

# Retracing the Footsteps: Analysis of the Skušek Collection

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## Abstract

The paper presents preliminary research into the original scope of the Skušek Collection, based on four lists and an old museum inventory entry of the collection of Asian art collected by Ivan Skušek Jr. during his six-year stay in China between 1914 and 1920. Furthermore, it presents the cross-referencing of the mentioned documents with the first inventory record when it was formally taken over by the National Museum of Slovenia in an attempt to recreate the original scope of the collection. Through analysis and comparison of these records and with support of photographic sources this research attempts to put objects of the Skušeks' original collection into four different groups based on provenance research. Through several case studies it gives new insights into the dynamics of the largely unknown parts of history of the collection, and the paths some of the individual objects travelled over several decades in the first half of the 20th century.

**Keywords:** Ivan Skušek Jr., Slovene Ethnographic Museum, East Asia, collecting, provenance research

## Po stopinjah: analiza Skušekove zbirke

### Izveček

V pričujočem prispevku so predstavljene preliminarne raziskave prvotnega obsega Skušekove zbirke na podlagi štirih seznamov in enega starejšega muzejskega inventarja zbirke azijskih predmetov, ki jih je Ivan Skušek ml. zbiral med šestletnim bivanjem na Kitajskem med letoma 1914 in 1920. Članek poskuša s primerjavo omenjenih dokumentov s prvim uradnim inventarnim zapisom ob prevzemu zbirke s strani Narodnega muzeja Slovenije poustvariti prvotni obseg zbirke. Z analizo in primerjavo teh zapisov ter z opiranjem na fotografske vire poskuša predmete izvirne Skušekove zbirke razvrstiti v štiri različne skupine, ki temeljijo na preliminarnih raziskavah provenience. Z več študijami primerov daje nov vpogled v dinamiko večinoma neznanih delov zgodovine zbirke ter prikaže poti posameznih predmetov skozi več desetletij prve polovice 20. stoletja.

**Ključne besede:** Ivan Skušek ml., Slovenski etnografski muzej, Vzhodna Azija, zbirateljstvo, raziskovanje provenience

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## Introduction

The present paper offers the first insight into the rediscovered lists of the Skušek's collection written in the time before the carefully chosen objects became public property as a museum collection called the Skušek Collection. Today, this collection of Asian material culture is kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. The majority of the objects are currently kept in museum storage, and only smaller part of the collection is included in the permanent exhibition. However, before the current work little was known of the size of the original collection or the objects in it before it was formally taken over by the museum. Any lists of the collection before that time were considered lost or misplaced until June 2020, when several of them were rediscovered inside misplaced boxes in the museum storage. Together with the lists, some of the Skušek family's photographs were also re-discovered.

The article thus presents, compares, and analyses four lists of objects compiled between 1917 and 1950 and an excerpt from the so-called "old inventory book" of the National Museum of Slovenia, which took over the collection after Skušek's death before it was given to the Ethnographic Museum in 1964. In the first part of the paper basic information on Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947) and his stay in China, as well as his collection of Asian objects which he brought with him when he returned to Ljubljana, are presented. The following part analyses four different lists and the "old inventory book" excerpt. The first three lists are the so-called "packing lists", where items are listed as the content of individual transportation (or storage) crates; the fourth list is a list of objects that Skušek's widow exhibited in her last apartment; the so-called "old inventory book excerpt" is an excerpt from the old inventory book of the National Museum of Slovenia<sup>1</sup> made at the official handing over of the collection.

All together these sources tell us how the nature of the collection has changed over decades and in many cases also reveal the interesting stories and paths of

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1 What we know today as the Ethnographic Museum of Slovenia used to be part of the museum institution which is today the National Museum of Slovenia. The Ethnographic Museum became independent in several stages: first was establishment of the Ethnographic Institute inside the National Museum building in 1921, followed by the split from the National Museum and establishment of Royal Ethnographic Museum (*Kraljevi etnografski muzej*) in 1923, the latter being renamed to the Ethnographic Museum in 1941. In 1964 the museum was renamed the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (Palaič 2019, 187–91). That same year the collection the Skušek Collection came to the National Museum and was, due to its nature, transferred to the Ethnographic Museum (as seen in the old inventory book of the National Museum of Slovenia). For some time all of the collections designated as 'non-European' have been kept and displayed at the Museum for Non-European Cultures Goričane, a branch of the Ethnographic Museum. After its closure, the Skušek Collection was transferred to Ljubljana and is today still held by the Ethnographic Museum of Slovenia (*ibid.*, 194–95).

specific objects. The research has confirmed that the original scope of the collection Skušek and his wife brought from China was significantly larger than the “Skušek Collection” which is today kept at the Slovene Ethnographic museum. The reason for this is a partial dispersion of the collection among Skušeks’ friends, acquaintances, and relatives. This subsequently caused an interesting phenomenon of individual objects, once owned by the Skušek family, coming to the Slovene ethnographic museum via other people, or individual objects once part of the original scope of the Skušeks’ collection being kept in collections of other institutions. Based on the research of the collection itself, comparing different sources, and individual object provenance in Slovenia, we can classify all the known objects into four different “provenance” groups: a) objects handed over to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum as the Skušek Collection; b) objects which came to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum through other, known and unknown channels; c) objects which were found in collections of other public institutions (e.g. other museums, buildings under government administration such as castles etc.); and d) objects whose current ownership or location are still unknown.

