

Between Ethnology and Cultural History: Where to Place East Asian Objects in Slovenian Museums?

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Abstract

While a few larger collections of objects of East Asian origin entered Slovenian museums after the deaths of their owners in the 1950s and 60s, individual items had begun finding their way there as early as the nineteenth century. Museums were faced early on with the problem not only of how to store and exhibit the objects, but also how to categorize them. Were they to be treated as “art” on account of their aesthetic value or did they belong, rather, to the field of “ethnography” or “anthropology” because they could illustrate the way of life of other peoples? Above all, in which museums were these objects to be housed?

The present paper offers an in-depth analysis of these and related questions, seeking to shed light on how East Asian objects have been showcased in Slovenia (with a focus on the National Museum and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum) over the past two hundred years. In particular, it explores the values and criteria that were applied when placing these objects into individual categories. In contrast to the conceptual shift from “ethnology” to the “decorative and fine arts,” which can mostly be observed in the categorization of East Asian objects in North America and the former European colonial countries, the classification of such objects in Slovenia varied between “ethnology” and “cultural history,” with ethnology ultimately coming out on top. This ties in with the more general question of how (East) Asian cultures were understood and perceived in Slovenia, which is itself related to the historical and social development of the “peripheral” Slovenian area compared with former major imperial centres.

Keywords: National Museum of Slovenia, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, East Asian objects, museum classification, ethnology, cultural history, art

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Med etnologijo in kulturno zgodovino: kam umestiti predmete iz Vzhodne Azije v slovenskih muzejih?

Izvleček

Medtem ko so večje zbirke vzhodnoazijskih predmetov v slovenske muzeje vstopile po smrti lastnikov v 50. in 60. letih 20. stoletja, so posamezni vzhodnoazijski predmeti pot do muzejev našli že v 19. stoletju. S tem so bili muzeji soočeni s problemom hrambe in razstavljanja teh predmetov, predvsem pa z vprašanjem kategorizacije. Ali naj bi jih zaradi njihove estetske vrednosti obravnavali kot »umetnost« ali pa raje spadajo na področje »etnografije« ali »antropologije«, saj ponazarjajo način življenja drugih ljudi? Predvsem pa, v katere muzeje pravzaprav sodijo?

Ta prispevek prikaže poglobljeno analizo tovrstnih vprašanj, pri čemer se osredotoči na primer Narodnega muzeja in Slovenskega etnografskega muzeja v zadnjih dvesto letih. Posebej izpostavi vrednote in merila, po katerih so bili posamezni predmeti razvrščeni v različne kategorije. V nasprotju s konceptualnim premikom iz »etnologije« v »dekorativno ali likovno umetnost«, kar lahko opazujemo v kategorizaciji vzhodnoazijskih predmetov v Severni Ameriki in nekdanjih evropskih kolonialnih državah, je klasifikacija teh predmetov v Sloveniji nihala med »etnologijo« in »kulturno zgodovino«, pri čemer so večjo noto dobivale etnografske oznake. To je povezano tudi z bolj splošnim vprašanjem, kako so bile (vzhodno)azijske kulture videne v Sloveniji, kar je samo po sebi povezano z zgodovinskim in družbenim razvojem »perifernege« slovenskega prostora v primerjavi z nekdanjimi večjimi imperialnimi središči.

Ključne besede: Narodni muzej Slovenije, Slovenski etnografski muzej, vzhodnoazijski predmeti, muzejska klasifikacija, etnologija, kulturna zgodovina, umetnost

Introduction

After opening its doors in 1821, the Provincial Museum of Carniola—the first museum in present-day Slovenia and the predecessor of the National Museum—went on, in the first ten years of its existence, to acquire Chinese and Japanese porcelain dishes, seven ivory figurines and a series of twelve colour paintings depicting Chinese warriors (Deschmann 1888, 164; Štrukelj 1980–1982, 138–39). In subsequent years the museum acquired even more Chinese and other non-European objects, and later also individual collections. Austria–Hungary's establishment of diplomatic relations with China, Japan and Siam in 1869 opened up new opportunities for travelling to East Asia.¹ As a result, an increasing number

1 As a member of the Eight-Nation Alliance that brought the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) to an end, the Austro-Hungarian Empire also gained the right to a concession in Tianjin. For more on the Austrian Concession in Tianjin see Lee Chinyun (2001, 74–92), and Lipušček (2013, 42–44).

of Chinese and Japanese objects arrived in Slovenia via various routes, later entering Slovenian museums as donations or purchases. The acquisition of these objects confronted the museum staff with the conceptual problem of where to place them within the existing taxonomy of their institution and, thereby, also with questions relating to the interpretation of non-European objects. Should they be labelled as “art” in recognition of their aesthetic value or did they belong, rather, to the field of ethnography or anthropology since they could show how people lived in another region of the world?

Shifting between these disciplinary boundaries in the search for the most appropriate methodological framework was not unique to the Slovenian area, though, but reflected broader European colonial policy and imperialism. At around this time there emerged a new kind of institution: ethnographic museums, which housed many non-European objects for the purpose of studying, classifying, evaluating and occasionally exhibiting these “exotic” items—mostly in ways that were influenced by colonialist thought. The rise of ethnology promoted the perception of such objects as carriers of ethnographic information about the cultures that had produced them. The information thus obtained was regarded as the most “objective” available, and the objects themselves were seen as metonyms for the entire culture from which they originated (Tythacott 2011, 142). By the turn of the twentieth century the classification framework had changed and the objects were now perceived chiefly as artworks, especially in the United States (Conn 2000), whereas the situation in Europe was more complex. The evaluation of non-European objects there fluctuated between science and art, with the boundary between the two being quite fluid. As a result of archaeological expeditions and the growing number of excavated artefacts that entered museums in the early twentieth century, archaeology came to play the role of a medium facilitating the transition of an object’s status from ethnological item to artwork and *vice versa* (Lee 2016, 5–6). This is especially true of the classification of Asian objects, which have generally been treated differently from other non-European artefacts. Craig Clunas (1997, 421) shows that as early as the mid-nineteenth century there was a tendency to set apart objects made in China, Japan and India from the material culture of other more “primitive” peoples, as may be seen, for example, in David Mather Masson’s guide *The British Museum, Historical and Descriptive* (1850). Asian artefacts were regarded as superior to those of other non-European cultures and enjoyed a status that was comparable, albeit still not equal, to that of European culture.

Drawing on the taxonomic categories described above—categories that influenced significantly the early perception of non-European cultures in Western societies—the present paper will explore the classification and general perception of

East Asian objects in Slovenian museums. Focusing on the National Museum of Slovenia (the country's principal and oldest museum) and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (which was detached from the National Museum in 1923), we will examine the values and criteria used to place these objects into categories. In contrast to the conceptual shift from "ethnology" to the "decorative" and "fine arts" based on a diachronic approach to Asian art that may largely be observed in the interpretation 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 coming out on top. A general reevaluation of East Asian objects did not gain momentum in Slovenia until the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This ties in with the more general question of how (East) Asian cultures were understood and perceived in Slovenia, which is itself related to the historical and social development of the "peripheral" Slovenian area compared with former major imperial centres. Accordingly, the paper will also consider various elements that influenced the perception of East Asian cultures and how these were categorized, taking into account the historical and social context of both the Slovenian area and the wider European region. This is followed by a discussion of how East Asian art was gradually institutionalized and assimilated into the scientific disciplines of Sinology and Japanology, which were officially established as academic programmes at the University of Ljubljana in 1995. Finally, some thoughts are offered on the "privilege of periphery."

