

Contested Performance: Ambassadors from beyond Europe at the Papal Court

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This paper examines the intersection between the performative and public practices of diplomatic representation in early modern Europe, and the construction of the religious and cultural identities of non-European societies within the emerging international state system. It focuses on embassies to the papal court by Japanese, Persian and Kongolese representatives, and on their depiction, from the 1580s to the 1620s.

In early-modern Europe, the institutions and practices of diplomacy were deeply enmeshed in performative conventions and rituals. Ambassadors were understood as representatives of their sovereign, not only in a purely legalistic, but also in a personal, even somatic sense. The Ambassador was expected to embody the dignity and power of his sovereign, and to represent it in public through his participation in ceremonial processions, audiences and social receptions. Within Europe and among Europeans, the conventions of these stylized performances of identity and status were, by the late 16th century, well understood and largely consensual. They also became increasingly grandiose and theatrical, as courts invested in more elaborate spectacles, and more grandiose ritual spaces.

In 16th and 17th century Rome, these diplomatic practices became intertwined with the Papacy's desire to define and promote Rome as the capital of a universal Church. While representatives of distant, non-Christian cultures were willing participants in diplomatic rituals, they followed their own imperatives in fashioning their own, and their sovereigns', identities. From the perspective of the Papal court, however, such visitors could not be allowed to stand only for sovereign authority; they had to represent ethnic and sectarian identities, as well as the possibility of their adherence to an increasingly global Catholic Church. By looking at a range of images and artefacts, including prints, portraits, and frescoes, this paper examines the stages by which these disparate elements and events gradually coalesced in the frescoes of the Sala Regia - the Papal audience chamber in the Quirinal Palace - one of the most ambitious and triumphalist of papal fresco commissions of the early *seicento*.