

East Asia in Slovenia: Collecting Practices, Categorization and Representation

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Material objects are the primary components of human heritage, for they constitute the patrimony of the material and immaterial dimensions of human knowledge, “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1950), and cultural identity. The development and, especially, the “progress” of civilization are based on the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and material objects, and thus on the continuous connections between different cultures and civilizations. The rather intense levels of contact between European countries and East Asia since the 16th century accelerated economic exchange, in which East Asian objects came to the fore and quickly became the most sought-after objects of trade, exchange, and collection. This tendency increased enormously over the last two centuries, when it was encouraged and facilitated by individuals of all social strata, as well as by museums and other official institutions around the world.

The vast majority of research focuses on collections and objects of East Asian origin located in the capitals of former colonial powers in Western Europe and in other political and cultural centres, while research on East Asian collections in “peripheral” areas is still quite meagre. The exclusion of this research gives only a partial picture of the European history of collecting East Asian objects, defined by the major colonial countries and other political, economic, and cultural centres. It does not show the circulation of collectibles between different spatial levels, nor the circulation between different levels of the social scale. A complex political, social, and cultural network in collecting East Asian material culture has thus gone largely unnoticed, which can lead to a simplification of the complex picture of cultural concepts and categories, reflecting only the dominant part of cultural production.

This special issue of the journal *Asian Studies* therefore focuses on East Asian collections in Slovenia, a region that has always been on the political periphery—first within the Habsburg Monarchy, and later as one of the founding nations of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but with little real political or administrative power. Most of the objects of East Asian origin were left as legacies of various people (sailors, missionaries, travellers and others) who travelled to China or Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a result of Austro-Hungary’s newly established

diplomatic relations with East Asia in 1869 (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019). This opened the seas to a growing number of Austro-Hungarian merchant and military ships, aboard which also sailed people from Slovene ethnic territory. While some larger collections of objects of East Asian origin entered Slovenian museums after the deaths of their owners in the 1950s and 60s, individual objects found their way into museums as early as the 19th century. With few exceptions,¹ the collections were mostly put into storage, where they led a “dormant life” in depots and attics, forgotten by museum curators and academic scholars and thus deprived of their metaphorical voice. Left to oblivion, they also lack detailed object records, information on their provenance, and accurate identification and categorization. The socio-political circumstances in Slovenia during the 20th century, with two world wars and the establishment of four different states, further contributed to their oblivion and often led to the loss of the history surrounding individual objects and other collectibles.

For the above reasons, the Department of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts University of Ljubljana launched the three-year national research 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) (hereafter the VAZ project), supported by the Slovenian Research Agency. The project team for the first time comprehensively and systematically investigated five collections of East Asian origin and presented them on the newly developed VAZ website (<https://vazcollections.si/>). The website links various East Asian objects at the national level and makes them accessible to the broader public for the first time. It not only presents detailed information about each object, but also uses various curated approaches (e.g. blogs, galleries, interactive and dynamic presentations, online exhibitions) to bring a number of interesting and inspiring objects to life, revealing their stories and the identities of their owners. The work was carried out in collaboration with museum professionals and followed an interdisciplinary approach. In addition to the individual objects, the way they can be interpreted, and their connection to the people who produced them, the project also addressed the objects’ aesthetic and formal characteristics.

This volume therefore presents the results of the VAZ project. It not only tells the story of a number of lesser-known individual objects and collections—most of which are still hidden from view—but also opens up questions concerning social status and material circumstances, as well as aesthetic and fashion trends that

1 The Slovene Ethnographic Museum, which houses the largest collection of Chinese objects (the Skušek collection) in the country, opened a branch for its non-European collections in the Baroque mansion Goričane in Medvode. The objects were on display from its foundation in 1964 until 1990, although only one curator, Pavla Štrukelj, was responsible for all non-European collections.