The findings are supported by photographs of objects and interiors from the Skušeks’ private collection, which came to the museum with other documentation and objects, and museum photographs of objects from the Skušek Collection kept by the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum. Through the comparison of the reconstructed collection on the basis of documents and the lists written before the museum takeover I am therefore attempting to reconstruct the original collection of the Skušek family through analysis, cross-reference, and several case studies of individual objects and the at least parts of biographies which we can extrapolate from available information and documents.

## Ivan Skušek Jr. and the Skušek Collection

Ivan Skušek Jr. was a I. class navy officer in the Austro-Hungarian navy. He was also one of the most important Slovene collectors of East Asian objects.<sup>2</sup> His career began as he concluded his studies and got employed by the Naval Ministry in Vienna. In 1913 he boarded an Austro-Hungarian army ship, a torpedo cruiser called “Kaiserin Elisabeth”, as a Commissary Officer in charge of finances (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 98–99; Marinac 2017, 151). After Japan declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1914, the cruiser was ordered to sail to the

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2 His collection encompasses objects mostly from China and Japan, but also from Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia.

Chinese port of Qingdao to help the army protect the German concession located there. After a devastating defeat in November of the same year, the Austrian and German officers were taken captive. Most of the prisoners were taken to Japanese internment camps, but officers and non-military personnel were captured by Chinese forces and taken to Beijing. Among them was Ivan Skušek Jr. (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 101–103; Marinac 2017, 156; Lipušček 2013, 41–43).

Even working as a Commissary Officer in an internment camp, Skušek had been granted some privileges, such as permission to move freely around the city (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 103). This enabled him to meet influential people and make important connections, as well as come into contact with objects of Chinese arts and crafts being sold around Beijing.

During his time in China, Skušek had no contact with his relatives back home. According to Ralf Čeplak Mencin (2012, 99–100), curator in charge of the Skušek Collection at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, the family went without any kind of contact for the six years of Skušek's internment. The only time he wrote home was in 1919 to inform them he was "alive, healthy, and soon returning home". Today we know that he was able to send and receive post, but the reasons for his lack of communication with his family at home are not known. Recently rediscovered<sup>3</sup> and translated letters<sup>4</sup> from a German missionary, Father Maurus Kluge (1873–1927), sent to Skušek in 1918 and 1919, give us some insights into Skušek's life during that time.<sup>5</sup> Their primary correspondence was concerning their mutual interest in ancient Chinese coinage and the exchange of information as well as physical coins. While there are none of Skušek's replies, the letters from Father Kluge shed some light on Skušek's deep interest in collecting Chinese art as well as active connections with "experts" in the field with whom he was apparently regularly meeting in Beijing.

Another piece of Ivan Skušek's transformation from a navy officer into a passionate collector of East Asian objects can be found through the written diaries of his younger brother, Franci Skušek, who talked to him regularly after his return from China. He wrote about Ivan Skušek going around Beijing and buying numerous Chinese antiquities:

Uncountable shops sold various old objects, books, painted fans, furniture, paintings, vases, gods made of porcelain and other objects of art,

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3 The letters were rediscovered inside misplaced boxes in the museum storage of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

4 The letters were translated from German to Slovene in 2020 by Niko Hudelja (Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana).

5 For more information on Kluge and his correspondence with Skušek see Grčar (2021).

bronze statues, clothes, lanterns, standing or hanging, made of brass or artistically carved hardwood. In the southern part of Beijing there were roads where only shops of these kinds of objects stood [...] (Skušek, n.d.)<sup>6</sup>

It is known that Skušek was persistently building up his collection over several years of his stay. As discussed in this article, he had already accumulated a considerable amount of objects by 1917. However, the question of where this growing collection was stored over several years of his stay in Beijing still remains unsolved. Similarly mysterious is the question of the role of his Japanese wife, Tsuneko Kondō Kawase (1893–1963) (married name Marija Skušek), in accumulating this collection.

Tsuneko Kondō Kawase and Ivan Skušek met in Beijing between 1917 and 1919. The first time she is directly mentioned is in Father Kluge's letter, where he sends his regards to the "good Ms. Schmidt<sup>7</sup> and the children" (Kluge 1919) in a letter written on 4th March 1919. That same year, Skušek also mentioned her in the letter he sent home to his family, telling them he is bringing home a Japanese woman and two children (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 110). In July of the same year they reportedly visited her family in Gifu, Japan, then returned to Beijing and started preparations for return back to Europe. They married in June of 1920, the same month they embarked on an almost three-month long trip to Slovenia. Ivan Skušek with his wife and her two children (Mathias and Erika) therefore returned home on 8th September 1920. Roughly a month later, in October of the same year, the crates with the collection Skušek amassed in China arrived in Ljubljana by train.

The crates travelled from Beijing to Ljubljana separately from their owner(s), and arrived in two train carriages from Hamburg. From Beijing they were first transported by train to Tianjin, from the port they were shipped overseas to Hamburg, and from Hamburg, again by train to Ljubljana (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 110). Ivan's brother Franček (or Franjo) wrote in his diaries that some of the crates were brought directly to their home, and some of the bigger crates were taken to storage (Skušek n.d.). He writes:

6 In the original: "Nebroj trgovin je prodajalo razne stare predmete, knjige, poslikane pahljače, pohištvo, slike, vaze, bogove iz porcelana in druge umetnine, kipe iz bronu, oblačila, lestence stoječe ali viseče iz medenine ali iz umetniško izrezanega trdega lesa. V južnem delu Bejinga so bile ceste, kjer so bile samo prodajalne starih predmetov [...]" (Skušek, n.d.).

7 Tsuneko Kondō Kawase was previously married to a man named Paul Schmidt, a German Customs Officer stationed in Qingdao, with whom she had two children (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 110).

