first painted, these were largely unknown in Japan. The author has seen, however, vessels similar to those represented on the Namban screens on other contemporary images: European maps of the Age of Discovery.

Hypothesis: From European Maps to Namban Screens

The author has studied world maps produced in Europe during the 16th and early 17th centuries, and found vessels similar to each one of the types shown on the screens as depictions of Namban ships (Fig. 3). The similarities between these drawings are often worth notice, sometimes striking, and it appears likely that all European vessels represented on Namban screens were copied from the decorative ships shown on late 16th century European maps.

In the 16th century cartography encompassed a number of disciplines that aimed at the production of accurate maps, and many of these disciplines were scientific in their nature. In this period maps were updated regularly, every time explorers returned from their voyages with news of discoveries. But knowledge of the world was incomplete and the blank spaces were often illustrated with appropriated drawings, depicting the flora and fauna, or the peoples inhabiting the lands represented, and often the seas were embellished with representations of the ships of their time (Unger, 2010). The trend of depicting ships on maps became fashionable in the middle of 16th century, and the fashion reached its zenith in the work of the competent French cartographers of the Dieppe school. From this period onwards, the oceans of most of the world maps were filled with small ships and imaginary creatures (Swift, 2006; Wigal, 2007). This fashion continued well into the 17th century, when the greater amount of geographic information available produced a style shift into precise depictions of the interior of continents.

European artists drew good and bad images of ships on the maps being made in their time. Sometimes the quality of the ships represented on 16th century maps is excellent, other times ships maps are simplified and stylized, often for lack of space. The rigging was especially simplified due to the small scale at which it was sometimes represented. It is almost certain that Japanese artists copied these images, often without ever having seen the actual ships, let alone understanding the complex arrangement of the rigging.

This fact explains the mistakes on Namban screen paintings described in previous sections of this work, especially in the rigging of the Namban ships.

