

Introduction

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Guest Editors

Recent decades have brought the topic of researching East Asian collections in Europe and the world to the forefront of research and academia. The colonial and postcolonial frameworks of collecting practices, the cultural and socio-political settings in which the collectors assembled their collections, as well as the history of displaying East Asian objects in museums and other institutions, were researched both in the political centres of those practices and on their peripheries. In a differently structured approach, the collections of objects themselves came into the focus of the research, including their materiality and their “biographies”, providing a novel perspective on the historiography of collections.

In many cases, these research approaches also encountered specific challenges. From missing documentation, lost objects and dispersed collections to the possible histories of thefts and confiscations, many obstacles can stand in the way of a thorough and integral reconstruction and exploration of East Asian collections and their histories. One particular issue is very common and by definition goes beyond the research of collections—the occurrence of individual East Asian objects, unrelated to known collections and/or without reconstructible provenance. These “orphaned objects”—a term borrowed from similar phenomena in archaeology—are a challenge of a unique kind, not only posing the question about their own unknown history and biography, but also challenging the methodological approaches for dealing with singularity, missing information and much more.

The Department of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana), Science and Research Centre Koper, Celje Regional Museum and the Maritime Museum of Piran, therefore, hosted an international symposium entitled *Orphaned Objects: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Research of East Asian Objects* at the Faculty of Arts on 18 September 2023. The symposium was organised as part of the project *Orphaned Objects: Examining East Asian Objects Outside Organised Collecting Practices in Slovenia* (J6-3133, 2021–2025), funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency. This volume includes most of the papers presented during the symposium.

The thematic issue thus relates to the research challenges of East Asian orphaned objects in various European and American collections. It further discusses the

theoretical and methodological approaches to the treatment and contextualisation of orphaned objects within the scope of museology and various approaches to curation, the strategic approach to the analysis, preservation, management and protection of the cultural heritage of East Asian or non-European origin, as well as good practices that correspond to the challenges relating to handling, storing, restoring and exhibiting the orphaned objects, highlighting the historical, art-historical, archaeological and anthropological aspects of examining objects without context.

This issue is divided into three thematic sections that attempt to address the above topics. It begins with a section devoted to the specific situation in Slovenia related to East Asian objects and shows the various reasons why the objects became orphaned. As such, it also touches on the perception of East Asian heritage in Slovenia and the specific socio-political situation. This section contains three papers. The first paper by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik examines in detail the various processes that led to the partial loss of identity of individual East Asian objects, usually within their transition from the private to the public sphere. It highlights four developmental processes that have led to the “orphaning” of East Asian objects in Slovenia: the sale of items owned by the nobility due to the financial and economic crisis they encountered after the March Revolution of 1848; the interwar and postwar confiscations; the process of inheriting and gifting objects; and the transfer between private and public spheres. In addition, the paper discusses the challenges of provenance research with a focus on methodological nationalism and the lack of specific knowledge of East Asian Societies in the 20th century. In conclusion, it briefly introduces an alternative approach to research of the orphaned objects, which she termed the “circumstantial framework approach” with a special focus on the “ownership approach”.

The second paper by Davor Mlinarič sheds light on the collection of Asian objects in the Celje Regional Museum. This collection is unique in that all the objects were confiscated during and after the Second World War and came to the museum from the regional collection centre, which was founded after the war to collect valuable cultural and historical objects. The author meticulously researches the various laws formally authorising the confiscation of objects and explains the origins of the collections of Asian objects. The first part deals with the measures taken by the Nazi occupying forces in Lower Styria and presents a case study of a set of samurai armour as a successful attempt to reconstruct its provenance on the basis of a more precise description of when it was confiscated by the Nazi occupying forces. The second part focuses on the confiscations of the postwar period and a series of laws designed to regulate the new state’s handling of property. It also sheds light on the functioning of the Celje District Collection Centre and dis-

cusses the difficulties in identifying objects in connection with the confiscations at Lemberg Castle, Dobrnica Castle and the Dobje Manor.

The last paper in this section, written by Helena Motoh, deals with the concept of “wandering objects”, used to explain a particular mobility pattern using the example of the Skušek collection, the largest collection of East Asian objects in Slovenia. It describes the mobility patterns of these objects, including how they were dispersed among family members and acquaintances, often given as gifts or sold during financial difficulties, and occasionally reacquired by the museum. The paper discusses how this mobility pattern, where objects do not lose the information on their provenance, but on the contrary, this information becomes their most important feature and the crucial element in the establishment and preservation of the social network surrounding the collection and its owners. The study situates the concept of wandering objects within broader theoretical frameworks and underscores its importance for understanding the fluid and complex histories of East Asian collections in Slovenia.