The Provincial Museum of Carniola: Between Ethnology and Cultural History

Very soon after the Provincial Museum of Carniola in Ljubljana, the capital of the region then known as Carniola, was founded in 1826 by decree of the Austrian emperor Franz I, the first East Asian objects found their way into the museum (see fig. 1). Chinese and Japanese porcelain coffee saucers were donated as early as 1833 by the Countess von Hohenwart and the Baroness von Lazzarini (Deschmann 1888, 164). In the same year, Baron Karel Smledniški contributed seven Chinese ivory and wooden figurines, while three years later, the provincial councillor Thomas Plushk from Villach donated a series of twelve colour paintings depicting Chinese warriors (Štrukelj 1991, 167). In subsequent years the museum acquired further Chinese and Japanese objects, and later also individual collections. Among the latter it is worth mentioning the collection of the missionary Peter Baptist Turk, who sent several Buddhist and Daoist statues, as well as other religious objects, to the museum in 1912 and 1913. Renamed the National

Museum of Slovenia in 1921, the institution became, in 1957, the custodian of a very large collection of various Chinese objects that had been bequeathed to the nation by the former Austro-Hungarian naval officer Ivan Skušek Jr. In addition to Chinese objects, the museum also acquired several other non-European objects from North America, Africa, other areas of Asia and islands in the Pacific Ocean, donated mostly by missionaries, travellers, sailors and diplomats.



Figure 1. Heinrich Wettach: Provincial Museum of Carniola, aquarelle, around 1900. (Source: Wikimedia)

The main principles used in categorizing Asian and other non-European objects in the second half of the nineteenth century can be inferred from the guide to the Provincial Museum of Carniola published in Laibach (Ljubljana) in 1888 (*Führer durch das Krainische Landes-Museum Rudolphinum in Laibach*), whose author was the museum's curator, the Carniolan politician and scholar Karl (or Dragotin) Deschman (1821–1889). Through a thorough overview of the collections and individual objects, the guide reveals the basic classification of the objects. In addition to archaeology and the natural sciences, special emphasis is placed on ethnographic and cultural-historical objects. The categories of “art” or “decorative arts” *per se* were apparently not yet established, but a separate section, albeit only five pages long, is devoted to paintings and archival materials (pamphlets, drawings, miniature paintings and other documentation). Porcelain, majolica and glass are listed under a separate heading in the table of contents, but are described under the section of cultural-historical objects. In such a classification, the objects of East Asian origin are placed under the ethnographic and cultural-historical categories.

The guide thus makes a distinction between ethnographic and cultural-historical objects, but the definition of both categories is still rather vague. Although there is a certain intertwining of the two in that the ethnographic objects were subsumed into the section on cultural-historical objects, the table of contents at the start does list the cultural history and ethnographic sections separately. The latter section comprises Asian and other non-European collections (mainly donations by missionaries and travellers), while the cultural history section includes individual objects of Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Turkish origin. These are mostly richly decorated export porcelains and metal products, especially weapons inlaid with gold and silver, donated to the museum by Carniolan aristocrats.

The distinction between the two categories was based on the objects' provenance, rather than on their origin. Thus, further examination reveals that the justification for including objects in the category of cultural history was whether they had once been owned by prominent and wealthy members of Carniolan society. Among the recorded donors we find the historian and politician Henrik Costa; Count Franz von Hohenwart, who was the museum's first warden from 1831 to 1836, and his wife; the patron of the arts Viktor Smole; the Baroness von Lazzarini; and Baroness Barbara von Rechbach. The individual objects of Asian origin assembled by them can be regarded as a legacy of the *Kunstkammern*, or "cabinets of curiosities", special rooms showcasing extraordinary objects that had fascinated the European aristocracy ever since the Renaissance, and of Baroque *chinoiserie*. Legitimacy for according to these objects a status comparable to that of European ones was determined by their being a kind of symbolic heritage of the Carniolan elite. This is confirmed by the display of the objects. While individual Asian objects of local provenance were housed alongside the European objects, the ethnographic collections were placed in a separate room, together with Carniolan handcrafted and industrial products from earlier periods but in separate display cases.

In the fourth exhibition room, in addition to metal and partly wooden products of Carniolan origin, the same showcases were also used to display, for example, a Japanese chandelier in the shape of a turtle carrying a heron; an Indian iron shield; two Indian axes with silver inlays; two Indian sabres with silver handles and blades inlaid with gold; Chinese iron stirrups with inlaid silver and brass floral decoration; and, a donation from Henrik Costa, Chinese cutlery (Deschmann 1888, 124–32). Between displays of carvings, wooden ornaments, images of Christ and crucifixes, we also find two Chinese cups with figures; five Chinese figurines made of ivory; a Chinese boat; and, donated by Baroness Barbara von Rechbach, a Chinese comb (*ibid.*, 132–40). The special exhibition room for majolica, ceramics, porcelain and glass also housed richly decorated Chinese and Japanese porcelain: visitors here could admire seven Japanese vessels of various shapes; a large,

elaborate Chinese bowl with a cover; a cylindrical Chinese tureen; a Japanese and a Chinese porcelain plate in bright colours with gold ground, both of which had been donated by Count Franz von Hohenwart; a Chinese cup with animal motifs from the Countess von Hohenwart; ten smaller Japanese cups (used for drinking coffee) from the Viktor Smole collection (fig. 2); and a Japanese coffee cup that had once belonged to the Baroness von Lazzarini (Deschmann 1888, 159–67).



Figure 2. Porcelain dish from Viktor Smole's collection. (Source: National Museum of Slovenia, Ljubljana)

The provenance of the above-listed East Asian objects from the collections of members of the Carniolan elite was the decisive factor that put them into the category of cultural history at the museum. To some extent, this suggests a recognition of their aesthetic value and a perception of these objects as representative samples of “Chinese” or “Japanese” art. In contrast, objects donated or sent by missionaries and other travellers were placed among the ethnographic collections. Ethnology was still a vaguely defined term in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it tended to be equated with the study of non-European peoples. In this respect, scholars from the Slovene ethnic region, which was part of the Habsburg monarchy, followed mainly the German conceptual scheme of culture (Hudales 2003, 74). The application of an ethnographic lens only to exotic objects brought back by missionaries and travellers further betrays the influence of Western colonial politics and imperialism. For the objects served as carriers of scientific information about “primitive” cultures and as evidence of the alleged backwardness of the societies that had produced them. We may conclude that while the non-European collections contributed by missionaries

and travellers were used primarily to obtain more or less accurate information about the social life and customs of foreign peoples, Asian objects of “Carniolan provenance” in the museum were treated in those years as proof of the refined cultural and aesthetic tastes of the local elite. Ethnology or ethnography was shaped by missionaries and travellers; cultural history by aristocrats and arising middle class.

