

# Why East Asian Objects in Slovenia Became “Orphaned”: Four “Orphaning” Processes

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## Abstract

What lies behind the impoverishment of the identity of East Asian objects in their transition from the private to the public sphere? This article looks at the various developmental processes that have led to the “orphaning” of East Asian objects in Slovenia and discusses the challenges of provenance research for such objects, proposing a new research approach. Objects of East Asian origin became “orphaned” in various ways, either being sold by aristocrats, confiscated by Nazi occupying forces or the socialist government institutions during or after WWII, or given or sold to persons who did not preserve their history. All processes were poorly documented and only sparse notes were made. This makes it extremely difficult for researchers to trace the biographies of these objects and identify their past ownership. Many other records, such as photographs of interiors and other object documents, have also been lost due to the complex socio-political situation and the mobility of the objects between the private and public spheres.

**Keywords:** East Asian objects, orphaned objects, Slovenia, confiscations, sales, provenance research

## Zakaj so vzhodnoazijski predmeti v Sloveniji »osiroteli«: štirje procesi »osirotjenja«

### Izvleček

Kaj je v ozadju osiromašenja identitete vzhodnoazijskih predmetov v tranziciji med zasebno in javno sfero? Ta prispevek obravnava različne procese, ki so vodili k »osirotanju« vzhodnoazijskih predmetov v Sloveniji, ter izzive pri raziskovanju provenience teh predmetov, pri čemer predlaga nov raziskovalni pristop. Osiroteli vzhodnoazijski predmeti so posledica različnih procesov, predvsem prodaje plemiškega inventarja, medvojnih in povojnih zaplemb, spominske narave podedovanih ali podarjenih predmetov in drugih povezanih dejavnikov. Vsi procesi so bili skopo dokumentirani, pri čemer so zapisi precej splošni. Zaradi tega sta raziskovanje biografiji teh predmetov in identifikacija njihovih preteklih lastništev precej otežkočena. Tudi številni drugi dokumenti, kot

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so fotografije interierjev in druga dokumentacija, so bili zaradi kompleksne družbeno-politične situacije in mobilnosti predmetov med zasebno in javno sfero v veliki meri izgubljeni.

**Ključne besede:** vzhodnoazijski predmeti, osiroteli predmeti, Slovenija, zaplembe, razprodaje, raziskovanje provenience

## Introduction: The Concept of “Orphaned” East Asian Objects in Slovenia

All objects in museums begin their lives outside museums. While in some cases it is possible to trace the path of an object back to its production and reconstruct the many phases of its life, in many cases the passage of an object through different stages and transfers between private and public spheres lead to the loss of at least part of its identity. “Orphaned” objects, forgotten by curators who know little about the objects themselves or their provenance, are therefore often condemned to a dormant life in museum storage.

The concept of an “orphaned” object was developed in archaeology in the context of trafficking in fragments of ancient Greek vases and other artefacts which had been stolen from tombs or looted from archaeological sites, and entered the art market without any accurate information about their origin (Leventhal and Daniels 2013, 340–41; cf. Motoh 2020). These soon became widely sought-after collector’s items and consequently the target of looters and traffickers. Leventhal and Daniels (2013) point out that the term is used in three different contexts: where individual archaeological artefacts are fragmented, where information about the provenance and historical context relevant to an object’s reconstruction and evaluation is missing, and in cases where an object is excluded from museums on ethical grounds. At the same time, the term “orphaned” has also been applied to entire collections that have lost the support of curators or been abandoned by their owners (Cato, Golden and McLaren 2003, 255).