The second part of the volume examines how people lived with these objects in their private environment. It contains three papers that also analyse how the objects changed their identities and meanings over the generations. The first paper, written by Bogdana Marinac and Maja Veselič, examines the evolution of meaning attached to East Asian objects brought to Slovenia by sailors on Austro-Hungarian ships from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries. It discusses how these objects, initially valued for their exoticism and utility, often became family heirlooms imbued with personal and cultural significance over the generations. As these items were passed down, their origins and functions were sometimes forgotten and they acquired new meanings related to family heritage and identity. The study highlights how the sailors’ descendants, who often lacked detailed knowledge of the objects’ backgrounds, primarily valued them for their aesthetic and sentimental worth. Through interviews and analysis of surviving artefacts, the authors reveal how the roles and meanings of these objects have transformed, reflecting broader changes in cultural perception and memory.

While the paper by Marinac and Veselič discusses how the meaning of East Asian objects brought to Slovenia by sailors changes over time, Lullo Sheri opens up the question of the denial and reinterpretation of the original identity of a Chinese stone lion through student rituals on the campus of Union College in Schenectady, NY. The author looks at the unusual story of the Chinese stone lion, which was sent to the college in 1874 by an alumnus, Reverend John M. W. Farnham, a Presbyterian missionary in Shanghai. As soon as the lion was installed on campus, it became the centre of attention for student groups as part of the annual painting

rituals. Since then, it had been covered with countless layers of paint until it was no longer recognisable. The extraordinarily rich biography of this stone lion is revealed through new narratives, symbols and identities discussed in the context of the college's painting tradition and the perception of Chinese art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States.

The last paper in this section, by Klara Hrvatin, further opens the discussion on changing identities and meanings by analysing East Asian objects in smaller town communities. It examines East Asian objects found in small Slovenian towns, particularly Ilirska Bistrica, which were not part of organised collections but were held by individuals. It explores the cultural and material connections between this region and East Asia through objects from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on their owners and the types of objects kept in their homes. The research seeks to identify whether there are "typical" East Asian objects in Slovenian households. The study aims to provide insights into the provenance, use and cultural significance of these objects within the local context.

The final part of this volume consists of four papers dealing with the broader issues and challenges of provenance research on orphaned East Asian objects. The first paper by Tina Berdajs analyses the earliest donations of East Asian objects in Slovenia, with a special focus on East Asian porcelain donated to today's National Museum of Slovenia by female donors in the first half of the 19th century. The author discusses the questions of researching the provenance of these objects based on the records in the *Illyrisches Blatt* journal of the time, in which the first donations to the museum were recorded, as well as the connections between these records and certain objects that are in the museum today. By analysing the objects and their donors in detail, Tina Berdajs expands the discussion on the specific types of objects acquired by female donors in 19th-century Carniola (today's Slovenia) in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and shows under what circumstances the objects were acquired.

The challenges of researching the provenance of orphaned East Asian artefacts are discussed further by Michaela Pejčochová. Her contribution sheds light on the complex political and social factors in the 20th century that led to looting and confiscation, in which individual artefacts lost part of their identity. Two battle paintings in the collection of the National Gallery in Prague were commissioned as a series on the victorious battles of the imperial army to commemorate the successful military campaigns against the Nian Rebellion (1851–1868). The two paintings, looted from the Pavilion of Imperial Splendour during the Boxer Rebellion, ended up in the private collection of the Czech writer, collector and traveller Josef (Joe) Hloucha. Michaela Pejčochová not only traces the transfer and

movement of the paintings from Beijing to the present-day Czech Republic, but also reconstructs the transfer between the private and public spheres and the subsequent transfers between institutions. The paper also shows how the paintings lost their identity during the transfer, as the inscriptions attached to them were separated from them.

The movement and transfer of Chinese artworks from Beijing to Europe are also discussed by Ma Kexin, who traces the hidden life story of the Yongzheng period hand scroll entitled *Guwan tu* from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. While Ma Kexin carefully examines the acquisition files in the museum archive to search for the network of people involved in the acquisition of the artwork, she also reassesses the contemporary display of the scroll in the context of its perception in the 20th century and sheds light on “the dilemma of creating a contextualised exhibition of ‘orphaned’ objects that have been lost in context”, as the author describes. The paper shows the changing identities of the artwork from a court product to a trophy and an object of booty, which later became an object of purchase and finally a display artwork.

The last paper in this volume by Zhao Haoyang investigates the provenance of scattered pages from the *Huangchao liqi tushi* album found in Western collections. The research highlights the challenges in linking these pages to the looting of Yuanmingyuan in 1860, as thorough archival analysis shows that many pages were acquired from unrelated sources over time. Zhao employs non-traditional methods, such as examining indirect archives and art-historical analysis, to gain new insights into these objects’ provenance. The study suggests that direct provenance records for many of these pages may never have existed, and instead, it focuses on connecting pages without records to those with solid evidence. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the scattered pages’ history and their movement through different collections.

This special issue of *Asian Studies* aims to contribute to the field of provenance research, focusing on orphaned objects of East Asian origin. It examines the different theoretical and methodological approaches to dealing with such objects and discusses various situations that have led to the loss of (at least) part of their identity. We hope you enjoy reading it.