The Slovene Ethnographic Museum: (East) Asian Objects as Carriers of Ethnographic Information

Although separate categories of “art” or “decorative art” were not included in Deschmann’s guide, the terms such as “art”, “historical art objects”, “art collections”, “works of art” are used repeatedly in the guide, usually referring to the collections of wealthy individuals acquired by the museum or to various European/Slovenian paintings and sculptures. Furthermore, the *Handbook for Art Development in Austria (Handbuch der Kunstpflege in Österreich)*, published in Vienna in 1902, fourteen years after Deschmann’s guide, also clearly lists the Provincial Museum of Carniola as one of the institutions dealing with art. The museum was to cover natural sciences, history, ethnology, cultural history and art history, all with a focus on Carniola (Weckbecker 1902, 446; see also Kos 2020). This also emerges from a somewhat later *Guide to the Collections of National Museum*, published in Ljubljana in 1931. Apart from a lengthy part on archaeology, the section on fine arts, presenting mainly paintings and sculptures, was included as a separate category, written by the art historian France Stelè, one of the pioneers of the art historical discipline in Slovenia. This reveals that “art” as a classification entered Slovenian museums in the early twentieth century, though the term was mostly tied to paintings and sculptures.

As Kos (2020, 23) notes, two major events further determined the museum’s orientation and collecting policy: the detachment of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum from the National Museum in 1923 and the establishment of the National Gallery in 1918, which received more than six hundred works of art (mainly paintings and sculptures) from the National Museum. The criteria for dividing the objects among the three institutions were not entirely clear, but the scope and nature of the museums were thus further defined. The National Gallery was to become the main “art” museum in Slovenia, housing mainly paintings and sculptures; the National Museum was to preserve archaeological and historical objects of cultural heritage that would contribute to the strengthening of national identity, and the Ethnographic Museum was to study objects of ethnographic value.

While a large number of paintings and statues were transferred to the National Gallery, most of the East Asian objects were transferred to the Ethnographic Museum, including various Chinese Buddhist and Daoist statues sent to the museum by the Franciscan missionary Peter Baptist Turk in the early twentieth century.

The creation of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum thus marks the next stage in the interpretation of Asian artefacts. Except for individual Asian objects of “local provenance” that had been separated from other non-Western collections already in Deschmann’s guide, the new museum took over all Asian and other non-European collections. It is worth noting that it was mainly individual ceramic and porcelain pieces that were not transferred and, accordingly, are still kept in the National Museum (as part of its ceramics collection). Most of the other items listed by Deschmann ended up in the Ethnographic Museum. From the guide to the cultural history collections of the National Museum published in 1931 it is clear that the bulk of the East Asian material is no longer housed there; the chapter on handicrafts just mentions briefly, in the section on ceramics, that the collection also contains “a few pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain” (Mal 1931, 146). This suggests that in Slovenia, too, the medium of porcelain had attained the special status of a “relic” of the European aristocracy (and of its obsession with exotic objects made of unknown material), but the categorization was still in flux. Interestingly, the Ethnographic Museum listed in its inventory a large Chinese bowl with colourful genre scenes that had originally been acquired by the Provincial Museum of Carniola as part of Viktor Smole’s legacy (Štrukelj 1980–82, 139). However, the bowl is in fact still housed at the National Museum together with the other ceramics. The fact that some porcelains were meant to be or actually were transferred to the Ethnographic Museum, while others remained in the National Museum, clearly illustrates inconsistency in the criteria used to categorize—and ultimately house—East Asian porcelain.²

The period from the establishment of the Ethnographic Museum in 1923 to 1964, when the Museum of Non-European Cultures was set up as a separate branch in Goričane, may be described as the second phase of the interpretation of East Asian objects in Slovenia. The dominant note during this period was sounded by ethnography. While the distinction made between ethnology and crafts or decorative/applied arts (these being a partial successor of cultural history) was applied

2 It is also possible that all East Asian porcelains were intended for the Ethnographic Museum. Boris Orel (1953–1954, 144), who became director of the Ethnographic Museum in 1945, pointed out irregularities in the transfer: certain objects taken over and inventoried by his museum had remained in the National Museum for unknown reasons. (Some of the objects had been inventoried, others not, but were still intended for the Ethnographic Museum). Owing to the ambiguous and incomplete documentation, it is difficult to verify this now.

to porcelain, all other non-European collections were categorized as belonging to the field of “ethnography” and many of them were subsequently transferred to the so-called ethnographic collections of America, Africa and Asia (Promitzier 2003, 295). During these years the Ethnographic Museum was mainly oriented towards constructing a Slovenian national identity by extolling the manifestations of folk culture in local architecture, interior design, ornamentation and national dress.³ This is eloquently demonstrated by the reports on museum work in the periodical *Etnolog* (see Rogelj Škafar 1993, 46–52), and also by the mounting of permanent exhibitions. While sixteen rooms were allocated to the display of Slovenian collections, there were only two rooms for the non-European objects (ibid., 9).

As early as 1924, the art historian Stanko Vurnik was appointed a curator at the Ethnographic Museum, but he applied the art-historical method of classification by stylistic types mainly to the study of objects of folk culture. As a result, objects of non-European origin were pushed into the background. Tina Palačić (2019, 189) points out, though, that one should bear in mind that very few new non-European objects found their way into the museum at that time. Nevertheless, the range of non-European objects that it received from the National Museum was certainly not negligible. As previously mentioned, the National Museum had acquired a large collection of Buddhist statues and other religious objects from Hankou and Shanghai in China that were sent to the museum in 1912 and 1913 by the missionary Peter Baptist Turk. These were duly categorized as ethnographic material and later transferred to the Ethnographic Museum.

Another example of how East Asian objects were viewed from the angle of ethnography is provided by the inter-institutional transfer of the Skušek collection to the Ethnographic Museum. In 1957, the National Museum had officially taken over an extensive collection of diverse Chinese objects assembled by the Austro-Hungarian naval officer Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947) during his almost six-year stay in Beijing between 1914 and 1920 (fig. 3). However, in January 1963 the entire collection was transferred to the Ethnographic Museum (Štrukelj 1980–82, 140). Bogdana Marinac (2020, 8) reveals that there were discussions on establishing a museum of Chinese art in the coastal city of Piran, but it was the touristic potential of such a museum, rather than the cultural and artistic values of the collection, that interested the local politicians. The Villa Istria in Portorož, near Piran, was to have housed the collection, but Skušek’s Japanese widow, Tsuneko Kondō Kawase (married name: Marija Skušek) (1893–1963), who after his death had offered the collection to Piran, decided to abandon that plan owing partly to the unresolved ownership of the house. As a result, the entire collection ended up in the National Museum. This was

3 For more information on the Ethnographic Museum’s role in this process, see Rogelj Škafar (2003).

in fact what Ivan Skušek himself had wished: “If I die, the museum will get the collection. No one else would be able to appreciate it.” (Skušek, n.d.)

