Sadao Watanabe: A Christian Artist

John Hesselink

When Sadao Watanabe became a Christian as a young man, he decided to devote his artistic talents to making Christ known to the Japanese people. "I owe my life to Christ and the gospel," Watanabe explained. "My way of expressing my gratitude is to witness to my faith through the medium of biblical scenes. I want to use my ideas and talents for the glory of God." Although his technique is derived from a Japanese school of folk art and his figures are similar to early Christian icons, Watanabe's portrayal of biblical scenes is unique.

Adapting an ancient Okinawan method of stencil dyeing used in the production of kimono, Watanabe's prints have a distinctively Japanese flavor. For example, in his portrayal of the Lord's Supper he substitutes sushi for bread and sake for wine, and in his various renditions of the wedding at Cana, a fish, a Japanese symbol of long life, is in the middle of the table. In both cases, the people portrayed are dressed in kimono.

Thus Watanabe hoped to attract his own people to the gospel and to create in them an appreciation of the Christian message. This hope has been only modestly realized, however, for although his artistry is recognized in Japanese art circles, his prints are mostly found in the churches and Christian homes of Japan. His influence...
may be stronger in North America and Europe, where he is widely recognized and greatly appreciated in both Christian circles and in the larger world of art. Reproductions of his prints have appeared on the covers of church bulletins, of World Council of Churches' publications, of the *Christian Century*, and in materials published by Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed communions. For an entire year the cover of the *Banner*, the denominational magazine of the Christian Reformed Church, was graced with a Watanabe print each month.

Jonah

Watanabe achieved fame in the international art world in 1958, when he was awarded first prize at a special exhibition of Japanese prints in New York City. In 1960, his international reputation was further enhanced when one of his prints was among the ten chosen in a Japanese-American competition arranged by the American novelist James Michener. Both of these prints were later published in an exclusive limited edition volume edited by Michener.

Watanabe has received honorary doctorates from two American universities, and his prints are found in New York's Museum of Modern Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and the British Museum. Moreover, ten of his prints are on permanent display in the Vatican Museum of Modern Religious Art.

Thus, this humble, devout, and faithful member of a United Church of Christ (Kyodan) congregation has far exceeded his goal of witnessing to his own people. Although Watanabe died in 1996 at the age of eighty-two, he has not been forgotten. Five of his prints are on permanent display at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, and a large, stunning stained glass window graces the chapel of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. In
addition to a modest exhibition of his works in Holland, Michigan, May 5-August 26, 2000, sponsored by the Holland Arts Council, a much larger exhibition was held at the American Bible Society Gallery in New York City in the spring of 2001. Patricia Pongracz, the museum's curator, concluded her introductory article in the catalog with these words: "In his scenes Watanabe brings the viewer closer to God's Word. He invites, almost demands, thoughtful contemplation of the text that inspired the composition."\(^1\)

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\textbf{Good Samaritan}
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\textbf{ENDNOTES}

\(^1\) \textit{Printing the Word: The Art of Sadao Watanabe} (New York: The American Bible Society, 2001), 9. This handsome catalog, containing introductory articles and full-color reproductions of the fifty-nine prints displayed at this exposition, is available from the American Bible Society, 1865 Broadway, New York, NY 10023.