Over the past few decades, in parallel with the increasingly extensive “curatorial crisis” (SAA Advisory Committee on Curation 2013; Voss 2012; Kersel 2015; Friberg and Huvila 2019), the international public has been paying more attention to the issue of orphaned objects or collections, disregarded by curators, and thus never examined and exhibited (Voss 2012). Orphaned objects, however, have long presented problems for museums. In the United States, the issue was first broadly addressed in 1985 (West 1988), and as the number of orphaned materials has grown, so have publications on this topic (e.g. West 1988; Baksh 2001; Lane 2001; Voss 2005; Voss and Kane 2012). Surprisingly, however, there are only a

few studies on orphaned objects or collections in the field of East Asian studies, despite the fact that the amount and variety of Chinese objects on the Western art market—many of which are without provenance—greatly increased in the 20th century, due to the turbulent political and social situation at the turn of the century, with looting of Chinese objects by foreign forces, as well as the extensive archaeological exploration in China during the 20th century.

In Slovenia, this issue is firstly addressed within the national project *Orphaned Objects: Examining East Asian Objects outside Organised Collecting Practices in Slovenia* (2021–2025),<sup>1</sup> within which the project members focus on three groups of East Asian objects defined as orphaned: (a) objects in the Collection of Objects from Asia and South America,<sup>2</sup> kept by the Celje Regional Museum; (b) East Asian objects in Slovenian castles and manors; and (c) East Asian objects brought to the present-day Slovenia by individual sailors of the military and merchant navies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the time, the opening of the Suez Canal allowed increasing numbers of Austro-Hungarian ships to sail to East Asia, while the new Southern Railway gave more sailors from the Slovene hinterland the chance to join the navy (Marinac 2017, 19). The project uses the term “orphaned objects” in the second sense identified by Leventhal and Daniels of antiquities missing contextual information. However, it goes beyond the archaeological context, including all objects without provenance and previously known ownership as well as those which lack significant information about their place of origin and/or their transfer from one cultural environment to another. It thus includes also objects that became detached from their history through various developmental processes.

The project’s first study focuses on the objects that came to the Celje Regional Museum from the Celje District Collection Centre established in 1945 to collect and preserve—i.e. confiscate—cultural-historical and valuable works of art from all over Slovenia. Some of these were already confiscated by the Nazi occupying forces during WWII. The objects were then stored in museums or other institutions as state property, or found their way into private hands. Scantily described at the time, they lacked most contextual information, including records of their owners and location of origin. The second study complements the first by examining individual objects of East Asian origin in Slovene castles and mansions. It attempts to reconstruct the extent to which they were included in the aristocratic heritage before and after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in

1 For more on the project see: <https://as.ff.uni-lj.si/raziskovanje/raziskovalni-projekti/osirotneli-predmeti-obravnavava-vzhodnoazijskih-predmetov-izven>.

2 As the name suggests, this is not an organic collection, but a museum organisation of objects whose only common feature is their non-European origin.

the interwar period. This will, for instance, make it easier to contextualise objects from the Celje Regional Museum, which were mostly taken from individual castles and mansions. The third study is more specific, as it deals with individual objects brought back by sailors. Their ownership is known, as the sailors themselves acquired them in East Asia, but the objects generally lack any other information (e.g. location, even country of origin and method of acquisition) that would give a deeper insight into the understanding sailors and their descendants had of East Asian heritage. This raises the question of how orphaned objects without provenance differ from those whose last owner is known but where there is no record of how they were acquired or their original context. Once these latter objects are no longer of interest to their owners or curators, they are usually also stripped of their "metaphorical voice" and consigned to a dormant life in depots and attics, which places them in a broader category of orphaned objects or collections.

These circumstances are closely related to the developmental processes that led to the orphaning of the objects. Only an understanding of the circumstances in which the objects lost their identity (or part of it) can help us search for additional sources to tackle and address provenance research questions. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate what happened to these objects in Slovenia, why and how they were deprived of their context and what circumstances led to the loss of the records. Once we know this, we can search for different sources, documents and records and try to find other possible solutions to these questions. This article therefore focuses on the circumstances and developmental processes that led to the loss of context. It highlights and analyses four different processes by which objects may have lost their identity and discusses the challenges and sources for researching their provenance.