Although the subsequent transfer of the Skušek collection from the principal state institution devoted to Slovenia’s historical heritage to a museum housing folk and ethnographic treasures was linked to the acquisition of the Baroque mansion Goričane in Medvode, where the Ethnographic Museum opened a branch for its non-European collections, it does reflect how it was seen as more appropriate to display Chinese objects alongside other non-European objects, rather than alongside local historical artefacts and national art.



Figure 3. Ivan Skušek and Tsuneko Kondō Kawase in Beijing, between 1918–1920. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana; the original is kept by his great nephew Janez Lombergar)

The Museum of Non-European Cultures: A Return to the Concept of Cultural History

Significantly, the transfer of the Skušek collection to the Ethnographic Museum stimulated interest in the non-European objects housed there. The relevant collections had already begun to attract greater attention in the first decade after

World War II, following the appointments of the ethnologist Boris Orel as director of the museum in September 1945 and of Pavla Štrukelj, also an ethnologist by training, as a curator in 1955. Štrukelj systematically examined and re-inventoried all the non-European objects, made the material available to researchers for study purposes and acquired new objects (Palaić 2019, 190–91).⁴ In 1964, the Museum of Non-European Cultures was set up as a branch of the Ethnographic Museum for the preservation, study and display of objects from non-Western cultures.

The creation of this new institution opens the third phase in the interpretation of Asian objects in Slovenian museums, when there was a return to an emphasis on cultural history. This must partly be understood against the background of the Non-Aligned Movement that emerged as part of the post-World War II wave of decolonization, and the resulting political and ideological atmosphere. After the split between Tito and Stalin in 1948, Yugoslavia was forced to adapt to the polarized world of Cold War and gain its sovereignty. Yugoslav president Josip Broz–Tito (1892–1980) found the alternative mode in the united force of developing countries to support each other in national development and oppose all forms of colonialism and imperialism. It was officially launched in Belgrade in 1961. The former Yugoslavia thus entered into various forms of cooperation with other members of the Non-Aligned Movement, which brought political self-confidence and economic benefits. One of the connecting factors in the Movement was culture: many of the member countries condemned cultural imperialism and emphasized cultural diversity as a means of overcoming Eurocentric tendencies in art (Piškur 2019, 15–16). This gave new impetus to ethnographic museums, cultural and artistic exchanges, exhibitions and other initiatives. While in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, a museum dedicated exclusively to African art was established, the Museum of Non-European Cultures near Ljubljana became the first Yugoslav institution whose mission was to acquire, preserve and display non-European collections (Palaić 2019, 194; Piškur 2019, 17).⁵

Although the favourable political atmosphere increased interest in non-European collections, the lack of staff at the new museum and the striving to organize as many exhibitions and events as possible, which was part of general efforts to promote the image of the Yugoslav State, made systematic research difficult. From its foundation in 1964 right until 1990, when renovation of the Goričane mansion began, only one curator, namely Pavla Štrukelj, was responsible for all non-European collections. The scope of the work she carried out is

4 For more information on Pavla Štrukelj and her work, see Palaić (2020).

5 For more on the links between the collections policy of the Museum of Non-European Cultures and the Non-Aligned Movement, see Palaić (2019).

astonishing. In addition to reinventorying the older collections and cataloguing new acquisitions, she curated as many as 83 exhibitions with rich accompanying programmes during her 26 years at the museum (Palaić 2020, 25). But this intensive tempo and her involvement in the preparation of so many exhibitions prevented her from conducting more in-depth research.

Drawing on analysis of Štrukelj's texts, Tina Palaić (2020) argues that despite the anticolonial attitude of the Non-Aligned Movement, the perception of non-European collections among the museum staff in the second half of the twentieth century continued at least partly to be informed by a colonial discourse, where Slovenian collectors were portrayed as "white protagonists" and a distinction was made between Slovenians and "Others". In this regard it is interesting to see Štrukelj returning to Deschmann's concept of cultural history when categorizing the Skušek collection. At the same time, she also viewed the collection from an ethnographic perspective, which points to a certain inconsistency and ambiguity in the criteria she used (Štrukelj 1965–1966, 57). This is apparent, among other things, in Štrukelj's discussion of a Manchurian garment depicting a dragon with five claws (fig. 4). After a brief report on the owner of the collection, her article focuses exclusively on a detailed analysis of the clothing and places it in the context of China's historical, social and cultural development. As references she cites foreign experts, including the renowned American historian and sinologist Edward Schafer, whose research had focused on Chinese contacts with neighbouring peoples and cultures during the Tang dynasty (618–907). She describes the garment as "a significant piece of clothing from the Chinese imperial court of the nineteenth century," adding that it was of a value "rare in our country" (*ibid.*, 58). By acknowledging "high art in the embroidery of fabrics and other clothing" (*ibid.*, 63), which China in addition to science had developed very early on in its history, she elevates the Qing court garment to the category of decorative art. However, aesthetic values most likely were not the decisive criterion in her categorizing. In Štrukelj's research papers on Chinese objects one can recognize a combination of approaches based on ethnography, decorative art and cultural history. If for Deschmann in 1888 the main criterion had been the link to the Carniolan elite of the early nineteenth century, which had sought to gain even higher status by collecting exotic objects, for Štrukelj it was the provenance of the Skušek collection from the Chinese imperial court that brought prestige to the individual objects and by implication to the museum as the new institutional owner.



Figure 4. Chinese robe with dragons with five claws. (Source: Skušek collection, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

When restoration work began on the Goričane mansion in 1990, Chinese and other non-European collections were moved to the depository, which meant that exhibitions and research activities based on the East Asian collections had largely to be interrupted. Further degradation of the collections followed after the closing of the Museum of Non-European Cultures in 2001, which coincided with the denationalization of the Goričane mansion. The collections have since then been transferred to the new premises of the Ethnographic Museum on Metelkova Street in Ljubljana (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 117), where they still more or less lie dormant in a depository. There was a short-term revival of interest in the objects in 2006 thanks to the organization of the 16th biennial conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies in the Slovenian capital and, in particular, the initiative of Professor Mitja Saje from the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Ljubljana to stage a larger exhibition that would present cultural contacts between Slovenia and China to international sinologist colleagues. Ralf Čeplak Mencin, the curator of the exhibition, followed the conceptual design of “classical” ethnological collections, focusing on the stories of the collectors, but he also selected objects from as many as twelve different

Slovenian public and private institutions in order to offer a panorama of the culture and art of China (see also Šmitek 2007, 275–76). This landmark exhibition can be regarded as the first step towards the gradual institutionalization of Chinese art as a field of study in Slovenia, which began to develop in parallel with the new academic discipline of Sinology at the Department of Asian Studies in the University of Ljubljana.

The Absence of an “Art Discourse” in Slovenian Museums: Archaeological and Imperial Objects and the Role of Collectors

The incorporation of East Asian material culture into the Western aesthetic canon occurred in Europe in the early twentieth century, although the boundaries in museum taxonomy between ethnography, archaeology, decorative arts and oriental antiquities were not rigid. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, East Asian collections in Slovenian museums were situated by scholars mainly in the realm of ethnography, with occasional forays into cultural history. The initial classification points to a separation of non-European collections from individual Asian objects of local (that is, Carniolan) provenance: the latter were mostly the legacy of a fascination with Chinese products as “exotic”, which gave them pride of place in the nobility’s “cabinets of curiosity”.