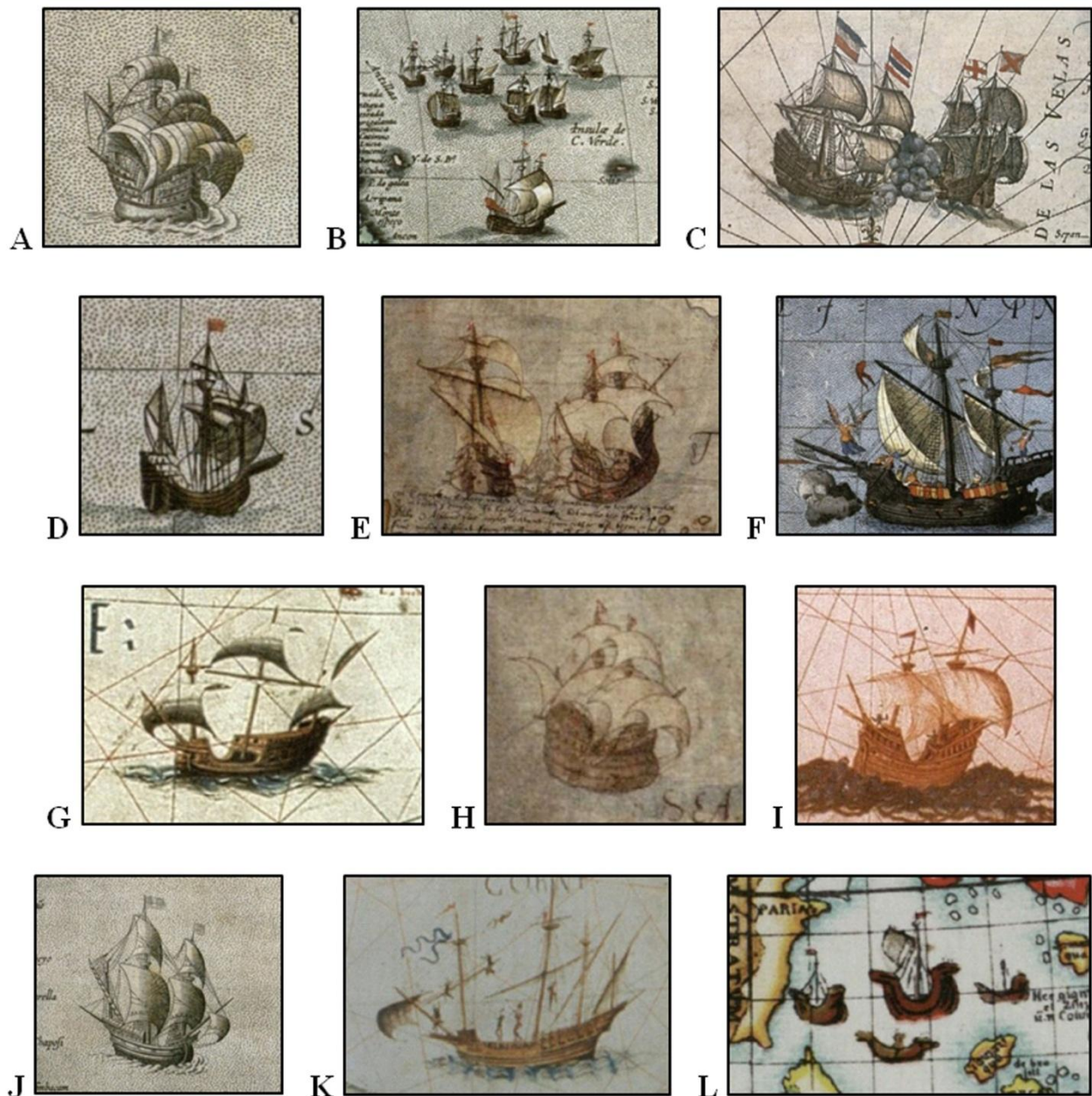


Fig. 3 Iconography of Ships from 16th Century's European Maps. Author: M. Swift. (A) From Ortelius's 1595 Map of Japan; (B) From Ortelius's *Americae Sive Novi Orvis, Nova Descriptio*; (C) From Hondius's Map of the Islands of the East Indies; (D) From Ortelius's *Americae Sive Novi Orvis, Nova Description*; (E) From John Goghe's Map of Ireland, 1567; (F) From Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, 1595; (G) From Pierre Desceliers's (Cartographer of the Dieppe-school) Map of the World, 1550; (H) From John Goghe's Map of Ireland, 1567; (I) Diego Homen's Map of the Indian Ocean, 1558; (J) From Ortelius's 1595 Map of Japan; (K) From Pierre Desceliers's (Cartographer of the Dieppe-school) Map of the World, 1550; (L) Johannes and Martin's Map of Americas, 1520.

Discussion: The Origin of Namban Screens

We know that many European art works were brought to Japan once trade with Portuguese merchants began (Nishimura, 1958). The primary purpose of this influx of European artworks was to spread Christianity. Missionaries brought European religious paintings and non-religious paintings to Japan and some taught European art techniques to Japanese artists, in order to help the Japanese paint religious figures themselves. In 1583, the Jesuit missionary Giovanni Niccolo came to Japan and opened a European Art School (Nishimura, 1958). As a result, Japanese Christian painters developed a particular style and imitating European painting became an art form between 1592 and 1615 (Nishimura, 1958). Some of the pieces of art produced in this period survive today. Well known examples are: Taisei-Okō-Kiba-Zu (drawing of the western kings on horses), Yonkakoku-Tojō-Byōbu (screen with pictures of four capitals), Rebantō-Kaisen-Zu (screen with the battle of Levant), or Sekaizu-Byōbu (World map screen) (Fig. 4). It is likely that a large number of European paintings and prints came to Japan around the period in which the Namban screens were produced. Moreover, Japanese painters also produced world maps around this time. Today, 20 of those world map screens survive in Japan (Kirishitan Bunka Kenkyukai, 1964), and three or four display small ships. Since Japan did not have the knowledge to produce original world maps based on the sea voyages or its own mariners, it is certain that these maps were copies of European world maps. According to Taku Nakamura (Kirishitan Bunka Kenkyukai, 1964), a scholar who carefully studied Namban world map screens, they were all produced from the late 16th century and throughout the 17th century.