## The Sale of Items Owned by the Nobility

The social, political and economic power of European noble families has been in general decline since the 17th and 18th centuries, and the revolutions in European countries seriously undermined aristocratic elites. The nobility in Slovenia saw their power severely weakened by the March Revolution of 1848 and the resulting expropriation of land, which was formally introduced with the law on the abolition of serfdom passed by the National Assembly on 7 September 1848 (Vodopivec 2007, 59). The March Revolution thus abolished the privileges of the nobility almost completely, leaving only the titles intact. The years following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918 and the founding of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were even less favourable for the nobility.

Not only were the aristocratic rank and titles abolished by the Vidovdan Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes of 1921 (Preinfalk 2019, 182), but the agrarian reforms and taxes also plunged the nobility into an increasingly serious financial and economic crisis. The situation, which had already become increasingly difficult in the 1920s, was not improved by the Great Depression. The maintenance of the castles and their furnishings thus represented a great financial burden, which forced the nobility to sell their properties and, above all, their culturally and historically significant holdings. Many were also forced to emigrate to other countries and thus export their wealth (Komelj 1983, 14).

Between 1920 and 1941, around forty public auctions in castles and manor houses in Slovenia were documented (*ibid.*, 22), including some important aristocratic collections of high-quality and valuable works of art. These objects went either to newly founded museums or galleries or to private individuals, while some of the objects also disappeared abroad. The auctions were an opportunity to fill the national collections with important works of art and various objects, which is why they attracted the particular attention of museum directors, art historians, restorers and other experts. Among them, France Stelè (1886–1972), a pioneer of Slovenian art history, played a crucial role. After completing his doctorate at the University of Vienna in 1912, he began to focus on the heritage of the castle property and its preservation (Košak 2012, 584). Stelè, together with museum professionals and other connoisseurs of art, especially with the director of the National Museum Josip Mal (1884–1978), the former director of the same museum Josip Mantuani (1860–1930), who was also an appraiser, and the art historian Izidor Cankar (1886–1958), also played a decisive role in determining whether owners could take works of art abroad. In order to limit the trade and export of art, the provincial government issued the Art Protection Ordinance in 1921. Owners who wanted to take their artworks with them or sell them abroad had to submit an export application. Stelè viewed the artworks on site and made his decision on the basis of quality, authorship, and subject matter preservation (*ibid.*, 586).

However, many objects still travelled abroad illegally, while several works of high quality were sent abroad because they did not meet the current needs of museums or were too expensive for them to buy (*ibid.*, 586–87). In the general atmosphere of promoting national consciousness, the central focus was on the acquisition of Slovenian works or works by Slovenian artists. In addition, the museums and galleries were primarily interested in paintings and furniture. For these reasons, East Asian objects, which tended to be porcelain or other decorative art products, were not usually of interest to museums, but were probably acquired by locals as mementoes of their landlords, or by other collectors or art dealers.

The fact that the Carniolan noble families owned Chinese or Japanese porcelain, ivory, lacquer or other objects is evident from their donations to the Provincial Museum of Carniola, the first museum in present-day Slovenia and the predecessor of the National Museum. After its founding in 1821, the museum soon acquired Chinese and Japanese porcelain dishes, ivory figurines and small-format colour paintings depicting Chinese warriors (Deschmann 1888, 164; Štrukelj 1980–1982, 138–39). Donors included Count and Countess Hohenwart<sup>3</sup>, Baroness Lazarini (1794–1833), Baron Schwegel (1836–1914) and others (Berdajs 2023).<sup>4</sup> Old photographs and documentation of the castle interiors, taken by France Stelè,<sup>5</sup> show that they were often decorated with Chinese or Japanese objects. Images of the castle in Stara Loka near Škofja Loka in Slovenia, for example, whose last owners, Knight Edvard Strahl (1817–1884) and his son, Knight Karl Strahl (1850–1929), were enthusiastic collectors of paintings and other artworks in Carniola in the 19th century, show Chinese and Japanese porcelain vases and decorative plates, a lacquer cabinet, sculptures and some other smaller objects (figs. 1 and 2).<sup>6</sup>