[with Ivan] We were opening the crates almost every day in the afternoon, when I was free, and every Sunday [we were opening them] the whole day through. (Skušek n.d.)<sup>8</sup>

Ivan Skušek apparently had the intention of building a museum of Chinese art on the outskirts of Ljubljana, where his collection would be exhibited and where his wife “Tsu” would be the curator and guide (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 113). His dream of the museum sadly never came to pass, but the family did fill up their whole apartment with the objects he bought in China. They regularly accepted guests and proudly showed off various curiosities, and their home soon became the “centre of cultural and social life of Ljubljana’s intelligentsia and art world” (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 113; Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 128).

Ivan Skušek Jr. died in 1947, and sometime before his death the family moved for the last time to a new apartment. Tsuneko Kondō Kawase, surviving both of her children, lived there until her death in 1963. The Slovene Ethnographic Museum keeps several photographs of the Skušek Collection as it was exhibited inside the family’s homes.<sup>9</sup>

The Skušek Collection was initially a bequest by Ivan Skušek to the National Museum of Slovenia, however it formally came into their possession only in 1950, three years after Skušek’s death. At first, the collection remained in the family’s home, and upon a formal agreement Tsuneko Kondō Kawase became its honorary custodian. We know today that during this period the collection’s objects became dispersed to some degree, mostly through gifts to family, friends, and acquaintances. Some objects were quite possibly also lost during the several moves of the collection into new homes. After Marija Skušek’s passing in 1963, the collection was officially transferred to, and partially exhibited by, the National Museum of Slovenia. Through comparison of the lists of the original scope of the collection and the first inventory list of objects made at the museum, it is quite clear that only a part of Skušek’s collection was actually bequested. In 1964 the “Skušek Collection” was given over to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum where it has remained ever since (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 112–17).

Today, the Skušek Collection is one of the 21 identified collections of East Asian art held in Slovene museums and other public institutions, and also one of the biggest (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 131). Most of the objects are of Chinese origin,

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8 In the original Slovene: “Zaboje sva z Ivanom odpirala skupaj vsaki dan popoldne, ko sem bil prost in vsako nedeljo celi dan” (Skušek, n.d.).

9 The exact dates of the Skušek family moving from one residence to another are not completely clear. For more information see Motoh (2021).



fewer are Japanese, one object (presumed) Mongolian, and one (presumed) Korean.<sup>10</sup> The overwhelming majority are dated to China's Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the following Republican period (1912–1949). The objects were of both higher and lower price range, and it is clear one of the main criteria guiding Skušek in acquiring objects was their diverse nature and wish for representation of as many different forms of art as possible.<sup>11</sup> In the collection we find such objects as big ornate pieces of furniture, architectural ceramics, Chinese imperial porcelains, coinage, Buddhist sculpture, several lacquer objects, clothing, and books, as well as a wide array of objects intended for everyday use, including a Japanese tea set, Chinese snuff bottles, dining utensils, a thermometer, and decorated make-up boxes. A special part of the collection is represented by Tsuneko Kondō Kawase's personal clothing—several beautifully made kimonos, which were clearly added to the collection just before it was taken to the museum.<sup>12</sup>

The collection has long been known only from museum inventory books, and its original scope was thus unknown. With the rediscovered lists written by Skušek himself and old inventories of the National Museum of Slovenia compiled with the help of his wife, we have, for the first time, an insight into the actual number of objects that Skušek accumulated and brought from China in 1920.

## Lists and Inventories of the Skušek Collection

The following part presents and comments on the lists and inventories of the collection Ivan Skušek Jr. accumulated during his stay in Beijing in the years 1914 until 1920. The first and earliest list (List 1) was written in 1917, three years after Skušek arrival and internment in China. The second (List 2) and third lists (List 3) have many similarities. They both include a complete number of packing crates, their dimensions, and very rudimentary descriptions of inventory listings. List 3 is written in Slovene, and is, unlike List 2, dated to 1920. However, due to these two lists' near-identical contents it is safe to assume that the second and third lists both date to the approximate time period of Skušek's journey back to Europe. The fourth list (List 4) is a record of the collection's objects exhibited at Tsuneko Kondō Kawase's apartment from the year 1950 (after Ivan Skušek's death), and

10 A Mongolian oven (*mongolischer Ofen*) and a Korean cabinet (*koreanischer Kasten*) were recorded as such in all the presented lists and inventories, although their provenance is yet to be researched and confirmed.

11 For research on collecting practices of Skušek, see Vampelj Suhadolnik (2020).

12 In several photographs kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum she is shown wearing this clothing well into her old age.

the last reference (or document) is the entry from the old inventory book of the National Museum of Slovenia, which took over the objects that gained the name the Skušek Collection. All the lists, except the museum inventory, originally span over only two pages, and are either typed or handwritten in Slovene or German.

Apart from the four mentioned lists and an entry, another list of purchased objects existed. It was first mentioned by Franci Skušek in his diaries, where he wrote about his brother Ivan checking off the objects they unpacked together on a list. This list supposedly had every item in every crate recorded together with all the prices (in dollars) Skušek paid for each individual object (Skušek n.d.). Another clue we have is a citation from a list in a paper written by the former curator of the collection, Pavla Štrukelj. Her paper published in 1966 mentions a small notebook, owned by Tsuneko before her death, which reportedly had every object recorded from the time of transport from Beijing to Ljubljana. She cites it as “1 Mandarinmantel gold” (Štrukelj 1966, 57). However, no list fitting these descriptions has yet been found, and therefore it is currently presumed lost. If it were to be found it would likely represent the most detailed list of the collection in existence.

