

BIJUTSUSHI

Journal of Japan Art History Society

185 Vol. 68 No. 1 pp. 117–137

TADOKORO, Tai. A Study of *The Christian Woman Asazuma with Cherry Blossoms* by Kurihara Gyokuyō: The Intent Behind its Creation

Kurihara Gyokuyō (1883–1922), a Nihonga (Japanese-style) painter, submitted *The Christian Woman Asazuma with Cherry Blossoms* to the twelfth Bunten (Ministry of Education Art Exhibition) in 1918. This work depicts the courtesan Asazuma, who stands alone and drops her eyes to the ground as if she is looking over her shoulder, against a background of cherry blossoms in full bloom and a bamboo fence. Asazuma was a Yoshiwara courtesan and a Christian during the Edo period, a time when the religion was prohibited. She was sentenced to death because of her faith and, having expressed a desire to see the cherry blossoms before she died, she was executed beneath a cherry tree in full bloom.

Previous studies have suggested that Asazuma expresses melancholy or resignation in this work. However, it is impossible to read such an intent based on Gyokuyō's own accounts, and the decorativeness of this work seems incompatible with the prevailing view. This paper will reveal Gyokuyō's intent and the background of this work, and further will show how to understand this painting in the context of Gyokuyō's oeuvre and the contemporary art world.

In the 1910s, Asazuma's story was not well known. It is thought that *The Christian Woman Asazuma with Cherry Blossoms* was created in the context of a Nanban fashion in art, literature and history in the modern period. However, there were several differing texts written about Asazuma. By clarifying the textual grounds and taking into consideration Gyokuyō's own description of this work, we find that, rather than intending this work as a historical painting, she prioritized expressing Asazuma's feelings which had drawn her attention. Considering also the Christian philosophy of Ebina Danjō, a minister of Hongō church, where Gyokuyō was a member, it is evident that Gyokuyō tried to express a woman who adores God and who waits for the time when, through death, she will be resurrected and blessed with eternal life.

It can be thought that *Shōjō yawa (Lovable Night Talks)*, a text on Asazuma by Ōta Saburō, influenced Gyokuyō's decision to create this work. Gyokuyō explained that she developed the idea for this work around summer 1918, and Ōta's book was published in June of that same year. In Ōta's book, Asazuma is compared to the Virgin Mary, and that is why, we can surmise, Gyokuyō was interested in this woman's story.

Furthermore, the fact that the Bunten exhibition at that time had a tendency to prioritize originality in art also affected the creation of the painting. After being rejected from the ninth Bunten exhibition of 1916, Gyokuyō tried to take her work in a new direction. In line with such tendencies of the Bunten, she searched for a theme which drew her interest and which she could express in her own way; the result was *The Christian Woman Asazuma with Cherry Blossoms*. However, Gyokuyō's intention for this work was not understood by general viewers. Later paintings show that she worked on the challenge of how to make Christianity easier to understand for those people unfamiliar with it. Therefore, it can be said that this work was created by Gyokuyō on the basis of Christian thought and made her face the challenge of creating Christian based works, and furthermore, greatly influenced her later creations.

THE JAPAN ART HISTORY SOCIETY

October 2018

All rights Reserved, Copyright © The Japan Art History Society