Some of the Chinese objects may have been sold to Edvard Strahl by Ivan Frankè, a Slovenian painter who travelled to China in 1873 in search of the kidnapped son of Alexandra Vasilievna Zhukovskaya (1842–1899), daughter of the Russian poet Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky (1787–1852). She had been banished from St Petersburg by Tsar Alexander II because of her illicit relations with his son Alexei. Frankè therefore travelled to Shanghai in search of a child and, against all expectations, found him near Lake Taihu with the help of the Austrian consul Schlick and his Chinese colleagues (Vurnik 1923, 36–37). He brought back from China not only the child, but also a large collection of photographs and various objects. This is confirmed by Edvard Strahl's letter to his son Karl, saying how pleased he was to be expecting Ivan Frankè, who wanted to show him a large collection of Chinese photographs (“eine reiche Collection Fotografien”) and other Chinese bric-a-brac (“andere chinesische Nippsachen”),

3 Franz Josef Hanibal Count von Hohenwart (1771–1844) and Lady Margareth Countess von Hohenwart (née Erberg) (1762–1853). Count Hohenwart was the first warden of the Provincial Museum of Carniola, today's National Museum of Slovenia.

4 For more on the collecting of East Asian porcelain between 17th and 20th centuries in present-day Slovenia, see Berdajs (2023).

5 The photographs and documentation relating to the preservation of France Stelè are kept at the Cultural Heritage Information and Documentation Centre (INDOK Centre) of the Cultural Heritage Directorate of the Ministry of Culture.

6 The Strahl collection and its auction in 1930 have been analysed in detail by Renata Komić Marn (2009; 2016; 2020).



which Strahl was looking forward to acquiring (Polec 1931, 68; Kambič 1997, 113; Komić Marn 2016, 63).



Figure 1. Hall on the second floor of the castle in Stara Loka, photo from 1929. (Source: Photo documentation by France Stelè, INDOK Centre, Stara Loka, 10641 N)

What happened to these objects is the subject of further research, but as already mentioned, photographs confirm that the Strahls had several Chinese and Japanese objects on display in their castle. In 1930, shortly after the death of the last owner, Karl Strahl, who had no children, the collection was auctioned off. In his Will, Karl Strahl had enabled three Slovenian institutions—the National Gallery, the National Museum and the Ethnographic Museum—to make a selection of objects from the collection and acquire them at reduced prices (Komić Marn 2020, 70). Other objects were purchased by individual intellectuals or business elites from Ljubljana and the surrounding regions, by antique or art dealers, or in some cases also by a housewife who chose furniture or decorative objects for her home (*ibid.*, 74). The interest in the Strahl collection also brought buyers from other parts of the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia and from abroad. The large Japanese vase on the white earthenware stove, for example, was bought by Ivan Oblak from Ljubljana (fig. 2) (Komić Marn 2016, 251).



Figure 2. Boudoir on the second floor of the castle in Stara Loka, photo from 1929. (Source: Photo documentation by France Stelè, INDOK Centre, Stara Loka, 10640 N)



The sales of noble property in the interwar period were therefore very dynamic. Tours of the castle interiors gave buyers the opportunity to select items in advance, although unfortunately some items disappeared during such tours and sometimes even during the auction itself (Komić Marn 2020, 74). Although all public auctions took place under the supervision of the district courts and the court records are kept in the archives, where a lot of very useful information about the objects, the last owners and the individual buyers may be found, the documentation is generally not stored systematically, which makes research very difficult. All this has turned many objects into “orphans”. While a few objects of East Asian origin once owned by the nobility ended up in museums with proper documentation as donations or, in rare cases, as purchased acquisitions, the paths of many others require further examination.

