

Doors open to Japanese art

Meadow Brook Gallery prepares for major exhibit

By CORINNE ABATT

the art and artifacts they brought with them had a decided effect on Japanese artists.

AN EXHIBITION of Japanese art of the 16th and 17th centuries, heavily touched by the Portuguese presence, was shown four years ago in New York City, St. Louis and Honolulu. This period is referred to as Namban Art. The later period of the present exhibit, which reflects the Dutch influence, is described by the Japanese as "Art of Kōmō: Red Hair."

During the four years of preparation for this exhibit, Usui studied Japanese art history at Tokyo University. Before plans were complete, a dozen major institutions had become involved. Initial money came from a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Grants from the JDR 3d Fund of New York and the Center for Japanese Studies at the University made possible the publication of an extensive catalogue. Professor Calvin L. French of the University of Michigan wrote the catalogue.

The art itself is on loan from the Kobe City Museum of Namban Art. The exhibit will be in two parts—half of the 80 pieces of art will be on display at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, while the others are at the Meadow Brook Gallery.

ALTHOUGH USUI hoped to make the exhibit a part of the bicentennial, the need for gallery cases with humidity control delayed it. "Japanese art," Usui explained, "is very sensitive to humidity, and any abrupt change from the Japanese climate would destroy it."

He said cases with humidity control are fast becoming a minimum requirement for an art gallery as more and more cultural exchanges develop. The controls in the cases will keep the humidity at a steady 55-60 per cent humidity. During the winter, with central heating, humidity in buildings may drop to 15 per cent, Usui said.

On the plane ride here, the art probably will be packed in air tight cases, so damage in transit is minimized. Still, to the viewing public, these details of preparation won't be half so fascinating as the art itself. For instance, Usui said the Japanese, master craftsmen in so many fields, never discovered perspective until they saw Western art.

But it didn't take long for a popular artist, Maruyama Okyo, 1733-1795, to incorporate this into his work and actually use it with great skill for his landscape and cityscape scenes.

They went many steps further through and actually painted Western scenes from the material that was

brought in by the traders. There are a number of works in the exhibition that show the Grand Canal in Venice, other scenes in Venice and the Netherlands, the Parthenon, the Colosseum and the Pyramids. Judging from photographs rather than the actual art itself, a pyramid is a difficult thing to conceive and draw without being at the site or having the advantage of photography.

The particular appeal of this art from the small end of the telescope is that it shows an unknown world as remote as Mars, still based on the familiar surroundings the artist knew. The Westerners shown at leisure are rather awkward in their settings as a Japanese transformed into a Western setting would, in fact, be.

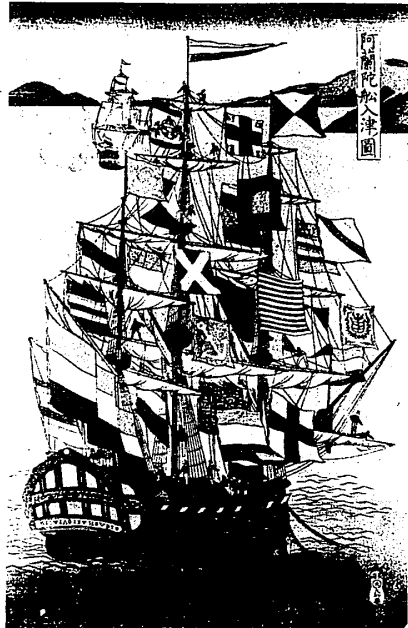
Prof. French, in his catalogue which is rich in background and history, explains the reasons for some of the strange approaches to Western scenes. Landmarks and buildings are misplaced because the artists worked from isolated pictures of them. In several cases, the reference pictures can be traced adding information not only about Japanese art, but what was available to the artists to work from.

Musically analyzed, this art is a fund of information on those years of activity between Japan and the Dutch traders and Prof. French has done an excellent piece of research on this far-reaching subject.

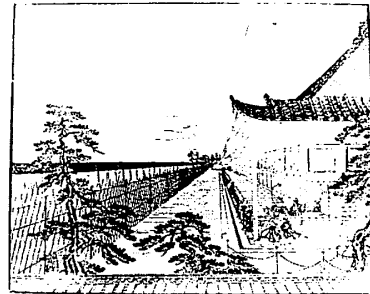


Hiraga Genai's portrait of "A European Lady" is about 20 by 16 inches. Although the lady is wearing a flower that has a delicacy typical of Japanese artwork and

her eyes are beautifully almond shaped, she still has a look suggestive of American folk portrait painters who were isolated from the European art movements.



"Arrival of Dutch Ship" is a woodblock print with color. The unknown artist left the stamp of his own personality and culture on his work.



Several works in the coming show illustrate how the artist, Maruyama Okyo, carefully combined skills from various artistic cultures. Here he uses perspective and delicate shading for depth and distance. These were introduced to Japan by the Westerners.

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