developed in areas that were not part of the former European centres of colonial power. It attempts to provide answers to the many questions that arise in the context of the project: By what routes did the objects from East Asia reach present-day Slovenia? Who were the people from the Slovene ethnic territory who travelled to East Asia on the threshold of the 20th century? How did they collect objects? What types of East Asian objects are thus specific to the Slovenian area? How do they function as collectibles? Did the objects serve as curios, souvenirs, or as prestige or aesthetic objects? How did people live with these objects in their private environments? How did they use and display them? What similarities or differences can we observe in the representative canon of collectibles as compared to that in the former major centres of colonial power? How do these objects testify to the material conditions, collecting patterns, and value concepts of their collectors? What do the objects tell us about the processes of material and ideational flows between Slovenia and East Asia? What are the most appropriate ways and methods to study, categorize, and present East Asian collections in Slovenia? How did people from Slovene ethnic lands perceive and understand different aspects of East Asian traditions, what kind of images of distant places did they create, and how did they share their knowledge and common experiences with a wider Slovenian audience?

The questions outlined above underline the contributions to this thematic issue and are based on insights into material culture and collecting history, which conceives of objects as social and cultural products, and emphasizes their circulation and recontextualization. Objects do not possess a real, ingrained, or fixed identity; their meaning is a cultural construction formed in relation to the interpretative framework of specific cultural contexts (Tythacott 2011, 7). The seminal idea that objects have a “cultural biography” was first put forward by Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai in 1986, and has since inspired several interdisciplinary studies drawing on art history, history, archaeology, and anthropology, and even economics and other social sciences. The same methodological framework has been applied to the study of objects produced in Asia, emphasizing the transcultural context, as an artefact can rarely be seen as the product of a single nation and its cultural denotation (Grasskamp and Juneja 2018; Allard, Sun and Linduff 2018; Ko 2017; Tythacott 2011). The importance of the human role and human action, as well as the relationship between human and object, must always be taken into account, since objects remain immobile without contact with humans (Tythacott 2011, 8). In recent decades, moreover, numerous studies have attempted to place the history of collecting in the global context of humanities research, thus foregrounding the question of the (dis)connection between materiality and cultural connotations (Rujivacharakul 2011). Interpretations of “East Asian” objects pose

a particularly difficult challenge stemming from museological classifications and the need to classify objects according to their geographical origin, chronological sequence, or evolutionary developments of form or technique (Preziosi 1996), while museological classifications are themselves the result of the epistemological paradigms of a contemporary individual who constructs their knowledge about the external world according to the materiality of the object. As Maja Veselič (2020, 6) notes, the processes of categorization, of organizing knowledge, can already be derived from inventory books, catalogues, and similar lists, as well as from other forms of displaying objects or web portals that serve the broader transmission and dissemination of knowledge.

The following issue is therefore divided into four thematic sections that attempt to address the above questions. It begins with a section devoted to the collectibles and different types of objects that can be found in Slovenian collections of East Asian objects. It shows the status of Slovenian “collectors” of East Asian objects, what their collecting practices were, what type of objects they collected, how these objects testified to their financial means and the nature of their journeys. As such, it also touches on the relationship between collectibles, everyday objects, and souvenirs, and further discusses how objects were stored, categorized, and displayed after they were transferred to museums. This section contains three papers that shed light on the role of collectibles. While two papers—one by Chikako Shigemori Bučar and the other by Mina Grčar—deal with the formation of collecting patterns and present individual objects in two different collections, the remaining paper—by myself—discusses how to categorize the East Asian objects and where to place them within the existing taxonomy once they have entered the museum space.