### List 1: *Pakungsschema* (Beijing, 24th August 1917)

The first list is written by Skušek (*K. u. K. Marinekommissär 1. Kl. Johann Skušek*) and it is titled as “Packing list” (*Pakungsschema*). The list was written in Beijing (Peking) and is dated to 24th August 1917. The language is German. This is the earliest known written document of the objects which Skušek collected during his stay in Beijing between 1914 and 1917. This source (from here on referred to as ‘List 1’) gives us a list of forty numbered crates (e.g. *Kiste No 1*) followed by a detailed list of objects kept inside each individual crate. While this list does not record the dimensions the crates, it does give the most detailed register of their contents.

All different kinds of objects in these forty crates are counted, for example “one small narrow cabinet, two small wood carvings made of black wood” (*Einekleines male Kredens, 2 kleine Holzschnitzerein aus Schwarzholz*). This would give a good approximation of the number of objects the collection consisted of originally. However, two main issues arise as we study the list. The first issue is that several objects were, at the time, taken apart and stored in separate crates. Examples of this are two large wooden stands with ten decorative weapons, namely spears.



These are stored in five separate crates,<sup>13</sup> where all of the parts are counted individually, which gives the approximate number of individual components, but the actual number of objects themselves would in many cases still be hard to determine. The second issue is that some objects (or components) are often described too generally and it is not possible to determine exactly what object the names represented or part of what object certain components were. Example of the first are several different decorative wooden interior walls usually only described as “carved wall section” (*geschnitzte Wandabteilungen*), and an example of the second are components of furniture pieces which were taken apart, such as “two doors of the big cabinet” (*2 Türen von der grossen Kredens*). For the former, we cannot determine which decorative wooden interior wall was held in which crate, and for the latter, we cannot determine which cabinet the doors initially belonged to.

Despite some generalizations in the listings, the extensive entries for each crate’s contents as well as actual numerical amounts of objects provided are of great importance in researching the Skušek Collection today, and give us some insight into how extensive it originally was. The list also tells us that by 1917 Skušek had already amassed a great number of objects of many different varieties. It also implies he was storing them for at least a few years in numbered crates (*Kiste*), most probably in preparation for an eventual move or change of location. It seems he was not expecting to settle in Beijing or intend to stay for a prolonged period of time.

## List 2: *Verzeichnis und Dimensionen meiner Privateffekten* (no date)

The second list analysed in this paper (List 2) was, like List 1, most likely written by Ivan Skušek, or at least according to his narration. It was written in German, but is not dated and it is not completely clear where it was originally compiled. A location is given on page one next to the name of Ivan Skušek Jr.—“Laibach” (Ljubljana). At first impression this could indicate one of two things: either the list was compiled in Ljubljana, or that the list was created in Beijing and sent to Ljubljana. The missing dating makes it difficult to determine where or approximately when List 2 was written.

List 2 is titled “List and dimensions of my personal belongings” (*Verzeichnis und Dimensionen meiner Privateffekten*) with additional information of the crates’

13 Crate no. 1 held red horsehair decorations for the spears (*rotes Rosshaar für Boxerwaffenstangen*), crate no. 6 held ten spear handles (*10 Boxerwaffenstangen*), crate no. 12 held two stands for spears (*2 Boxerwaffengestelle*), crate no. 19 held ten spear-tops (*10 Boxerwaffen*), and crate no. 23 held four feet of the mentioned stands (*4 Füße vom Boxerwaffengestell*).

dimensions, their volume, and their contents typed next to it. Next to the title of the list there is also an addition of “Belonging to the Embassy guard”.<sup>14</sup> The inventory lists the 40 crates recorded on List 1, as well as additional 35 crates, bringing the complete count 75. Crates 41 through 75 are also additionally numbered with roman numerals, starting at 1. Crate no. 41 is therefore also numbered as “I”, crate no. 42 as “II” etc. Four subsequent columns list each crates dimensions (*Dimensionen in cm*), its volume (*Inhalt in m<sup>3</sup>*), followed by a 2–3 digit number handwritten in pencil, and finally, the contents (*Anmerkung*). Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik (2021, personal correspondence) shows that the numbers handwritten in pencil represent the weight (in kilograms) of each individual crate. The weight of the crates would, of course, be a piece of crucial information regarding the transport by ship and especially the transport by train. This data is a strong indicator that List 2 was actually compiled in Beijing and somewhat predates List 3 (discussed below).

In contrast to the detailed listing of contents in List 1, the contents recorded on List 2 seem much drier and more basic. In most entries only one or two objects are written down, and the rest are missing or labelled simply as curiosities (*Kuriosos*), e.g. “1 table and curiosities” (*1 Tisch und Kurios*). Based on the emphasis given to the measurements of crates and barely any attention given to the contents themselves, we can presume List 2 was written in Beijing or in any case before the transport of the objects.

### List 3: *Seznam in obseg moje selitvene imovine* (Ljubljana, 20th October 1920)

The third list presented (List 3) is very similar in its contents to List 2. List 3 was handwritten in cursive by Ivan Skušek (signed at the end) in Ljubljana and is dated 20th October 1920. It is written in Slovene and originally titled “List and dimensions of my moving property” (*Seznam in obseg moje selitvene imovine*). The first column lists the number crates, and the numbering is identical to that used on List 2. The second column lists the dimensions of the individual crates, and the third and last column records the contents. While List 3 is almost identical to List 2, it still gives an exact date of when it was created, which roughly coincides with the timeframe of when the collection was supposed to arrive by train from Hamburg to Ljubljana. Another important difference is the lack of the weight of the crates, which might suggest that by this point the weight of individual crates was not considered that important anymore. It is safe to assume it was written at

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14 In the original German: “zugehörig zur Gesandtschaftsschutzwache”.

approximately the same time as Skušek's objects arrived at Slovenia (at the time part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). One of the more important differences among the mentioned lists (1, 2, and 3) is that the record of crates' contents in List 3 is somewhat more detailed than in List 2, but less detailed than in List 1 (e.g. see Table 1).