An ethnological thrust was also noticeable in the missionary exhibitions and fairs that were once common in all major European and American cities. During the international fair held in Ljubljana in 1930, one pavilion hosted a “missionary and ethnological exhibition”. Alongside the many objects collected by missionaries in Africa, Asia, America and Oceania, the ethnological section also included objects that had nothing to do with such missions. These were Chinese objects, such as furniture, screens, chandeliers and porcelains, many of which had been lent to the exhibitors by Tsuneko Skušek, the Japanese wife of Ivan Skušek, and were presented in one Chinese and one Japanese room (Motoh 2020, 37). This would further suggest that Asian objects were perceived as purely ethnological records of the cultures that produced them. A review of the history of missionary exhibitions organized in Slovenia until World War II undertaken by Helena Motoh (2020) reveals that later exhibitions in the 1930s also showcased diverse “ethnological” objects from China and Japan, including Buddhist statues, Chinese furniture and textiles, coins, books and even paintings. These exhibitions’ emphasis was on the Slovenian missionaries who as part of a small nation had contributed significantly to the international missionary movement, whereas the aesthetic values of the Asian objects on display remained largely unnoticed.

The treatment of East Asian objects as belonging to the realms of ethnography or ethnology continued in later decades, and it may be seen in other Slovenian museums too. For example, the collections of Asian and South American objects stored at the Celje Regional Museum have likewise been placed into the category of ethnology. Under the same category are listed objects that were sent or brought to Celje by Alma Karlin (1889–1950) from her eight-year travels around the world. Similarly, the objects brought home by sailors from voyages in East Asia and other world regions that are now stored at the “Sergej Mašera” Maritime Museum in Piran are included in the category of ethnology. To this day, (East) Asian material in Slovenia has been studied mainly from an ethnological angle, rather than from that of art history. The only exception is the collection of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints that are classified as “art history” at the Celje Regional Museum. This classification was most likely inspired by hierarchical Western notions of art, according to which paintings represent the highest form, but the fact that these prints still remain unexplored by art historians indicates that they are not seen as equal to other paintings and graphics of European origin.

What are the reasons for the absence of an “art discourse” in the Slovenian museum and academic community? To answer this question, let us first turn to the European market and developments in other European countries. A conceptual shift in the perception of East Asian objects, as may be observed in former European colonial powers, was accelerated by the wave of entirely new objects that found their way into Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The political upheavals in China and the triumph of British troops in the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century literally “opened” Chinese space to foreigners. The sacking of the Summer Palace in Beijing by an Anglo-French expeditionary force in 1860 further enabled artefacts of imperial provenance to enter the European market for the first time. The first of many auction sales of looted items marked “from the Summer Palace at Peking” took place in London the following year (Pierson 2014, 227). It is estimated that around 1.5 million objects from the palace were looted or destroyed, some of which are now stored in 2,000 museums in 47 countries around the world (Macartney 2009 in Tythacott 2018, 12). The range of objects in question does not reflect Chinese aesthetic ideals, since the looters left behind masterpieces of painting and calligraphy while taking away objects of higher monetary value. Still, the objects were advertised as “trophy” and “treasures” from a “celebrated” location, which elevated them to symbols of Western power (Pierson 2018, 74). Further Chinese objects reached Europe as a result of the plundering and destruction of imperial residences and princes’ palaces after the Boxer Uprising between 1900 and 1901, the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the conversion of the Forbidden City into the Palace Museum in

the 1920s, which was accompanied by major theft and embezzlement (Yeh 2011, 178–79). The appearance on the market of exquisite and high-quality artefacts with a unique provenance, which differed greatly from the Chinese export art designed to cater to the aesthetic criteria of the European elite, helped to transform the understanding of Chinese material production in the West.

Another major factor that accelerated the change in emphasis in the interpretation of East Asian objects from ethnology, via decorative art or archaeology, to art was the archaeological material unearthed during the construction of China's first railways in the early twentieth century and during archaeological expeditions led mostly by foreign experts. All these developments, to which one should add the aesthetic revolution sparked by cubist and surrealist artists, who celebrated the spontaneity and vitality they discovered in the "exotic" cultures of non-European peoples (see Clunas 1997, 428; Tythacott 2011, 162), along with the new material production it inspired, forced the museum and academic community to reconsider their focus on a definition of human civilization based on Renaissance ideals. In this process, the status of Chinese objects *vis-à-vis* those from rapidly modernizing Japan also changed. Japanese objects that had initially been accorded a higher status were now considered to be greatly indebted to Chinese culture, and the interpretation of Chinese objects as artworks gained further momentum. While all later products, particularly those from after the Qianlong Emperor's reign, were seen as reflecting a degradation of Chinese culture, objects from early periods of Chinese history were praised as evidence of superior "civilizational" achievements (Clunas 1997, 429; see also Beattie and Murray 2011, 42–43).

Furthermore, imperial objects were imbued with the narrative of the victory of the European order over Chinese "disorder", of the technologically advanced West over the backwardness of Chinese society. These dynamics led to greater emphasis on the materiality of the objects and their aesthetic dimensions, but at the same time denied a "civilizational" role to the Chinese, who were seen as crude savages, idle and dull (see also Pagani 1998, 28). In a discussion of the Goncourt brothers' collecting strategy, Ting Chang (2011) concludes that they valued "Chinese objects" exclusively for their materiality, ignoring altogether the social background of how they were produced. This attitude is also reflected in the rejection of contemporary tendencies in Chinese art and in indifference towards the inhabitants of modern China, as evidenced by the emphasis on historicism and rarities in gallery displays in the West (see also Lee 2016, 6). This sociopolitical and cultural discourse encouraged an increasingly systematic collection of Chinese objects, which, drawing on Eurocentric notions of China and driven by market economy principles, became particularly pronounced at the turn of the twentieth century. The main features of these objects that whetted collectors' appetite were the

historical period to which they belonged and their archaeological connections. Large-scale archaeological excavations, in particular, shaped the dynamics of the art market, contributing to the emergence of collectors of East Asian artefacts as a new type of collector and to a reappraisal of the objects on the strength of their distinct aesthetic properties.