### Interwar and Postwar Confiscations

The second process that led to the “orphaning” of East Asian objects in Slovenia was that of mass confiscation: first during Nazi occupation in the Second World War and then by the postwar socialist government. During the War, confiscations were carried out both by the occupying authorities (especially the Nazis in the Štajerska and Gorenjska regions in northern Slovenia) and by the bodies of national liberation movement (mainly the partisans’ military courts). Between the end of the war in May 1945 and the end of 1946, however, more extensive confiscations of so-called “enemy” property took place in Slovenia (Mikola 1992, 155). During this period, confiscations can be divided into those imposed by administrative authorities (confiscation commissions) and those imposed by courts (judicial confiscations). Judicial confiscations in Slovenia mainly took place from June to August 1945, as under the Criminal Code, the confiscation of property was one of the penalties available to the judiciary (*ibid.*, 165).

The majority of confiscations took place after the Second World War, targeting principally those of German nationality or citizens of the German Reich, as well as so-called enemies of the state, regardless of their nationality, who were alleged to have collaborated with the enemy. The postwar government went so far as to declare the entire nobility to be Germans or persons of German nationality and confiscated their assets on this basis (Preinfalk 2019, 197). With the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918 and the founding of new nation states, the question of nationality became a burning issue. As Miha Preinfalk (2019, 191) has shown, this question was particularly topical in Slovenia, as even in earlier phases the local nobility usually did not define themselves as Slovenes, but either belonged to

the German camp or cultivated the ideas of internationality or transnationalism. In addition, nationalistic voices in Slovenian political and national discourse had claimed that the noble families were foreigners and did not belong in Slovenian society (*ibid.*, 191). Some of the noble families who refused to live in the new Slavic country had emigrated after the First World War, but many old noble families with large landholdings who had lived in the region for centuries remained. After the Second World War, most of them were expelled from the country.

Those targeted with confiscations included many entrepreneurs who constituted the main pillars of economic life, such as industrialists, businessmen, craftsmen, merchants and also rich farmers. These were mostly groups whose economic strength had been built up before the First World War and especially in the interwar period on the basis of industry, trade and commerce and who had acquired valuable works of art, precisely with the aim of increasing their status and prestige. (The nobility had often sold their objects off in the struggle for survival.) The Nazi occupying forces targeted the same groups with the intention of weakening the economic power of the Slovenian nation, while the postwar government justified confiscations by accusing the entrepreneurs of economic collaboration, in its bid to destroy the private sector in order to create a public sector (Mikola 1999, 9).

The legal basis for the organisation of the confiscation commissions within the administrative authorities was the Law adopted in 1944 on the collecting, preserving and distributing of books and other cultural, scientific and artistic objects, which became state property by the Decree of the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). The latter, which discussed the transfer of the enemy's property into state property, the state administration of the property of persons no longer residing in the territories and the confiscation of property confiscated by the occupying forces, was adopted on 21 November 1944 (Kodrič-Dačić 2000, 53; Mikola 1992, 155). Accordingly, the confiscations were carried out by four different types of commissions: federal, district, city and zonal. At the federal level, a Federal Collecting Centre (FZC) was set up within the Ministry of Education in Ljubljana in the summer of 1945. In addition to the federal commission, four district confiscation commissions were set up for the districts of Ljubljana, Maribor, Celje and Novo mesto, three municipal confiscation commissions for the towns of Ljubljana, Celje and Maribor and 32 smaller district confiscation commissions (Mikola 1992, 156).

When property was confiscated, very sparse inventories were drawn up, usually containing only a general description of the objects, e.g. a bedside table, a chest of drawers, a tall wardrobe, a folding screen, etc. For paintings, more information was recorded, including the name of the painter and the title of the painting. Asian

objects were usually attributed to China or Japan or simply labelled as Oriental, e.g. a Japanese suit of armour, an Oriental lantern, 14 pieces of Chinese porcelain or a Japanese Spanish screen. Records in the inventory book of the Federal Collection Centre, kept in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, detail alongside the confiscated object the name of the person or the place whence it was taken, and in some cases also the institution or person who received it. From this inventory we can learn what type of items were confiscated from the castles, manors or individuals. In addition to paintings, furniture, carpets, musical instruments, books and many other decorative objects, there were also some East Asian artefacts. These included porcelain pieces, bamboo vases, tables, cabinets and other pieces of furniture, Buddhist and other sculptures, gongs, folding screens, samurai armours, shields, swords, a sword made of Chinese money, small caskets, jade objects and others. Although the lack of records and documentation makes it difficult to trace the provenance, these sources enable us to reconstruct to what extent East Asian objects were part of the aristocratic heritage or the heritage of wealthy industrialists or other commoners, and what kind of items these people favoured.