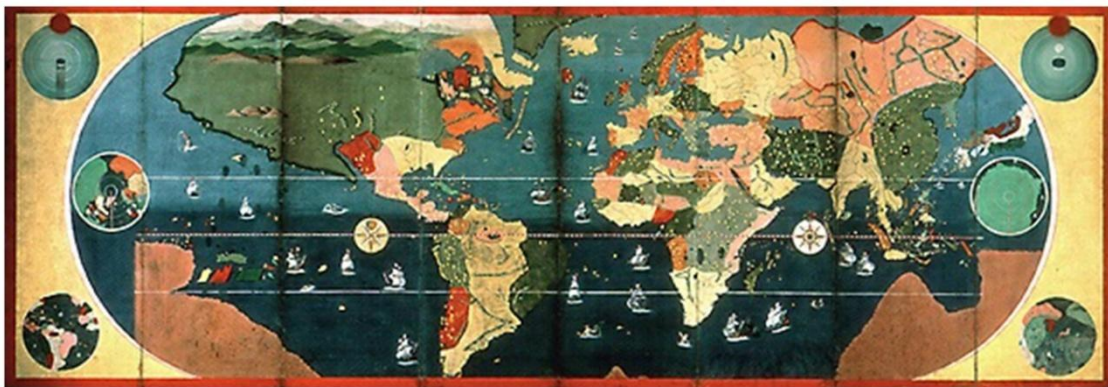


Fig. 4 Sekaizu-Byōbu (Kobe City Museum Version). (T. Miyoshi, and K. Onoda)

Nishimura believes that this influx of European artworks was largely a result of the Tensho Embassy (Nishimura, 1958). The Tensho Embassy was welcomed by Pope Gregory XIII and by many Italian city states, because their arrival in Rome meant that Christianity had reached the edge of the known world (Wakakuwa, 2008). On the way back to Lisbon from Rome, the Embassy visited Padua. While there, a nobleman presented four expensive books to them. Two of these books were *CivitatesOrbisTerrarum* and *TheatrumOrbisTerrarum* (Nishimura, 1958; Fróis et al., 1941). *CivitatesOrbisTerrarum* (Cities of the World) is a book that compiles drawings of cities, maps of several regions of the world, and its people (Braun et al., 2008) (Fig. 5). *TheatrumOrbisTerrarum* is the so-called first world atlas (Broecke, 1996) (Fig. 6). Both books have hundreds of depictions of small ships, most very accurate and seemingly typical of each region.



Fig. 5: *CivitatesOrbisTerrarum*. (A) Lisbon. (B) Venice. (C) Rome. (D) Constantinople. (G. Braun, F. Hogenberg, S. Fussel, and B. Taschen)

The Tensho Embassy returned to Japan in 1590. However, they had to stay in Nagasaki for three years before Hideyoshi permitted them to visit the capital in 1593. While they were staying in Nagasaki, many Daimyos and merchants visited them to hear stories of the travels to Rome. Fróis noted that the visitors enjoyed the European maps and globes (Wakakuwa, 2008). Finally, in 1593, they were allowed to visit Hideyoshi's palace. This visit was the march of Capitão-mor and the scene that is depicted on many Namban Screens.

An interesting additional fact is that Naizen Kano, who drew one of the earliest Namban Screens, served as Hideyoshi's painter (Yamashita, 2004; Kano, 2007). Perhaps he witnessed the reception of the returning Tensho Embassy? Or perhaps Taiko Hideyoshi asked him to paint the original screen? These are merely the author's hypotheses, but they would tie these important events and artwork together in a simple way.