Chikako Shigemori Bučar illustrates the role of small and trivial objects in the collection of Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950), a famous traveller, writer, interpreter, and collector from Celje, Slovenia, who left in November 1919 for an eight-year journey around the world. During her journey, she amassed a large number of diverse objects. As can be seen from the gift certificate, Alma’s long-time friend and roommate Thea Shreiber Gammelin (1906–1988), the heir of her collection, donated as many as 1,392 non-European objects, including natural objects, to the Celje Regional Museum between 1957 and 1960 (Trnovc 2011, 57). In addition to typical collectibles such as lacquerware, *ukiyo-e* prints, and fans, Karlin’s collection includes a wide range of small and trivial objects, e.g., a wall calendar, a train ticket, paper bookmarks, ceremonial wrappings, and there is even the receipt issued by a newspaper company. Chikako Shigemori Bučar extracts eight different types of these objects and attempts to contextualize them in the scope of the nature of Karlin’s journey, her ability to purchase them, and her interest in ethnography. Furthermore, she

addresses the issue of the “ethnological interest” and curiosity of the “Westerner” in the first decades of the 20th century in the context of East-West exchange and tries to analyse the role of souvenirs for the collector himself and for other people around the collector. It was common for travellers to bring back souvenirs that attested to the fact that their owners had visited distant places and observed “exotic” customs and other novel phenomena (Thomas 1991, 141). As such, the souvenirs are imbued with nostalgic and romantic notions, and allow their owners to document their personal histories and achievements (Pearce 1992, 76–77). Everyday objects that function as souvenirs also attest to the owner’s privileged knowledge of other cultures (Tythacott 2011, 72). Such aspirations are also reflected in the journey of Alma Karlin, who aspired to broaden her horizons and thereby also gain recognition in her local community. Apart from discussing the role of such objects for the collector herself, Chikako Shigemori Bučar also addresses their relevance in reconstructing the collector’s everyday life in the course of a journey. Although small and trivial, such objects reveal some important details of Karlin’s experiences in the central part of Tokyo during the Taishō period (1912–1926), where she lived for just over a year, from June 1922 to July 1923.

While Chikako Shigemori Bučar discusses the collecting practices of Alma Karlin through her interest in trivial objects, the next article in this section by Mina Grčar deals with the collecting patterns of Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947), another important collector from the Slovenian region. Her focus is on Skušek’s rich collection of various types of Chinese coins, from all periods of Chinese history, which have never been fully researched and evaluated before. Ivan Skušek Jr. was a senior officer in the Austro-Hungarian navy who spent almost six years (1914–1920) in Beijing due to the political situation. In Beijing, he collected Chinese objects with the intention of setting up a museum after his return home. Among the wide variety of object types he collected is a diverse collection of at least 216 Chinese coins, if not more, along with other types of ancient Chinese money. The author based her research on several recently found documents that shed light on Skušek’s collecting pattern in the field of Chinese coins. Particularly valuable among them are letters to Skušek from a Franciscan missionary, Father Maurus Kluge, which illuminate Skušek’s social life in Beijing, especially his interaction with other experts and connoisseurs of numismatics, and therefore give us insight into the process of building his numismatic collections, as well as the prevailing value of what kinds of coins were deemed worth collecting in the early 20th century. The paper consists of two parts; while in the first the author discusses the different types of Chinese coins in Skušek’s collection and beyond, the second illustrates the circumstances and his collecting patterns, which according to Mina Grčar is closely interwoven with his social life at the time of his stay in Beijing.

The last paper in this section, written by myself, deals with the categorization and classification of the East Asian objects, after they entered Slovenian museums. As early as the 19th century, when the first objects of East Asian origin entered the Provincial Museum of Carniola—the first museum in what is now Slovenia—museums were confronted with the problem of how to categorize them. The paper offers an in-depth analysis of the various interpretations and evaluations of East Asian objects with a focus on the National Museum and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, which was detached from the National Museum in 1923. Should these and other non-European objects be called “works of art” in recognition of their aesthetic value, or did they belong more in the realm of ethnography or anthropology because they could show how people lived in another region of the world? I examine the values and criteria by which objects were categorized and discuss this question from a comparative perspective with developments in other European countries. In contrast to the conceptual shift from “ethnology” to “decorative and fine arts”, which can be observed especially in the categorization of East Asian objects in North America and the former European colonial countries, the classification of such objects in Slovenia oscillated between “ethnology” and “cultural history”, with ethnology gaining the upper hand. The general reassessment of East Asian objects only gathered momentum in Slovenia in the first two decades of the 21st century with a further impetus from the Slovenian Research Agency, which announced that it would fund a three-year research project on East Asian collections in Slovenia.