For the most part, these East Asian objects ended up in private hands, in the museums or other public institutions, such as National Theatre, Academy of Theatre Art, War Museum, Triglav Film, which was a Slovenian film production and distribution company, different governmental bodies and many others (cf. FZC Inventory Book). A unique case among these is the collection of Asian objects in the Celje Regional Museum. The collection, called the “Collection of Objects from Asia and South America”, was compiled entirely from the confiscated objects. They came to the museum from the Celje District Collection Centre.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of the museum and confiscation documents, Davor Mlinarič (2023) was able to identify at least five manor houses from which some of the objects might have come, but with the exception of one suit of samurai armour, it is impossible to determine which of the objects belonged to a particular manor house. As already mentioned, the description “Japanese screen” on its own, for example, does not allow us to determine which of the Japanese screens now in the museum actually belonged to a particular person or mansion. This would only be possible on the basis of photographic material of the interiors.

What enabled Mlinarič (2022; 2023) to reconstruct the provenance of a suit of samurai armour was the more precise description by the Nazis, who probably found it interesting due to the large Buddhist swastika on the front. The record of the confiscation from the Frankolovo—Sternstein mansion near Celje, in the

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7 For more on the confiscations of East Asian objects now held in the Celje Regional Museum, see Mlinarič (2023) and the paper by Mlinarič in this issue.

Celje Regional Museum and the Celje Historical Archives, lists it as “1 asiatische Rüstung (vermutlich Samurai XVII. Jahrhundert mit einem in Gold aufgelegten Hakenkreuz)” (Mlinarič 2022, 42; 2023, 38). This clearly indicates that this armour has a gilded swastika on the chest. Since there is only one such piece in the museum, Mlinarič was able to confirm that this piece comes from the Frankolovo—Sternstein manor (fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Dō* (胴) breastplate of the *okegawa* (桶側) type, iron, copper, silk, ribbon, *urushi* lacquer, gilt, horn, leather. Japan, Edo period. (Source: Celje Regional Museum, A 144/13)

This is the only object from the Celje collection for which we have been able to reconstruct the provenance. In the case of some other objects, we have so far been able to identify a few castles or manor houses from which they might have come to the museum, but it remains difficult to determine which belonged to a particular castle and who the owners were. Most objects, however, resist all efforts to determine where they might have come from. The sparse records and the complex processes of confiscation and transfer of the objects to different locations make it very difficult to trace their paths.

## The Developmental Process of Inherited or Gifted Objects

Another way in which objects were “orphaned” was if they were inherited or received as gifts. This applies mainly to objects bought by sailors, travellers or other people who made the journey to East Asia in the late 19th or early 20th century. This was the time when China, Japan and Korea were under military and political pressure from the West to open up to trade with Western countries. As travelling became easier and more affordable, soldiers, sailors, merchants, missionaries and explorers were able to visit East Asia in greater numbers. Sailors on the Austro-Hungarian ships, which included people from present-day Slovenia, were mostly confined to the coastal areas or harbours and mainly brought back what were essentially souvenirs. Among their legacy we find teacups, small vases and other porcelain objects, decorative trays, clothing, fans, smaller statuettes, postcards and photographs (fig. 4). It was common for travellers to bring back souvenirs depicting their achievements or testifying that their owners had visited faraway places and observed “exotic” customs and other novel phenomena (Thomas 1991, 141). While some items stayed in the purchasers’ possession as mementoes, others were given as gifts to their family members, relatives and friends. Over the years, most such inherited objects have lost their identity, so that much information (such as origin, type of object, its meaning, its location, even the country of origin and method of acquisition) has been lost. Since souvenirs are associated with nostalgia and romantic notions of the purchasers’ achievements, the emotional associations which give them great significance for their original owners are inevitably lost in the inheritance process, so that the descendants show less interest in the souvenirs of their ancestors. This is particularly evident in the second generation of descendants.<sup>8</sup> Some still keep the objects left to them, but many have donated or sold them to museums. All too often, objects arrive in the museum with little more than the name of the original owner, as other information that would have given context has already been forgotten. This loss of much of their narrative power places them in the broader category of orphaned objects.