Table 1: Contents of crate no. 20 as recorded in three different packing lists.

|              | List 1   | List 2  | List 3                                       |
|--------------|--|---|--|
| Crate no. 20 | 2 chairs, 1 Mongolian Oven, 2 doors of the large cabinet, 2 doors of the bookcase, 2 Buddhas <sup>15</sup> | Buddhas, chairs, wooden objects <sup>16</sup> | 2 chairs, oven, doors, Buddhas <sup>17</sup> |

#### List 4: *Delni seznam pohištva in stvari Marije Skušekove* (Ljubljana, 6th August 1950)

The fourth list is a rather short record of the objects Marija Skušek had displayed in her last home located on the Strossmayer Street 3/I in Ljubljana (List 4). It was originally typed up in Slovene language and is titled “Partial list of furniture and things of Marija Skušek (*Delni seznam pohištva in stvari Marije Skušekove*). It is dated 6th August 1950. It lists 216 objects set mainly in three rooms: 71 objects in the first room, 17 objects in the second, 20 objects in the third, and 98 objects with no designated room. The objects are mostly smaller items (compass, opium pipes, statues of Buddha, porcelain lamps, decorative roof tiles) or pieces of furniture intended for practical use as well as display purposes. The arrangement of the objects in the rooms is further confirmed by several photographs of the apartment interiors, which show the rooms filled up to the ceiling with objects of East Asian art (fig. 1). At the end of the list there is also a comment about additional 10 crates, which were supposedly unopened for 30 years due to lack of space. Where exactly these crates were stored is unknown, but it gives an interesting insight into how the collection was treated. It shows that by 1950 not all of the crates seem to have been opened since their transport to Ljubljana, or maybe not even since before that.

15 In the original German: “2 Sessel, 1 mongolischer Ofen, 2 Türen von der grossen Kredens, 2 Türen vom Bücherkasten, 2 Buddhas”.

16 In the original German: “Buddhas, Sessel, Holzwaren”.

17 In the original Slovene: “2 stola, peč, vrata, Bude”.



Figure 1. Chinese display cabinet at the Skušeks' home filled with smaller East Asian objects. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

### Old inventory Book of the National Museum of Slovenia— Skušek Collection

The “old inventory book” was compiled at the National Museum of Slovenia when the Skušek Collection was formally taken over. The inventory is composed of 373 entries with measurements of objects and Marija Skušek's commentary. According to notes, it was officially recorded at the beginning of 1950, and the collection in this inventory is labelled as the “Chinese-Japanese Collection of Kondo-Kawase Tsuneko, married Maria Skušek that she brought in 1920 from Peking to Ljubljana” (Old inventory book of the National Museum).

While the list itself is invaluable for research into the history of the collection, it also brings up the questionable attribution of the collection to Tsuneko Kondō Kawase.

After the death of her husband she remained the key person who could give information on the collection of objects she, quite literally, lived with for decades. The curator Pavla Štrukelj wrote, based on Tsuneko Kondō Kawase's words, that the collection originally belonged to her father, Count Kagijiro, with whom she supposedly lived in Beijing while he accumulated the objects of Asian art and built the collection, and later gave it to Tsuneko and Ivan upon their wedding (Štrukelj 1966, 57).

There are at least three accounts which expose this story as a fabrication. First is the list of the already packed 40 crates of objects written by Ivan Skušek himself in 1917 (List 1). If Ivan already had more than half the collection recorded three years before the wedding, it is not possible for it to have been a wedding present in 1920. Second is the letters of Father Kluge, which reveal Skušek's passion for not only collecting objects, but also actively acquiring knowledge about them. Third is Ivan's brother's notes, where he writes that while they were at home unpacking the crates Ivan was also sharing information about the individual items with his wife, since she was seeing the objects for the first time (Skušek n.d.). This information reveals several fabrications which persistently surrounded the Skušek Collection after Ivan Skušek's death. Therefore, while the inventory of objects recorded in the old inventory book excerpt is important, much data regarding the dates and ways of acquisition provided by Tsuneko Kondō Kawase herself is highly questionable and should not be taken at face value.

The inventory is, of course, important, especially in regard to the actual objects that ended up as part of the museum collection. It also tells us that many objects from the original scope of the collection did not make it into what is today, under the curatorship of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, officially called the Skušek Collection. They most probably stayed with various family members as mementos, or were given by Skušeks' to friends and acquaintances. It is also quite possible some objects got misplaced or lost during several relocations of the collection before it finally ended up displayed and stored at the Museum of non-European Cultures Goričane, and later at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

### **Reconstructing the Skušek Collection—Analysis of Lists, Inventories, and Photographs**

Through the study of the presented lists we get the clearest insight yet into the actual size of the collection at the time it was brought to Ljubljana. Despite rather basic information on the contents on the packing lists or inventories, we can still determine

different types of objects based on their use and/or materials they were made of. The most extensive and widely represented is the furniture<sup>18</sup> (see Table 2).