The second part of the volume examines how people lived with these objects in their private environments and shows how they used and displayed them. It also examines how the objects that once adorned the interiors of their homes were transferred from a private to a public sphere, thus discussing the process of the collections’ transition to the museum. It contains two papers—one by Helena Motoh and the other by Tina Berdajs—both of which focus on Ivan Skušek Jr. and his collection. Both papers further show Skušek as a systematic collector who kept detailed records of every object he purchased, paying attention to provenance, history, and authenticity. He can truly be considered the first collector of Chinese and other East Asian objects in present-day Slovenia, having built up his collection systematically by examining the objects and checking the provenance, value and significance of each. As the largest collection of Chinese objects in Slovenia, it stands out from others in its size and diversity. It consists of approximately 500 mostly Chinese objects, some of them reportedly of imperial provenance. It ranges from richly embroidered textiles, paintings, albums, Buddhist statues, ceramics and porcelain, musical instruments, photographs, and rare books, to furniture, decorative wall screens, and a model of a house. Skušek himself envisaged the

museum in the style of traditional Chinese architecture, for the needs of which he even brought home a model of a Chinese house, but financial constraints prevented the establishment of such a museum. Instead, after his death in 1947, the National Museum officially took over his extensive collection, which was transferred to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in 1963.

The paper by Helena Motoh deals with the so-called “apartment” period of the Skušek collection, an aspect that has not yet been thoroughly researched. Using the rediscovered photographs of Ivan Skušek and his Japanese wife Tsuneko Kondō Kawase (1893–1963) (known as Marija Skušek after her marriage) at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, she attempts to identify the three places where the couple lived from their return from Beijing in 1920 until their deaths. Initially, they lived in the Skušeks’ parents’ house at Pred Škofijo 3, and after the church wedding they moved to a larger building at Prule 19 (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 112). After World War II in 1945/46, the family was forced to move to a smaller apartment at Strossmayerjeva 3 (Marinac 2017, 171). Helena Motoh presents the couple’s three apartments as a lived space whose identity is constructed through various display of individual objects and, above all, through the physical movement of the owners through the interiors of their apartments. At the same time, the way the objects are used and displayed, and the way they are traversed within a given space, help shape the identities and everyday lives of their owners. Different types of objects such as furniture, statues, porcelain, and textiles were part of their daily lives, which they not only used but through which they also lived. Therefore, the significant number of objects acquired during Ivan Skušek’s six-year stay in Beijing were kept and crammed into rather small spaces that functioned as a hybrid mix of private museum storage and living space.

While Motoh’s paper already touches on the mobility of the entire collection, Tina Berdajs opens up the question of the transitional process from the private to the public sphere. Inspired by Kopytoff’s and Appadurai’s concept of an object or cultural biography, she delves into the biography of the Skušek collection and provides a detailed insight from the creation of the collection, its transfer to today’s Slovenia, and its private display in the couple’s homes, to its transition to the museum space. One of the most impressive parts of the biography of the Skušek collection is precisely its numerous movements, despite its incredible size and the large proportion of some objects. Using archival material only recently rediscovered in the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum as part of the VAZ project—the four lists of objects drawn up between 1917 and 1959, an excerpt from the old inventory list from the National Museum, and photographs—Tina Berdajs not only attempts to reconstruct the original size of the collection, but also shows how parts of it were dispersed among relatives, friends, and acquaintances. She

identifies four distinct “provenance” groups of Skušek’s objects and shows their extremely dynamic and branching mobility after their arrival in Slovenia. Her paper further shows that not only was the original scope of Skušek’s collection much larger than the collection we know in the museum today, but also that the variety of objects Skušek collected was much more diverse than the collection in the museum reveals.

