

B E A U T Y G I V E N B Y G R A C E
T H E B I B L I C A L P R I N T S O F

SADAO WATANABE

Japan's foremost Christian artist, Sadao Watanabe (1913–1996) converted from Buddhism to Christianity at 17 years old. He soon combined his new faith with an interest in preserving the traditional Japanese folk art of *katazome* stencil dying by creating colorful representation of biblical scenes that he hoped would speak to his people. He said, 'My task is to stand within the artistic tradition of Japan ... Theology will not take deep root in Japanese soil if it is merely an import.'

Within the framework of his Christian faith he was able to translate the biblical narratives into Japanese settings, thereby giving them broad resonance. Each hand cut print has been created using a complicated traditional stencil art form formally used for dying kimonos. He clothed all the biblical characters in the Japanese dress of kimonos. Noah's Ark looks like a Japanese cricket cage filled with a menagerie of animals. Watanabe depicted the Last Supper with a spread of fish and sake and the Wedding at Cana with a declawed lobster—all familiar traditional foods of his people.

Watanabe was less concerned with representing visual reality than with finding ways to communicate his Christian beliefs to other Japanese. The result is a body of art that is an expression of deep faith as well as a valuable contribution to the history of Christian art. His prints are part of many international collections including the Vatican Museum, National Galleries in Washington, DC and London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.

Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe brings together fifty stencil prints, calendars and cards on biblical themes from the collections of Sandra Bowden and John A. Kohan. Watanabe's fame notwithstanding, the artist's chief desire was to create art that could be enjoyed by common people and displayed in ordinary settings. *Beauty Given by Grace* fulfills Watanabe's wish, as it travels to different venues across the North America introducing this remarkable Japanese artist of faith to a new generation.