Sixteenth-Century European Clock

This clock is the oldest Western mechanical clock in Japan. It is also one of the best-preserved sixteenth-century clocks in the world. In 1609, King Felipe III of Spain (1578–1621) gave the clock to Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) as a token of gratitude after Japanese villagers saved Spanish sailors shipwrecked off the coast of the Boso Peninsula. Spanish diplomat Sebastián Vizcaíno (1548–1624) presented the clock to Ieyasu on behalf of the king when visiting Japan in 1611. It is thought to have been one of Ieyasu's most treasured possessions.

The main reason that the clock has almost all its original parts is that it was not used. Until 1872, timekeeping in Japan used 12 hours for daytime and 12 hours for nightime, which meant that the length of hours changed throughout the year. For example, a daylight hour during the summer was much longer than a daylight hour in the winter. Therefore, this clock, which displays hours of equal length, was not very useful in Japan.

Ieyasu died five years after receiving the clock, and it was transferred to Kunozan Toshogu Shrine as part of his personal effects. Protected and stored by the shrine since 1616, Ieyasu's clock was never repaired or updated to incorporate technological advances, which was the common pratice with similar clocks in Europe. It appears to have all of its original parts, making it an excellent resource for the study of historical clock making. In 2014, Johan ten Hoeve, a clock conservator in London, made a working replica of the clock for Kunozan Toshogu. Using only the hand tools that would have been available in the sixteenth century, it took him almost a year to complete the replica. The solid silver dial and hour hand were decorated by members of the Hand Engravers Association. Both clocks are on display in the Kunozan Toshogu museum; the replica is wound daily, striking on the hour.

The clock was originally thought to have been made by Hans de Evalo in 1581, as his name is engraved on the plate on the front of the clock. However, analysis by the British Museum of X-ray imaging done by Shizuoka University in 2014 revealed another name engraved beneath the name plate. A clockmaker named Nicolas de Troestenbergh is now thought to have made the clock in Brussels in 1573.

Important Cultural Property