The presence of archaeological material and artefacts of imperial origin in the European art market, therefore, catalysed the major cultural shift towards the perception of Chinese objects as “decorative or fine art” in most of Europe. The absence of such material in Slovenian collections, in contrast, accounts for the continuing use of “ethnographic” labels. With the exception of a few Chinese coins dating back to the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), there is no archaeological material at all in East Asian collections in Slovenia. Most of the objects date from the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century; some have been dated to earlier periods, but further studies are needed to verify this. Artefacts of imperial provenance offered for sale at various auctions in London and Paris from 1861 onwards also failed to reach the Slovenian ethnic territory, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The latest research on East Asian objects kept in various Slovenian museums indicates that these were obtained mainly via direct contacts between individuals from the Slovenian area and East Asia.⁶ Objects obtained indirectly (for example, by purchase at auctions or through personal contacts) did of course circulate among the elite and higher nobility to a certain degree—as indicated by a samurai armour, lacquered cabinets, porcelain dishes and other items in the museums—but the Communist policy of confiscating valuable objects from noble families and wealthy individuals after World War II means that researching their provenance is now almost impossible. Most of the objects were thus obtained directly by purchase in East Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, facilitated by the growing presence of the Austro-Hungarian military and merchant ships in East Asia.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a multinational state with several important cultural and scientific centres, but in comparison with other European imperial powers its navy was still quite small in the first half of the nineteenth century. Its colonial interests were oriented primarily towards the Balkans, where it formally annexed Bosnia in 1908. Not until the latter half of the nineteenth century did Austria–Hungary begin to expand its navy and to turn to East Asia in search of cheap raw materials and new markets—especially after the opening

6 For a more comprehensive overview of East Asian objects and collections strategy in Slovenia, see Vampelj Suhadolnik (2019; 2020).

of the Suez Canal in 1869 had given it a slight advantage over the other naval powers. Already in September of that year it concluded a trade agreement with China and opened a consulate in Shanghai. Increasing numbers of merchant and military ships sailed into East Asian waters, there by securing for Austria–Hungary a share—albeit a small one—of the eastern Chinese territories. The Habsburg Empire’s foothold in East Asia also created opportunities for sailors, missionaries, travellers, diplomats and others to travel to East Asia, including some individuals from the Slovenian area who brought back numerous objects. The range of these objects is considerable, reflecting the type of access enjoyed by the individuals in question, their purchasing power, the context in which the exchanges took place and also their aesthetic ideals. They are mostly smaller objects of a commemorative nature and belong to the category of export art that was generally available in large East Asian ports. Objects from earlier periods or from the inner market are rare.

An exception to this general rule is the collection assembled by the senior naval officer Ivan Skušek Jr. Owing to political circumstances, he remained in Beijing for almost six years (1914–1920). During this period, he developed a specific aesthetic sensitivity for the Chinese heritage and systematically collected relevant objects with the intention of setting up a Chinese museum upon his return home. His collection contains a number of high-quality objects of reportedly imperial provenance. Indeed, in other circumstances, Skušek and his collection could well have played a similar role in the institutionalization of Chinese art in Slovenia to that of Sir Percival David and his private collection in England, Henri Cernuschi and Émile Guimet in France, Ferenc Hopp in Hungary and Charles Lang Freer in the United States, among others. Just as the merchant Nathan Dunn had opened the first museum of Chinese objects in the United States in 1838,⁷ so Ivan Skušek also planned to build the first museum of Chinese culture in his homeland. Like Dunn, Skušek adopted an encyclopaedic approach to collecting⁸ and was keen to reproduce the Chinese heritage by displaying it in a museum. Skušek was in fact even more ambitious, since he wanted the museum building to be a large-scale construction in the style of traditional Chinese architecture: to that end he even brought back a model of a Chinese house (fig. 5). Moreover, he seems to have wanted to display the objects set against authentic interiors of the homes of the Chinese elite, as suggested by his purchase of decorative walls of the type

7 For more details of Nathan Dunn’s Museum of Chinese objects, see Conn (2000).

8 The Skušek collection comprises a wide range of objects. In addition to paintings, Buddhist statues, ceramics, porcelains, textiles, musical instruments, rare books, photographs, albums and many other smaller objects of everyday use, there are also larger objects, such as furniture, decorative wall screens and a model of a Chinese house.

that embellished Chinese rooms. He also had a special interest in richly carved wooden furniture. His acquisition of a three-volume album containing professional photographs and detailed architectural analysis of the Forbidden City, published by Tokyo Imperial University in 1906, further testifies to his interest in interior design and architecture. If he had succeeded in constructing a Chinese museum in Slovenia based on authentic Chinese architecture and interior design, it would have been a truly unique achievement not only in Slovenia but also in Europe as a whole.

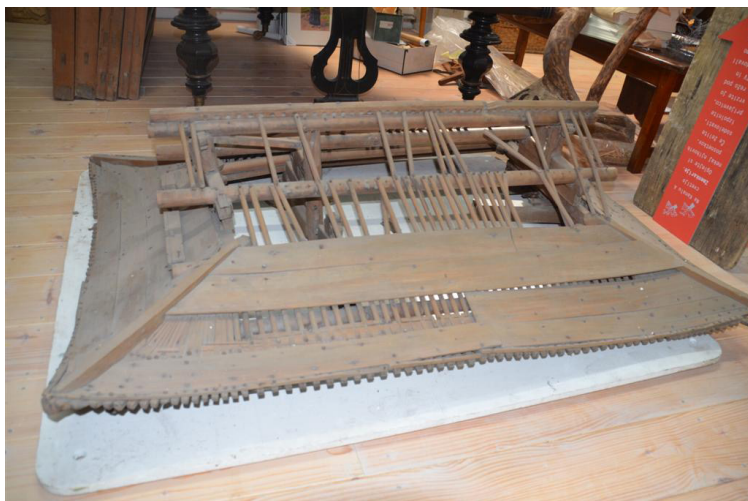


Figure 5. Roof of the Chinese house model. (Source: Skušek Collection, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

A significant role in classifying East Asian objects as artistic material and in the gradual institutionalization of Chinese art in Europe was played by individual collectors, whose private interest prompted them to study closely the objects in their collections and to ascribe aesthetic values to them. They began to organize exhibitions and publish magazines, journals, catalogues and monographs. In England, this tendency went even further with the foundation of the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1921. Through various public activities, this group of collectors and other enthusiasts influenced the thrust and perception of East Asian ceramics collection in Great Britain among not only museum professionals and the academic community, but also the wider public. Endowed with considerable financial means, some of these collectors supported further study and research. In particular, thanks to the funding of Sir Percival David, a degree course in Chinese art history was established at the University of London in 1930—the first

such academic programme in art history in Great Britain (Pierson 2011, 132).⁹ An equally significant role was played by Charles Freer and other collectors in the United States. By bequeathing his collection to the nation and helping to found what is now the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the former contributed greatly to the recognition of Asian material as art in the United States (Conn 2000). At around the same time, in 1915, the American School of Archaeology was established in Beijing with the aim of training people to interpret Eastern art in the West and *vice versa* (Shin 2016, 249). The use of private funds to establish such public institutions, which to a certain extent also served as research centres, can be observed in France as well.