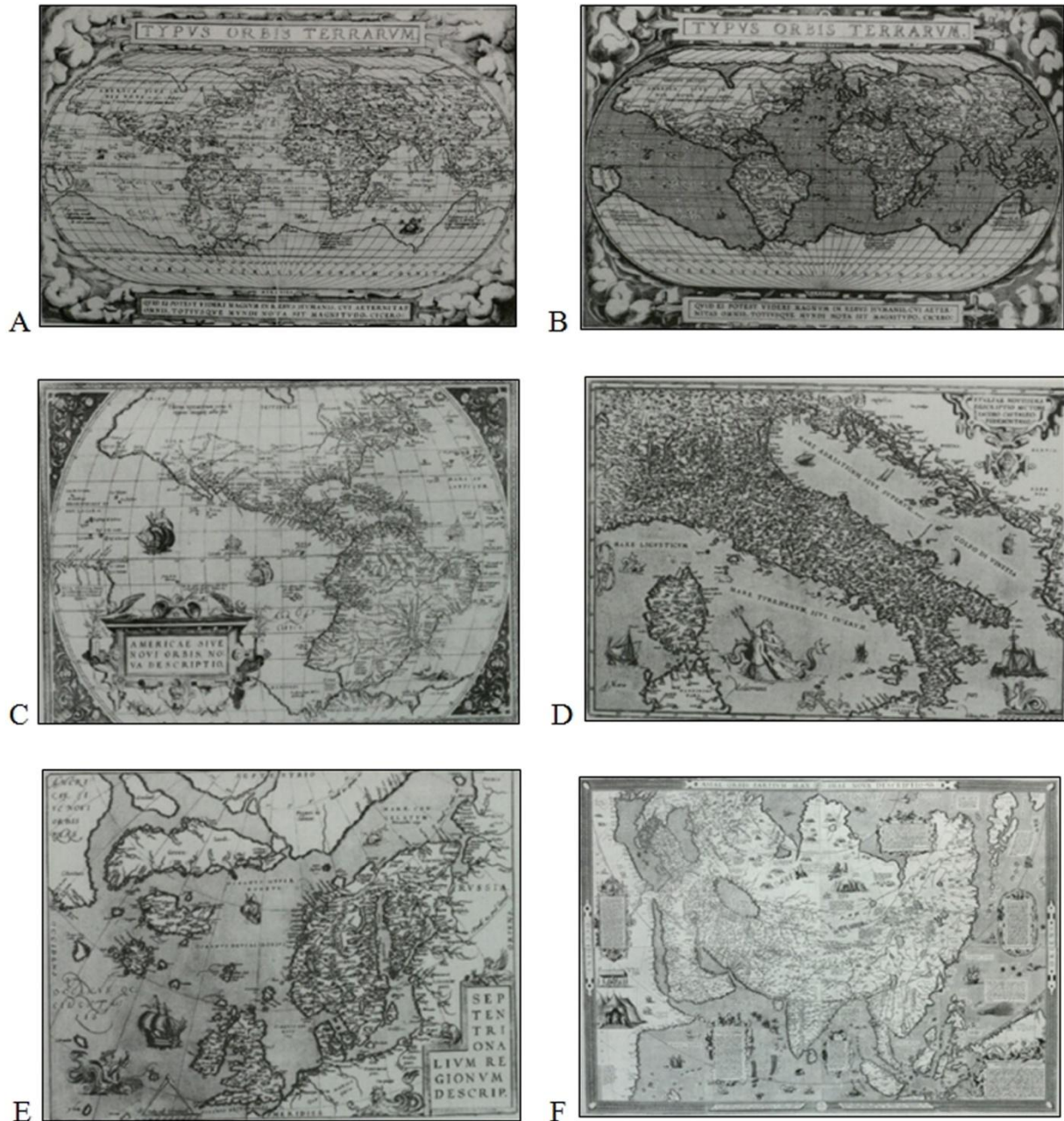


Fig. 6: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. (A) World Map, 1570. (B) World Map, 1586. (C) Americas, 1570. (D) Italy, 1570. (E) Northern Europe, 1570. (F) Asia, 1567 and 1570. (M. P. R. V. D. Broecke)

Conclusion

Not all the Namban ships were necessarily based on ships from *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* and *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. We don't know what other European sources were available in Japan at the time. The members of the Tensho Embassy were invited to many Italian cities, for instance, Florence, before Rome, and after that other cities, including Milano, Venice, Padua (where they received the books already mentioned). There were many printed books and images in Italy at the time. As mentioned above, maps with drawings of cities and ships were common as a result of the flourishing of the Dieppe-school decades earlier. It is likely that the four Japanese members of the Tensho Embassy purchased or were given maps and paintings for their Christian fellows in Japan and for Japanese rulers, like Hideyoshi. And it is likely that other European missionaries and merchants also brought maps and paintings to Japan. Historical records tell us that the members of the Tensho Embassy brought maps and globes to Nagasaki, Japan, although there are no historical accounts describing the members of the Tensho Embassy presenting maps to Hideyoshi. The records say that "among the gifts, Hideyoshi liked an Arabian horse." But it is a fact that it was after this visit that Hideyoshi's personal artist and his school produced the first Namban screens. Whether or not this is true, the Namban screens are still rightly considered Japanese Important Cultural Property and records of the first interactions between Europe and Japan, between West and Eastern Christians, and represent an interesting symbiosis between Renaissance European and Japanese traditional arts.

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Biography

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