The third part of this volume focuses on Marija Skušek and her significant role in transmitting Japanese culture to Slovenian audiences. It is surprising to know that, although Ivan Skušek became an avid collector of Chinese objects during his time in Beijing, with the hope of founding a museum in his homeland, and developed a specific aesthetic sensibility for Chinese cultural heritage, he never undertook a systematic and in-depth study of the objects in his collection, nor did he take an active role in communicating Chinese culture to Slovenian audiences. Their house, with the various objects displayed in rooms, became in a way the centre of the cultural and social life of the intellectual and artistic elite of Ljubljana, but it was mainly his Japanese wife Marija Skušek, also known as “Mrs Japanese”, the first Japanese woman to immigrate permanently to this part of Europe (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 112), who played a significant role in transmitting Japanese culture to the locals. She gave lectures on Japanese culture and society in various cities in Slovenia and other republics of Yugoslavia, conducted classes on Japanese arts and crafts, demonstrated a Japanese tea ceremony, taught Japanese, and was involved in a variety of activities. What kind of performances she gave, how she presented Japanese culture, what objects she used during the performances, and how the objects helped her not only convey the different aspects of Japanese society but also form her own identity in a foreign country will be further discussed in this part. While the first paper by Klara Hrvatin discusses the series of lectures she gave in the 1930s, the second paper by Nataša Visočnik Gerželj examines the role of her physical appearance during dance performances and the objects she used—fans and kimonos—in conveying Japanese culture.

Using the so-called Marija Skušek Archive at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, which contains original lecture manuscripts, newspaper clippings, photographs, and correspondence, Klara Hrvatin examines the lectures Marija Skušek gave in various cities in Slovenia and Yugoslavia in 1930/1931 and 1935/1936. In her paper, she reconstructs the place and date of the lectures and provides an in-depth insight into their content. Often dressed in beautiful kimonos, speaking Slovenian with a strong accent, and performing charming dances and songs from the unknown culture of Japan, she must have aroused great interest, as did her lectures. Looking more closely at the newspaper clippings, the author can trace her appearance in the media of the time with many appreciative adjectives, e.g. such

an educated and nice lady, always smiling and very polite. Hrvatin's analysis further shows that the central theme of her lectures was the position and role of Japanese women in Japan, which is unsurprising considering that most of her lectures were organized by various women's organizations. She mainly discussed Japanese ideals, what it meant to be a woman in Japan, appropriate behaviour and etiquette, and the changes in women's social status at the start of the 20th century. Another important aspect of this paper is that by examining the organizations that invited Mrs Skušek to give lectures Hrvatin also brings to light the network and social circle in which she was active, showing Mrs Skušek as an important figure in the public life of Ljubljana.

Marija Skušek's lectures were often accompanied by various performances of dances and songs. Nataša Visočnik Gerželj looks at her clothing and other accessories that she used for these and examines their role in communicating Japanese culture to the local population. She focuses particularly on her kimonos and fans as specific objects that contribute to communication in Japanese society. One particular folding fan, elegantly painted with cherry blossoms that is a type of fan known as *maiōgi* 舞扇 (dancing fan), is of particular interest. Not only for its artistic value, but also as an identifier of the type of dance Marija Skušek might have performed. In addition to the objects used in the performances, the author also focuses on the role of Mrs Skušek's physical appearance, movement, and bodily practices, as wrapping the body in a kimono not only adds a certain aesthetic value, but also contributes to a certain degree of courtesy and formality. Moreover, it is worth noting that these objects were not collectibles at the time, but personal items that Mrs Skušek wore on various occasions and used in her daily life. They were not considered works of art, but items in her wardrobe. Only with their transition to the museum did the value of the objects change from everyday objects to works of art. Nataša Visočnik Gerželj thus also discusses the transitional process and the complex relationship between the objects used on a daily basis and collectors' items, and thus the owner's cross-cultural connections.