Ivan Skušek, in contrast, despite his eagerness to establish a museum—he even bought a piece of land in a northern district of Ljubljana for that purpose—never undertook a systematic and in-depth examination of the objects in his collection. During his stay in Beijing he had developed a very positive attitude towards Chinese culture and begun to champion Chinese art, but after returning to Slovenia his desire to resume service in the navy proved stronger (Skušek n.d.; Čeplak Mencin 2012, 115–16). Financial problems put an end to his original plans to found a museum. This must also be the reason why he tried to sell certain pieces of Chinese furniture from his collection to museums in the United States and Europe, as revealed by the drafts of several of Skušek's letters that are preserved in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

The re-evaluation of East Asian objects in the Slovenian area on the basis of aesthetic criteria was therefore halted or slowed down. To a certain degree, the focus of such efforts shifted to the domestic environment. For in the following years Skušek's home was frequented by the intellectual and artistic elite of Ljubljana (fig. 6). It is very likely that in this way Chinese aesthetics left their mark on the work of the city's leading architect, Jože Plečnik (1872–1957), who was a regular visitor to Skušek's flat and was much taken by its ceramic roof statues and garden furniture (Lomberger 2002). Skušek's wife, the Japanese Marija Skušek (Tsuneko Kondō Kawase), whom he had met in Beijing, also played a significant role in transmitting East Asian culture to the wider Slovenian public. Owing to the lack of documentation, it is difficult to assess the extent to which she influenced the selection and purchase of objects in Beijing, but after settling down in Slovenia she became very socially active and was an important mediator between Japanese and Slovenian culture.¹⁰ After her husband's death in 1947 she took over custody of the collection.

9 For more details of the institutionalization of Chinese art in Great Britain, see Pierson (2011).

10 For more on Marija Skušek and her role in transmitting the knowledge of the Japanese (East Asian) culture to Slovenian and Yugoslav audience, see Hrvatina (2021) and Visočnik Gerželj (2021).



Figure 6. Ivan Skušek's flat in Ljubljana. (Source: Photo Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana)

A stronger impetus for the reinterpretation of East Asian objects came from the ethnologist Pavla Štrukelj, who was responsible as curator for the Skušek collection after its transfer from the National to the Ethnographic Museum. She acquainted herself with Western concepts and ideas about non-European cultures, as is evident from her citing of foreign experts as references in her work. She quickly recognized the value of individual objects in the collection, particularly their (putative) imperial provenance. In her scholarly papers she described some as “exquisite” and “high-quality” artefacts, which suggests that she had accorded to them the status of (decorative) art. The institutionalization of Chinese art, therefore, continued at least partly within the boundaries of ethnology. In other respects, Pavla Štrukelj had taken up Deschmann's cultural-historical approach to the categorization of the collections, though now with a focus on the imperial “status” of objects.

To some extents developments in Slovenia must have been also influenced from across the Atlantic by Ivan Jager (1871–1959), a Slovenian architect and urban

planner who settled in the United States after assembling an enviable collection during his rather short stay in East Asia in 1901. In contrast to Skušek, Jager eagerly studied Japanese art, architecture and philosophy, which he skilfully used in his work after arriving in Minneapolis in 1902. Although he remained in contact with some Slovenian fellow architects and artists, and to a certain extent influenced their oeuvre, the great physical distance prevented any major contribution by Jager to the reevaluation of East Asian material in Slovenia as “fine art.” He bequeathed his collection to the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, but except for a short exhibition of his *ukiyo-e* prints in 2005, it has remained largely hidden from the public.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the absence of an “art discourse” should also be understood in the light of the specific situation of the Slovenian area. Always on the political periphery—initially within the Habsburg monarchy, later as one of the founding nations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but with little real political or administrative power—in Slovenia the tendency towards strengthening provincial and national identity was quite prominent. As pointed out by Hudales (2003, 67–68), already at the time of the foundation of the Provincial Museum of Carniola, its mission had been to collect and display everything that might serve to extol the history of Carniola, its capital Ljubljana and particularly the industry of its inhabitants. When looking at the different categories applied to Asian objects it is necessary to take this into account. As already mentioned, whereas Asian objects brought by missionaries and travellers were classified as ethnographic, those of local provenance were treated as belonging to the realm of cultural history. The possession of exotic Asian objects as a legacy of the global phenomenon of *chinoiserie* testified to Slovenia participating in the broader historical, social and cultural development of Europe: they could thus be placed together with the “regional” symbols that helped to build provincial and national identity. In contrast, Asian and other non-European collections assembled by missionaries and travellers served to demonstrate Slovenia’s position on the “evolutionary” scale in relation to other peoples. The boundary between the two approaches was rather vague, which is also reflected in how most objects of Asian origin were re-categorized and transferred from the National Museum to the newly established Ethnographic Museum.

The striving to consolidate national identity—and, accordingly, to emphasize the continuous development of Slovenian/Slavic art and its being part of a wider European context—manifested itself in January 1920, when the chair for art history was established at the University of Ljubljana. Alongside the chair for Slovenian philology and history, the art history professorship was among the first to be set up within the newly founded university, whose main concern in those years

was to strengthen its Slovenian character (Golob 2020, 9). Not surprisingly, given that the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been dissolved in 1918 and a new state—the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—established, the Slovenian national movement was very active culturally and politically. The main goal of the Art History Society, founded in Ljubljana in 1921, was similarly “to promote the study of art history, particularly in Slovenia, and to make appreciation of art and its history more widespread,” as argued by Vojeslav Molè (1886–1973), who together with Izidor Cankar (1886–1958) and France Stelè (1886–1972) was one of the pioneers who helped to establish art history as an academic discipline in Slovenia (Molè in Golob 2020, 62). The study of Slovenian and especially South Slavic art—including the development of the necessary methodology and terminology, modelled on the Vienna School—was thus situated in the broader context of Western European art. In an extensive monograph on the development of the discipline of art history in Slovenia over the past hundred years, Nataša Golob (2020) argues that later generations of art historians continued developing the thematic, theoretical and methodological framework for their research along those lines. The emphasis on (Western) European and Slovene or South Slavic fine arts has continued to this day, whereas sensitivity to the aesthetic value of East Asian objects has not generally been fostered.

Instead of a Conclusion: The Institutionalization of East Asian Art in Slovenia and the “Privilege of Periphery”

The circulation of delicate and exquisite Asian objects in the European market led to a reevaluation of the Western aesthetic canon, into which such objects were now admitted for the first time. However, preference was given to objects from earlier periods, in which Western connoisseurs looked for “primitivist” features. They found these in the formal and chromatic simplicity of ceramic vessels from the Song dynasty, various pottery figures from the Han and Tang dynasties, grave objects and, particularly, in the graceful lines of Buddhist sculptures (Tythacott 2011, 163). In accordance with Western notions of the hierarchy of the arts, in which painting (especially oil paintings with figural motifs) was rated highest, Chinese and Japanese paintings were admitted into the category of visual art, albeit, as Clunas (1997, 423) has shown, into the subcategory of prints and drawings. This “canonization” was further encouraged by the institutionalization of Chinese (East Asian) art in Europe, with a significant role played in this process by private initiative, which to a certain extent helped to shape the collections policy of museums.

This process has been slower in Slovenia. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, East Asian collections were classified mostly as ethnological material, with occasional shifts to cultural history. This can be attributed to three key factors: the lack of high-quality artefacts of imperial or archaeological provenance, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the insufficient financial means of private collectors in the interwar period, which prevented further specialization; and the orientation of art history as an academic discipline towards an emphasis on national identity, with legitimacy conferred by the integration of Slovenia into the broader context of Western artistic development. In contrast to the colonial history of England and France, where East Asian collections were to some extent tokens of national and imperial identity, the political marginalization of the Slovenian area led to a tendency to promote national identity and to celebrate folk culture. East Asian collections did not play a major role in consolidating Slovenian national consciousness: they consequently remained excluded from the evaluation of individual objects as artworks and continued to be mostly stored at the museum depots.

