Japan

Scenes of traders at Nagasaki

1750 – 1800 Osaka or Kyoto

Pair of hand scrolls; ink, colour, gold on paper

These lavishly decorated handscrolls depict the arrive of Chinese junk ships filled with Indian cotton textiles and Chinese lacquer and ceramics at an unnamed Japanese port. Exotic foreigners interact with local merchants; a pop up market and carry-on, amid tiny vignettes of everyday Japanese life in and around huts that line the streets.

Fantastic depictions such as this were often commissioned by wealthy merchants as a keepsake for good fortune as they show the excitement associated with the arrival of foreigners and their exotic commodities.

On a raw, sand coloured background, these 40cm wide scrolls are displayed on the roll, with a part of these long paintings available to examine, each over a meter in length. Each scroll has a couple-of centimetres-thick, pale-blue coloured border at top and bottom, separated from the scenes by a thin white line. The border is speckled with white, it gives the detailed drawings a whimsical quality.

Everyday Japanese figures, some depicted seated on green matts, in their open wooden huts with thatched rooves, preparing food, others going about manual activities. They wear elaborately patterned Kimonos, of red and white, blue and white, red and gold, or muted tones of mustard or dark blue.

The foreigners carrying merchandise are, by contrast, brightly coloured and wearing pantaloons, brightly coloured shirts with ruffles at the collars and waist and tall hats.

The streets are bare, drawing attention to the detailed human activity. The occasional knarly and knobbly tree with bunches of green foliage is drawn adjacent to the huts lining the street.

The water is full of movement, dotted with brightly coloured merchant ships and the teaming quality of the water itself has been brought to life with undulating silvery lines which catch the light.