The final part of this volume addresses the broader issues of perception and representation of various aspects of East Asian tradition as they emerge from the writings of Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950). In addition to an extensive collection acquired during her eight years of world travel, Karlin also left behind a large corpus of published and unpublished novels and other literary works, manuscripts, and journalistic articles. In fact, she saw herself primarily as a writer and craved recognition as a novelist. She not only recorded the daily life, customs, religious practices, and flora and fauna of the places she visited, but also drew on her adventures for her novels and other prose works. This material provides a very valuable insight into Karlin's understanding and perception of East Asian

traditions, while also revealing the prevailing values of Western societies in relation to various aspects of non-European cultures in the early 20th century. How did she portray the countries and peoples she visited on her journey, did her descriptions differ from those of other travellers, what were her attitudes to the various practices she encountered in East Asia and how were these shaped, and, moreover, how did her understanding and attitudes relate to the academic and popular discourses of her time? Was she able to escape the established conceptual frameworks and orientalist discourses regarding East Asian cultures and societies? All these questions and more are explored and discussed in two papers by Klemen Senica and Maja Veselič.

Klemen Senica looks more closely at Karlin's description of Japan and the Japanese in the first of her three-volume travelogue entitled *Einsame Weltreise (The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman)*, published between 1929 and 1933 by the German publisher Wilhelm Köhler, as well as passages in *Reiseskizzen (Travel Sketches)* published during her trip between the years 1920 and 1928 in the *Cillier Zeitung*, a local German-language newspaper in her hometown of Celje in present-day Slovenia. Moreover, he draws a parallel between Karlin's description of Japan and that of her more famous predecessor Isabella Bird (1831–1904), and sheds light on the historical, political, and ideological contexts of the time in which both women experienced Japan, its land, and its people. Thus, his analysis not only highlights similarities and differences in the two women's portrayals of Japan, but reveals that Alma Karlin was most likely familiar with Bird's travel diary when she made her own trip to East Asia. By placing the two writers' travelogues in the broader context of Western Orientalist discourse, he further distinguishes between the different types of Orientalism reflected in the two travel diaries, namely British and German Orientalism, and further illuminates that Karlin tries to avoid glorifying European moral superiority, although, despite her favourable attitude towards East Asian societies, in which she openly praised some of their aspects, she still could not completely detach herself from Western colonial discourses.

Among the many interests Alma Karlin pursued during her world voyage, religion was most prominent. The last paper in this volume, by Maja Veselič, therefore for the first time examines two versions of Karlin's unpublished manuscript entitled *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten (Religion and Superstition in the Far East)*, held at the National and University Library in Ljubljana. In order to more accurately capture Karlin's perceptions and attitudes towards various religious practices in East Asia, she supplemented the aforementioned manuscript with Karlin's travelogue *Einsame Weltreise*. Veselič's work consists of three main parts. In the first part, she illuminates how Karlin developed her interest in comparative religion, focusing on her life story in the early years and the prevailing ideas of her

time, especially the development of Theosophical philosophy, which was one of the driving forces behind a broader interest in Asian religious traditions. The second part presents an in-depth analysis of the manuscript, summarized not in the geographical way Karlin structured her work, but in the overview of the topics to which Karlin referred. In addition, Veselič also evaluates the various sources from which Karlin gathered information and provides further evidence that she did not visit Hokkaido while in Japan, as widely believed. In the final section, she discusses Karlin's concepts and approaches as revealed in the manuscript, placing them within the broader intellectual trends of the time. She shows that Alma Karlin distinguished between beliefs and superstition, emphasizes the binary opposition between religion and superstition, while highlighting Karlin's ethnographic folkloristic approaches to religion.

This special issue of *Asian Studies* aims to contribute to the field of European global collecting history by opening new vistas in order to readdress some of the unexplored topics. By presenting East Asian material in Slovenia and reconstructing the intercultural contacts between the two territories, it sheds light on the specific position of the Slovenian territory in the history of Euro-Asian exchanges on the threshold of the 20th century. I hope you will enjoy reading it.

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