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1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My current research focuses on the reception and transformation of Western Christian images in Japan during the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation and the following period by Hidden Christians, including the so-called Kakure Kirishitan, who chose not to reconcile with Catholic orthodoxy, maintaining separate and distinctive religious practices developed in nearly three centuries of isolation. Originally, my intention was to survey how Christian sacred images of Western origin transformed as they became indigenous and amalgamated with domestic religious images, such as those of Shinto and Buddhism. However, as the investigation progressed, it has become increasingly clear that for the Kakure Kirishitan, their sacred images have been subjectively legitimated, adhering not to the original religious context but to the formalities and forms that were, paradoxically, substantial and inherited from their ancestors, who supported their faith at the cost of their own lives. In such a framework, the notion of iconographical orthodoxy is relative and conditioned by formalities and forms.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

Kouya Tagita, *Shouwa-jidai no Senpuku Kirishitan* [*Hidden Christians of Showa Era*], Tokyo, Kokushokankokai (1978). This is the first and most extensive study on the Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians). The author, born in 1896, was a scientist, autodidactic folklorist, and historian who devoted his life to researching the Hidden Christians. While there has been no comprehensive study of the art of the Hidden Christians, some important works have certainly addressed the reception of Western art in Japan during the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation period. Such studies include Mitsuru Sakamoto et al.'s *Namban Bijutsu Sō-Mokuroku, Youfū-ga-Hen, Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsu-kan Kenkyū Hōkoku 75* [*An Essay of Catalogue Raisonné of Namban Art: Japanese Early European-Style Painting - Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History 75*] (1997). As

for Western literature, Henri Focillon's *La vie des formes* (1st print: E. Leroux, 1934) has been helpful in contemplating how the "life of the forms" is eloquent, which is why it takes on its own connotation.

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between "style" and "iconography"? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

Given that style and iconography are defined by the environment of a certain period or region, the two should not be strictly distinguished. However, difficulties might arise if they are conflated and discussed methodologically, as each has its own autonomous development. Rather than introducing new approaches, however, perhaps we should first examine the linkage between style and iconography in a specific environment, such as with an individual religious sect in a specific region. To give an example, the Buddhist statue (statues?) of the early Heian period in Japan, carved from one tree, which emphasizes volume and characteristic solemnity, is closely related to esoteric Buddhism and the esoteric-related iconography of the time. Artworks like this could be discussed in a more comprehensive and macroscopic way.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different "turns", each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

New scholarly debates – such as those taken up by Michele Bacci, Georges Didi-Huberman, Herbert Kessler, Carlo Severi, and Victor Stoichita – have provided guidelines for my current research. For Japanese scholarship, I would point to Sueki Fumihika, who is not an art historian but a more general historian who strongly contributed to deepen our knowledge of the history of Japanese thought and religions.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

If I had to guess, I would say that 'fundamental' notions such as function, agency, and materiality as well as formality and type are not related to style or iconography. Such notions function as identifiers or containers for variable and relative representations. Looking at, for example, sacred images of the Kakure Kirishitan, consider, for instance, that the formality and type of the moon was originally associated with the immaculate conception, which has gradually been conceived as the norm for all sorts of representations of the Virgin Mary and other female sacred images, though at times it has been viewed as something completely different and linked to indigenous beliefs.

6. *What is your specific understanding of "meaning" in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

Naturally, meaning in visual objects is different from the meaning conveyed by words. Visual objects can operate as a more direct way of conveying meaning in the sense that the object or form being viewed has meaning in itself.

7. To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?

This depends on how much the society and the community that perceive the images are culturally, socially, and historically related to the society and community that created the images. Even the meanings of universal motifs, such as the sun, moon, trees, and flowers, are defined on the basis of viewers’ contexts.

8. In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?

We are now far better equipped to understand this relationship than when we discussed the history of form in developmental-historical terms and learned that formalism was central to the methodology of art history. At the same time, however, the boundaries between art history and other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and anthropology, are becoming increasingly blurred, making it difficult to discuss art history as a larger, self-contained narrative.

9. To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers’ understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?

In order to perceive and experience reality, people rely on images more than they might at first think. This is why, in every age and region, heads of religions have used images to spread their beliefs and rulers have used images to govern. Images can be directly perceived without being interpreted and can often be more eloquent than words in both good and bad ways.

10. What is your assessment of the materiality of images?

Materiality is relevant to me because I am currently researching religious images that were used as tools for faith by the Kakure Kirishitan. Material existence itself has been crucial for them. Some of the Kakure Kirishitan communities that originally did not produce sacred images in order to avoid detection have gradually adopted other religions’ holy images due to the need to have a material existence. Materiality is also important for the study of *Fumi-e*, which means “trampled sacred images.” These copper or brass reliefs, originally imported from Europe and then reproduced in Japan, were used to identify Hidden Christians. Thus, the materiality of *Fumi-e* has affected both Hidden Christians and their persecutors.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

An image may be considered to have an autonomous social life, whether intended or not by the viewer or user. For example, not to mention the art historical odyssey of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in the Western world, the non-Western world also has its own autonomous social life surrounding this painting. In Japan, for example, this work has not only become an icon for Western art and Leonardo's mythology but has also been reproduced in various forms as a symbol of something unfamiliar but Western and lofty.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

As long as the experience of images is spatial and temporal, multiple senses can play roles in how they are perceived. The sacred images of the Kakure Kirishitan, used together with a very special oration in absolute secrecy, are highly interesting. The Latin *Catechismus Romanus*, for example, has been handed down orally. However, the meaning has been lost, and the work is now understood as holy sounds or spells. This links to the gradual oblivescence of the original meaning of sacred images. Over time, the sounds – not the words – and the forms – not the icons – have taken on other meanings.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

To the extent that nonfigurative objects evoke specific concepts, notions, and ideas, this may be included in an art historical narrative. For instance, with a certain shape of landscape for Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdo* in Japanese, which means “celestial realm”), the imagery would be closely related not only to painting but also to Buddhist garden art in Japan.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

In general, for studies of transfer, transformation, and the reshaping of images across multiple civilizations, we would first need knowledge of multiple languages, including classical languages. Translation of the basic texts relevant to those studies would also be important.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

Taking into account the state of scholarship on Western art as well as traditional art of non-Western world, such as those of China and Japan, even today the world of art historians is divided roughly into a Western-language context and non-Western, especially East Asian, language context. Therefore, strictly speaking, English is not the *lingua franca* here. The majority of important studies on East Asian art are written in the original languages and are not yet translated into Western ones. I believe that notions informed by a basically Western European understanding of images have always had the potential to become universal, but as a matter of course, that depends on the imagination of scholars.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

One of the issues we need to address is how to resolve the persistently present but unconsciously concealed boundaries between the worlds of scholarship operating in Western and non-Western languages.

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