Most people from present-day Slovenia who travelled to East Asia thus brought back individual pieces or souvenirs from their trip, but some deliberately acquired larger collections with the aim of educating the locals back home and sharing their knowledge with them. Among these were Alma Karlin (1889–1950) and Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947). Alma Karlin was a world traveller who amassed an extensive collection of various objects, mostly of ethnographic value, during her eight-year journey around the world (1919–1927). Ivan Skušek Jr. on the other

8 For more on the heritage of sailors and their descendants’ attitude to inherited items, see the paper by Veselič and Marinac in this issue.



hand was an Austro-Hungarian naval officer who found himself in China during the First World War, where he had to stay from 1914 to 1920. During his time in Beijing, he acquired a large and encyclopaedic collection of various Chinese objects. After their return from Asia in 1927 and 1920 respectively, Karlin and Skušek both wanted to share their knowledge of Chinese and Japanese culture and invited people to their homes. Alma Karlin even published, in the local newspaper, an invitation to her “dear fellow citizens” and all who were “thirsty for knowledge” to visit her house and see her collection (Trnovec 2023, 319), while Ivan Skušek was more ambitious in his plans of constructing a museum in a traditional Chinese style, to display the objects against an authentic Chinese interior. To this end, he even brought back a model of Chinese architecture and Chinese decorative screen walls, such as embellished the homes of the elites in China. Historical and financial circumstances, however, prevented him from accomplishing his goals. Instead, he kept the collection in the flats in which he lived with his Japanese wife Tsuneko Kondō Kawase (1893–1963) and her two children from her first marriage—whom he had met in Beijing—and exhibited it there. From 1920 until Ivan’s death in 1947, the Skušeks lived in several flats in Ljubljana, which meant they had to move their large collection of Chinese objects, including many very heavy pieces of Chinese furniture, several times (cf. Motoh 2021).



Figure 4. Folding fan. Japan, late 19th–early 20th century, legacy of Anton Haus. (Source: Maritime Museum Piran, EP 4052).

Their houses were therefore full of various objects and when neighbours, friends and acquaintances came to visit, they sometimes gave things away, so that these objects ended up outside the actual collection. Tsuneko Kondō Kawase, known after her marriage as Marija Skušek, outlived her husband by more than 15 years. As a widow, she even kept a visitors book, from which we can learn about the wide range of people who visited her flat—which had become a kind of private museum. Among them we find important artists, architects and other members of the intellectual and political elites of the time. Jože Plečnik (1872–1957), the leading architect in Ljubljana during the first half of the 20th century, was a regular visitor to the Skušek home. During his visits, he probably acquired a water pipe for smoking tobacco, which is now kept in the Plečniks' house, itself now a museum. Another item, a beautifully carved table with dragon motifs, ended up in Strmol Castle and was most probably bought by its last owner Rado Hribar (1901–1944). Other objects, such as the richly decorated green porcelain lamp depicted with children's motifs, were acquired by neighbours. When the porcelain lamp was sold to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum by a neighbour of the Skušeks, who after the Second World War lived a few houses away in Strossmayerjeva Street (fig. 5), no mention was made of where it had come from.<sup>9</sup> This is typical of the fate of many objects. Nevertheless, on the basis of old photographs of the Skušek collection, their apartments and other documents kept in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, we have been able to identify this and other objects as items that originally belonged to the Skušeks, but which at a certain point strayed away from the original collection and ended up in the possession of other people—bought by neighbours or random visitors, or dispersed among relatives after the couple's death—or of other institutions.<sup>10</sup> The original collection that Skušek had assembled in Beijing was reduced in size after its arrival in Ljubljana. According to the inventory book of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, it consists of around 500 Chinese objects. However, an examination of the object lists (compiled in Beijing in 1917 and on arrival in Ljubljana in 1920), old photographs and other documents makes it clear that there were originally many more.