While the exclusion of such material from the discourse of art history can be understood in the light of political events during the twentieth century and the strengthening of nationalistic and state-building tendencies, the fact that even after the Bologna reforms of higher education in Slovenia in the first decade of the twenty-first century, non-European art was still not included in the syllabus of degree courses in art history is noteworthy. It points to the still dominant Eurocentric orientation of art history as an academic discipline in Slovenia. Indeed, efforts to institutionalize East Asian art only really got under way in 1995 with the introduction of Sinology and Japanology programmes at the newly established Department of Asian Studies in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana.

Some momentum in this process has also come from ethnologists. While Pavla Štrukelj revived Deschmann's cultural history-based approach when studying high-quality, valuable artefacts of imperial provenance in the Skušek collection, her successor Ralf Čeplak Mencin, also a professional ethnologist, has proposed setting up a dedicated museum of Asian and African art. A tendency to treat the objects in the Skušek collection as artworks may also be discerned in the way that foreign experts in the field of Chinese art have been invited to evaluate the collection: William Watson from the British Museum was invited to do so in 1962, and Yi Hongzhang, a Chinese expert and curator at the Palace Museum in Beijing, in 1994 (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 114). Thanks to the combined efforts of sinologists and ethnologists, the process gained new momentum, leading to the organization of the already mentioned exhibition *Encounters with China*, which opened

in Ljubljana in 2006 (fig. 8). As noted by Zmago Šmitek (2007, 275), the exhibition did not limit itself to the past but also raised questions that were relevant to contemporary China. A further development in the reinterpretation of Chinese objects and their artistic value was stimulated by the accompanying exhibition of contemporary art mounted by six graduates of the School of Drawing and Painting (in the Academy of Fine Arts and Design) under the leadership of the Chinese–Slovenian artist Wang Huiqin. In addition to the Chinese objects presented in the main exhibition, the accompanying smaller one explored the interplay of Slovenian contemporary art and Chinese visual production.



Figure 7. The exhibition *Encounters with China: Traces of Chinese Cultural Heritage in Slovenia* at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in 2006. Photo by Marko Habič.

Prior to that, a dual degree programme at the Faculty of Arts had enabled the younger generation of students to specialize in Sinology or Japanology and in art history, providing them with solid foundations for subsequent work in the pioneering field of East Asian art. The first university-level course on Chinese art in Slovenia was introduced in 2003 as an optional course within the undergraduate programme in Sinology. As part of the Bologna reforms, this optional course was

transformed into a regular one, and the master's programme in Sinology was expanded to include a regular course on Chinese art. The latter offered master's students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with museum work by becoming involved in the analysis of individual objects of East Asian origin. The establishment of these two new courses was a further step towards the institutionalization of Chinese art in Slovenia.

In 2018, a further stimulus came from the Slovenian Research Agency, which announced that it would fund a three-year research project on East Asian collections in Slovenia. The project was intended to situate within the global context the history of collections of East Asian objects in Slovenia and their cultural connotations. Overseen by the Department of Asian Studies, the project team comprehensively and systematically investigated five collections of East Asian origin for the first time. The work was done in cooperation with museum professionals and followed an interdisciplinary approach. In addition to individual objects, the way they can be interpreted and their connection with the people that produced them, the project also addressed aesthetic and formal characteristics. The findings from the project have challenged the boundaries between the traditional categories of "fine arts", "anthropology" and "ethnology", leading to a reassessment of the existing museum taxonomy in the light of a broader understanding of world cultures and our human heritage.

Ivan Skušek himself had already exemplified such a universal approach—not only through the encyclopaedic nature of his collection but also with his vision of a museum built in traditional Chinese architectural style that would display, say, an opium pipe or another everyday object next to a richly carved mirror on a pedestal in the form of two lions of supposed imperial provenance, thereby transcending traditional divisions between academic disciplines. It is precisely such initiatives that can help to facilitate, both in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe, a reappraisal of the material production of the classical "Other"—a process that is reflected, for example, in the renaming of ethnographic museums to "museums of world cultures".¹¹ The national database created as part of the abovementioned project provides a systematic and analytical overview of all East Asian objects in Slovenia.¹² The database presents this material in digital format as part of the cultural heritage at both the national and global level. This is a further step in the reevaluation of Asian objects, since it means omitting the selection phase in which it is decided

11 To give but a few examples: the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam, the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands, the Weltmuseum in Vienna and the Världskulturmuseerna in Sweden. For further discussion of the universality and cosmopolitanism of museums, see Fiskesjö (2007).

12 Database of East Asian objects in Slovenian museums is available at the following website: vazcollections.si.

whether or not an object is of “better” or “higher” quality and thus belongs to the realm of the decorative or fine arts.

In this sense, the fact that the Slovenian area was historically on the political periphery—a status that continued in the new countries established particularly after World War I—can be seen as an advantage. Being a small country without a colonial past does not necessarily imply a “privileged epistemological point of view”, as Bojan Baskar (2015, 75) has argued and as may be seen in the classification of non-European material as “ethnology” in Slovenia. Nevertheless, Slovenia’s specific circumstances did make it possible to present the East Asian material in the country’s museums using a more systematic and universal approach. It is these very circumstances that have raised awareness of the need to undertake, through the above-mentioned project, a comprehensive review of collecting culture and the perception of such objects in Slovenia—something that has not generally been done at the national level for most countries, though specific collecting practices have been studied at the local level. Above all, Slovenia’s peripheral position has facilitated appreciation of these objects as being part of the universal heritage of human culture. Such an appreciation is particularly strong in the peripheral areas of former European empires, where the systematic investigation of national and local museums and private collections has started only recently.¹³

The “privilege of periphery” further manifested itself in the initiative to set up a global association of experts in Asian art, which was prompted by the lack of opportunities in Slovenia for direct contacts and discussions with international colleagues that would facilitate the exchange of ideas. The European Association for Asian Art and Archaeology (EAAA), the first international academic society of this kind in the world, was duly founded in Ljubljana in 2013. By 2020 it already had almost 300 members.

The institutionalization of East Asian art in Slovenia, which took place mainly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, was made possible by a number of historical, socio-political and cultural factors that were specific to the peripheral situation of the Slovenian area in earlier historical periods. These factors created a favourable atmosphere for the reevaluation of Asian art from a broader perspective, transcending existing conceptual boundaries. Important new developments may therefore often originate from the periphery, rather than from the core.

13 Similar initiatives are under way in Switzerland, led by the University of Zurich (Thomsen 2015), and in Scotland, under the auspices of National Museums Scotland (n.d.).

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was carried out under both 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), both of which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency. I am very grateful to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, the National Museum Slovenia and Janez Lombergar for permission to publish images. I am also very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and to Luis Sundkvist for a thorough reading of the text and polishing the English.

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