Table 2: Furniture types as they were packed for transport and recorded on Lists 1–3.

| Type of furniture                | Objects and packing crates   |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Tables and desks                 | 7 bigger and 4 smaller tables (some disassembled) packed in crates no. 23, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 50, 57, and 71.   |
| Chairs                           | 14 chairs (7 pairs), packed in crates no. 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, and 35.  |
| Screens                          | Unknown number, some disassembled, packed in crates no. 44, 64, and 67.  |
| Cabinets, closets, and frames    | 12 individual objects, most disassembled, packed in crates no. 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 21, 24, and 40. Several parts (doors, shelves etc.) stores in 10 other crates. |
| Beds                             | Unknown number (at least 2), all disassembled, packed in crates no. 41, 42, 47, 48, 49, 65, and 66.  |
| Standing mirrors                 | Unknown number (at least 3), all disassembled, packed in crates no. 18, 23, 25, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, and 59.  |
| Ovens                            | 2 ovens, 1 disassembled, packed in crates no. 20, 26, and 39.  |
| Wooden lanterns                  | Unknown number, all but 2 disassembled, packed in crates no. 1, 3, 5, 7, 17, 18, 19, 24, 41, 42, 43, 50, 64, 67, 69, and 71.   |
| Brass and other metal lamps      | 9 lamps, some disassembled, packed in crates no. 3, 17, and 32.  |
| Weapons' stands                  | 2 stands each holding 5 spears, all disassembled, packed in crates no. 1, 6, 12, 19, and 23.   |
| Decorative carved interior walls | Unknown number of pieces, all disassembled, packed in crates no. 4, 6, 18, 27, 31, 32, 33, 34, 38, 62, 63, and 64.   |

The above table demonstrates how only one type of object can be divided into several sub-types. Moreover, due to the fact that many objects recorded on the lists were disassembled in expectation of transport and were also not assembled back together after Skušeks' return to Europe, it is, in many cases, very hard to determine the exact number of objects making up this group.

There are many objects most of which could be comfortably sorted into a wider group of "object for everyday use" or "for use in leisure time", such as opium pipes, snuff bottles, an abacus, ivory boxes, dining utensils, painted and embroidered fans, a riding crop, a racket, several ash trays, etc. In most cases it is hard or practically impossible to determine the exact number of objects of certain groups, either

18 For more information on Ivan Skušek Jr. and his collecting of Chinese furniture see Vampelj Suhadolnik (2020).



because many objects were disassembled during the process of storage and transport, or because there was no count given and only the title of a group of objects was given. Due to no additional information, besides the basic title of the object, it is also hard to determine which crate individual objects were stored in, unless there is only one object of its kind, such as the thermometer of cloisonné lamp stand (*1 Cloisonné Lampengestell*).

Determining the original scope of the collection is challenged also by the several objects recorded as a single entry, the first such example being the numismatic collection. On Lists 2 and 3 it is only inventoried as “Chinese coins” (*chines. Münzen*), however the two entries do not indicate an actual number of individual objects included. All of the Chinese coinage<sup>19</sup> is therefore collected as one single entry, which represents a larger number of objects. The coins accumulated in this collection were only inventoried individually after coming to the museum. The previous curator, Pavla Štrukelj (1921–2015), listed 216 individual coins kept on 15 separate tables (one to 17 coins per table) while recording the Skušek Collection in the *Acquisitions Book of Non-European Objects SEM, 1965*.

The second example is a “metal box of used silks and old brocade” (*1 Blechkiste mit alter gebrauchter Seide und alten Brokaten*). Studying Lists 1 through 4 we can see there are no individual entries on any pieces of clothing or other fabrics. The only reference to any fabrics is the above mentioned entry of a “metal box”. It is therefore safe to conclude that all clothing items and other fabrics from the Skušek collection were stored in this one place (at least) during transport. We can only assume the actual contents (or number of objects) of the “metal box” on the basis of objects listed on old inventory book excerpt where we can see the museum received at least four embroidered silk curtains, four brocade and silk coverings, three embroidered skirts, six women’s long-sleeved embroidered upper garments, and an embroidered male robe, supposedly of Imperial origins (Čeplak Mencin 2012; Štrukelj 1966).

A side-by-side comparison and cross-reference analysis of all the presented lists also shows that a surprisingly large number of objects have never made it on to the list of the official inventory of the Skušek Collection kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum today. As mentioned before, many of the objects had already been gifted to family members and friends of Skušek’s even before the collection reached any museum. After Tsuneko Kondō Kawase’s death a large number of objects was taken over as what is now called the Skušek Collection, first by the National Museum of Slovenia, then they were, due to the nature of the collection,

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19 Coins from this numismatic collection are dating from the Zhou (1046–256 BCE) to the Qing Dynasties (1644–1912).

given over to the Ethnographic Museum and displayed in its branch location at Goričane. After the closure of Museum for Non-European Cultures Goričane the collection was relocated again several times through different storage locations until finally ending up at the present location at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana. There is no doubt that some of the objects might have become lost or displaced during those moves. With this information, as well as with the help of information held in the old inventory books of the National and Ethnographic Museums, we can clearly see that the objects, which compose the Skušek Collection at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum represent only a part of a greater whole.

Apart from analysis of the aforementioned lists and inventories of the National Museum and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, photographs of the Skušek family and their collection represent another relevant material for reconstructing the full collection. This analysis revealed four different groups of objects that were originally owned by Skušek based on the different paths and processes that brought them to their current locations: a) objects handed over to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum by Marija Skušek which were later inventoried as the Skušek Collection; b) objects which came to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum through other channels; c) objects in the collections of other institutions (e.g. other museums, buildings under government administration, such as castles); and d) objects whose current ownership or location are unknown.

The first group is the most extensive. It generally includes the objects which were included in the old inventory book excerpt and, of course, were more or less obviously also a part of Lists 1 through 3.

