



**A rare and important 17th/early 18th century Japanese silver and parcel gilt buckle/clasp with exceptionally rare Christian decoration.
£4,250.00**

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The history of trade between Japan and the West is a fascinating study of cultural attitudes and barriers. Before the late 16th century Japan had limited contact with other cultures, the exceptions being Korea and of course China. The arrival in 1543 of a Portuguese ship (blown off course by a typhoon) was an event of exceptional significance to the isolationist orientated government of Japan. Eager to trade with Japan, the Portuguese soon established more formal traffic through the port of Nagasaki, and in 1549 the Jesuit priest Francis Xavier (1506 – 52) arrived in the country and founded the first Christian mission.

For the Japanese, any initial feelings of alarm caused by the appearance of the nanban-jin, or 'southern barbarians', as the Portuguese were called, was soon overshadowed by the exotic appeal of these curious visitors and the effects can be seen in Japanese art of the period. The arrival of Christianity also had a profound effect on Japan. The Catholic mission founded by Xavier was one of the most successful in Asia. By the early 1590s there were an estimated 215,000 Japanese Christians.

At that time the Imperial Regent of Japan, Toyotomi Hideoshi (1537 – 98), began to sense that an allegiance to the Christian God would threaten his own authority and so issued a decree in 1587 expelling all Christians. This edict was never carried out, but persecutions and executions of Christians occurred under the later rule of Tokugawa Iyasu (1542 – 1616) and his successors.

Following the success of the Portuguese other European powers were soon attempting to gain access to Japan. The first Dutch ship arrived in 1600, and in 1609 the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC) established a trading factory in Hirado. Following the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1639, the Dutch became the only Europeans allowed to remain in Japan. They were forced to move to Dejima, a tiny artificial island in Nagasaki Bay and closely supervised.

The political instability in Japan during the late 16th and early 17th centuries was to a degree influenced by the many conversions and the association between Christians and a series of rebellions led to harsher repression and eventually the banning of Christianity and the expulsion of all Europeans saving the Dutch. While the crackdown on Christianity was deliberately harsh, missionaries, notably the Jesuits, continued to teach and proselytize through an intricate underground network.

Despite the restrictions placed on foreign trade and relations, Japan in the period after 1639 was not entirely closed to foreign influence and after 1720 Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684 – 1751) relaxed the rules regarding the importation of foreign books which naturally influenced Japanese learning and culture providing an important alternative to dominant intellectual practices derived from China.

The form of the buckle is a restrained Baroque cartouche with the edge defined by a series of ornamental mouldings some incorporating acanthus leaf decoration and demonstrating a knowledge of contemporary European design.

The central element of the buckle is decorated with the Agnus Dei, symbol of Christ and St John the Baptist, and an eagle, symbol of St John the Evangelist. The only overtly Christian symbol is the cross held by the lamb. The role of St John the Evangelist is emphasised by the small ink pot with two brushes next to the eagle which highlight his traditional role as the author of the Book of Revelation. These two saints were particularly venerated by missionaries for their roles in recognising Christ and their evangelism, a central tenant especially of Jesuit missionaries in this period.

Next to the pot is a book which we can surmise is a bible. On the cover we can see an ume mon (peach blossom) which may represent the Oda clan, a samurai family who were also daimyo (feudal lords) that played an important role in Japan during this period. The buckle may have been produced by an artisan under their protection or it may have been produced for one of the extended family with Christian connections or beliefs and therefore adorned with their mon.

At the apex there is a representation of the eye of providence with its rays descending towards the emblems. The eye represents God watching over humanity and the rays his will which emphasises the roles of the two saints in recognising the divinity of Christ and its recording.