

Folding Screens with Maps of Japan and the World

Overview

The two eight-paneled folding screens with maps of Japan and the world are replicas of rare and valuable examples of cartography produced before the Edo period (1603–1867). They reflect the era when geographic knowledge was dramatically expanding to include regions such as the Korean Peninsula, northeastern China, Western Europe, and the New World. The folding screens were passed down for generations in a wealthy merchant family in Obama and are nationally designated Important Cultural Properties reflecting Obama's role as a port town that connected Japan and the rest of the world. The originals are preserved in the museum archives.

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Rare Maps Made at the End of the Sixteenth Century

Many maps were produced in Japan throughout the Edo period, but the ones on these ornamental folding screens are thought to have been made earlier, at the end of the sixteenth century. One shows the archipelago of Japan, and the other depicts the entire world based on maps used by sailors from Spain or Portugal. Each screen is about 3.8 meters wide and 1.2 meters tall. The maps' borders, colors, and labels provide insight into how the regions of Japan and the world were understood by mapmakers of the time.

History of the Two Folding Screens

The folding screens were likely made in Kyoto and may have once belonged to a daimyo lord who was close to Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the de facto ruler of Japan at the end of the sixteenth century. The screens were eventually brought to Obama and were owned by generations of the Kawamura family, wealthy merchants who ran a successful shipping business. The fact that a merchant family in a coastal town could obtain such outstanding works of art demonstrates how prosperous some business owners became due to the thriving trade in Obama.

Exhibition Items

The folding screen with the map of Japan depicts the country surrounded by blue seas and framed by gold-leaf clouds. The coastlines of the islands of Kyushu and Shikoku, as well as the Chugoku and Kansai regions in the southwestern part of Honshu (the main island), are faithfully represented. By comparison, the coastlines of the Tohoku region and the island of Hokkaido in the far northeast of Japan are much less accurate.

The other screen features an oval-shaped map of the world. A band in the middle represents the equator and is divided by red marks at every ten degrees of longitude. Various colors are used to signify regions as interpreted by the cartographers of the time. Much like on the map of Japan, some areas are depicted in a way that resembles modern maps quite closely, while others are less accurate, showing that knowledge and documentation of different continents at the time was uneven. The surface of the folding screen around the map is covered with gold leaf, creating a striking contrast with the deep blue of the oceans.