One such object is the so-called Mongolian oven. It is already recorded on List 1, which means Skušek had bought it and had it packed for transport by 1917. It is also one of the objects recorded on List 4, which means it was displayed inside the Skušeks' home in 1950. This is also confirmed by several photographs of the oven inside the residence surrounded by other objects (fig. 2).

Similarly, the abacus, thermometer, and compass are also recorded on List 1, two of them on List 3, but none of them on List 2. It seems that in this case they were put under the umbrella group of undefined "*Kurios*" on List 2. All three are again given on List 4 as being present in the apartment in 1950. This is also confirmed by a photo of the objects being exhibited on the shelves of an open Chinese display cabinet (fig. 1). All of the objects mentioned above are now kept in the Skušek Collection at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.



Figure 2. Mongolian oven displayed inside the Skušeks' apartment. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

The second group of objects represents the items which were originally a part of the Skušeks' collection and found their way to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum via other channels or people, and not bequeathed by Marija Skušek. Therefore these objects are physically stored inside the same museum, but officially do not belong the Skušek Collection. They do not form a separate collection, but are currently labelled as "Collections of Asian objects". Skušek and his wife often gifted objects to their family, friends, and acquaintances, whose descendants donated or sold their heritage to the museum. That these objects once belonged to Ivan Skušek is further confirmed by List 1 and old inventory book excerpt, as well as Skušek's photographs which show several of these objects.

The first such example is a bulbous porcelain lamp, (fig. 3).<sup>20</sup> This was confirmed when the new photographs of Skušek family's home interior and collection were found with the aforementioned lists. One of those images (fig. 4) shows a series of porcelains set up on top of a cabinet. One of the displayed pairs is also a pair

20 This group of objects is currently awaiting more in-depth and detailed research on provenance and acquisition.

of bulbous porcelain lamps on stands, the upper part being identical to the one mentioned above.



Figure 3. Upper part of a Chinese porcelain *famille verte* lamp, 19th century, China, overglaze enamel on porcelain. (Source: Storage of the Asian, Oceanian and Australian museum collections, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

Further study of available sources showed that Lists 1 through 4 as well as the old inventory book excerpt record two pairs of porcelain lamps (2 *Porzellanlampen*) and one pair of porcelain lamps on stands (2 *Porzellanlampen mit Sockel*). Only one pair has been officially given over to the museum as part of the Skušek Collection. The mentioned bulbous lamp could originally have been part of pair mentioned on the lists. Through a study of the “Acquisition book of non-European objects” compiled by the previous curator of the collection Pavla Štrukelj, an entry indicating the possible acquisition of this painted porcelain bulb has been found. It



records a “Chinese vase” bought in April 1982 from Mrs. Ljudmila Vidic living on Strossmayer Street 10 in Ljubljana (Štrukelj n.d.). Without the base, the bulb itself does indeed look like a small bottom-less vase, thus it is very possible that this entry refers to the object discussed here. Another hint pointing to its origin is the person who sold it living on Strossmayer Street, which means she was quite possibly a neighbour of Marija Skušek. The object was therefore definitely a part of the Skušeks’ original collection, but came to the museum via another person.



Figure 4. Porcelain objects displayed on a carved Chinese cabinet inside the Skušeks’ apartment. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

The second example is a partial set of miniature Japanese figurines made of painted ceramic and fabric (fig. 5). The miniature dolls are part of a set of *hina-ningyō* 雛人形, ornamental dolls displayed on raised platforms covered in red fabric in time of the Japanese festival Hinamatsuri 雛祭り, also called Doll’s Day or Girls’ Day, which is celebrated yearly on March 3rd. These miniature figurines, the same as the porcelain lamp, are kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum separately from the official Skušek Collection. At the moment it is unknown how the dolls ended up at the museum, although the photographs of the Skušek family’s collection taken at their home show the dolls were indeed part of it (fig. 6). From the picture we can also see that some of the dolls from the set

are missing today. The remaining figurines are an example of objects ending up at the museum through unknown channels.



Figure 5. Japanese miniature dolls *hina-ningyō*, 19th century, Japan, painted earthenware and fabric. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)



Figure 6. Japanese miniature dolls *hina-ningyō* at the Skušek's apartment (lower left corner). (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)



While these objects were originally part of the large collection Skušek brought from China, their individual stories contain additional information and their ways of ending up in a museum differ from the objects which were accepted by the museum as part of what is today known as the “Skušek Collection”. In fact, for most of these objects which came to the museum in later years through known or unknown channels, the only direct connection to the Skušek family is the newly discovered photographs. Without those, the vague entries on the discussed lists as well as the rather dry entries in the museum’s Acquisitions book would not suffice to make a reliable conclusion of how these objects made it from East Asia to Europe and ended up in a museum. Therefore, despite at one point being in Skušek’s ownership, this group of objects should be treated appropriately as a separate group and researched with great care and attention to their individual stories as they did not make their way into the museum collection as actual part of the official Skušek Collection, but as gifts from several different people over several decades.

The third group of objects is similar to the second one, although the object has not ended up at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, but instead at Strmol Castle which today serves the protocol needs of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia. The castle is located some kilometres northwest of Ljubljana and it is one of only two castles in the whole country that retain the furniture and various interior equipment which belonged to the last private owners before the building was nationalized. So it is known the furniture inside the building was accumulated by the last owners, Rado (1901–1944) and Ksenija Hribar (1905–1944). On the first floor of the castle, in the anteroom, stands a carved wood Chinese table with an inlaid marble plate on top. It was previously labelled as a “Biedermeier table” (Leben 2013, 60), but it is actually a piece of finely carved Chinese furniture. Suggestion that the only collector of Chinese furniture in Slovenia, Ivan Skušek Jr., was possibly friendly with the Hribars’, turned out to be true. The table in question was therefore confirmed to have been brought to Ljubljana by Skušek, as evident on List 1,<sup>21</sup> confirmed to have been kept and exhibited at the Skušeks’ home through photographic sources (fig. 7), and found its way to the residence of Rado and Ksenija Hribar at Strmol Castle (fig. 8).

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21 The table was disassembled and the bottom was stored in crate no. 26 (*3 Drachenfüsse vom runden Marmortisch*), and the top plate was stored in crate no. 30 (*1 Platte vom kleinen runden Marmortisch*).



Figure 7. Photograph of a round table with triple-dragon foot at an unknown location. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

This connection opens up several new questions, such as how did this table ended up in the castle, were these people good friends, and thus was the table Skušek's gift, or did Hribar buy it? The bare fact that an object that was part of Skušek's collection found its way to a home of a very well-known and prominent couple of 20th century Slovenia definitely merits further research.

The last group is objects, which based on Lists 1-4, never made it into a museum, and, as of now, have also not been located at any other collection of a public institution. They are most probably still in the private hands of Skušek's descendants or other people who received them as a gift from Ivan or Marija Skušek. Some of the examples would be relatively easy to identify, such as a pair of Japanese Satsuma-style decorated vases, at least three Chinese Mandarin official hats, several books, and standing brass lamps. However, there are a few objects we can confirm are now "lost", meaning their whereabouts are unknown to us, but are most probably privately owned. One of such objects (or a set of objects) is a Japanese tea service (*1 japan. Teeservice*) which was listed as one of the two tea services on List 1. It is only known to us through a photograph taken by a member of the Skušek family (fig. 9).



Figure 8. Round table with triple-dragon foot at Strmol Castle. Photo by the author. (Source: Strmol Castle)



Figure 9. Photograph of a Japanese tea service at the Skušeks' apartment. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

A more prominent example is the surprisingly famous tiger-skin rug. It was first recorded on List 1 being packed in crate no. 37 containing, among other things, “1 tiger and 2 wildcat’s furs” (*1 Tiger- und 2 Wildkatzenfelle*). It is also listed on List 2 as “furs” (*Felle*), List 3 as “skin of tiger” (*koža tigra*), and List 4 as “tiger skin” (*tigrova koža*). Some people still remember the tiger fur exhibited at the Skušeks’ apartment (Helena Motoh, personal communication, 2020), as List 4 would also suggest, but it was also part of a public exhibition in 1930 (Motoh 2020, 37).

That year’s Ljubljana Grand Fair also hosted a so-called ‘Missionary exhibition’ of objects brought back home by Slovene missionaries working abroad. As Helena Motoh writes, “the objects for the ethnological department were provided by Tsuneko Skušek, who, with her furniture, screens, lanterns, tiger skin, and porcelain equipped one Japanese and one Chinese room” (fig. 10) (Motoh 2020, 37).

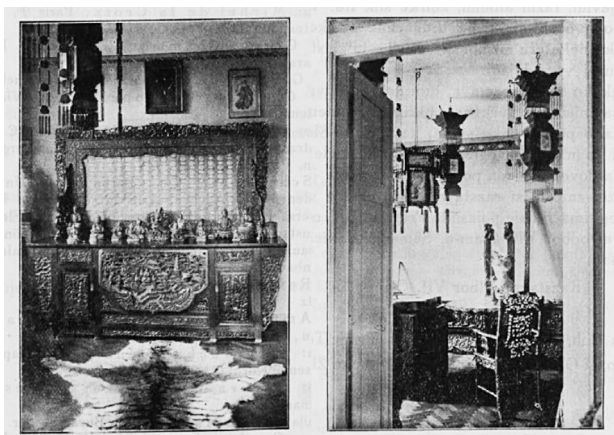


Figure 10. Chinese Room at a Missionary Exhibition, Ljubljana Grand Fair, 1930. (Source: Dular 1930, 88–89)

It is therefore clear that many objects (some seemingly quite well known in the past) have not ended up in the museum collection as part of the Skušek Collection, but were remarkable enough to be noticed on their own accord and remained in the memories of people who encountered them for decades to come.

## Conclusion

The research into the objects themselves and their provenance, through several case studies presented in this paper, sheds new light on a museum collection with a very

dynamic history. The findings based on the analysis of photographs, the four lists, and the excerpt from the old inventory book of the National Museum of Slovenia tell us that the official Skušek Collection is only part of a greater whole, of a bigger story, spanning further than only the Skušeks' home and connecting more people than just one family. The number of objects was originally more than the approximately five hundred we know as the "Skušek Collection" today. Through this research we also see that the variety of objects which Skušek collected was more diverse than the objects kept at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum imply.

While these findings give us several answers, they, at the same time, also raise even more new questions. How did the Skušeks' decide what type of objects they would gift to others? Who were the objects were gifted to, and what kind of relationships did Skušek and his wife have with these people? Did they see the objects as works of art, or did they consider them merely exotic curiosities? While this paper presents a preliminary analysis and an entry point into further studies of newly discovered documents, letters, and photographs, much work still remains to be done and many aspects of the collection are still to be researched.

## Acknowledgement

The research for this paper was carried out as part of the project *East Asian Collections in Slovenia: Inclusion of Slovenia in the Global Exchanges of Objects and Ideas with East Asia* (2018–2021) (no. J7-9429) and the core research funding programme *Asian Languages and Cultures* (no. P6-0243), funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

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