9 Purchase book of non-European items 1965, 193. Slovene Ethnographic Museum. See also Berdajs (2021).

10 For more on the concept of so-called wandering objects and the Skušek collection, see paper by Motoh in this issue.



Figure 5. Upper part of a porcelain lamp. China, Qing dynasty, 19th century. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 40 N)

We can observe something similar in the case of Alma Karlin's collection. She set out on her journey with the idea of learning about and understanding different societies and cultures and collecting as many different objects as possible in order to enlighten her fellow citizens (Trnovec 2023, 318–21). Her strong desire to share her knowledge among locals is reflected in the newspaper appeal for visitors to her house, so it is not surprising that she gave quite a few objects away to visitors. During difficult times in later years, some friends helped her out financially, and we know that Alma also gave objects as a kind of compensation.<sup>11</sup> One of these items—a scroll painting of roosters on a bamboo background—ended up in one of her friends' houses (fig. 6). The objects wandered also through the sales made by the only heir to the collection, her long-time friend and roommate Thea Schreiber Gammelín (Trnovec 2020, 220), although she donated most of the collection to today's Celje Regional Museum. Thus, the objects lost their context, but lived on in a different environment, both in private homes and in museums, where

11 Phone conversation with one of the owners of such objects, 11 March 2024.

they were inventoried, categorised, exhibited and moved from one depot to another, or in some cases misplaced. If information about the original owners of an artefact and/or the context in which it was acquired, brought back or managed has been lost, what remains is only an object with no narrative or metaphorical voice.



Figure 6. Scroll painting of rooster, ink and colours on bamboo. China, early 20th century. (Source: Private collection. Photo by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik)

## Transfer between Private and Public Spheres

The fourth developmental process that left some of the objects voiceless—related to all those mentioned above—was the transfer between the private and public spheres. Through auctions, confiscations, purchases and donations, objects and entire collections gradually found their way into museums or other public institutions. The transition to a museum is one of the most important moments in the life of an object, lifting it out of the mass production of material culture to fulfil a public service (Tythacott 2011, 139). It must thus be marked in a special way by accession and inventory numbers. The transfer of most of the individual objects and collections under consideration here took place during a very dynamic period in which the socio-political situation in present-day Slovenia was constantly changing.

The situation after the Second World War presented particular challenges. This was the time when two major collections, those of Alma Karlin and Ivan Skušek, entered the museum space. After Alma Karlin's death in 1950, the collection was inherited by her German friend Thea Schreiber Gammelin, who decided to donate the collection to to-



day's Celje Regional Museum in exchange for her Yugoslav citizenship (Trnovec 2020, 120). The acquisition of the collection was managed by the curator herself, who, together with the housekeeper, dragged a handcart to Alma's house on the small hill of Pečovnik and transported the objects to the museum in cardboard boxes. Nothing was documented on site, but Thea later came to the museum and told them where each individual object came from. The objects were transferred to the museum between 1957 and 1960 and were not inventoried as Alma Karlin's collection until four years later (*ibid.*, 120).

While the transition of the Karlin collection depended entirely on the skills and diligence of a single person, the transition of the Skušek collection into the public sphere was much more complex, and it took several years before it was finally housed in the Museum of Non-European Cultures, set up in 1964 as a branch of the Ethnographic Museum. Surviving documents reveal that the process began in 1948, one year after the death of Ivan Skušek, and ended in 1963, the year of Marija Skušek's death. We can observe the stages by which a private apartment was transformed over these fifteen years into a museum depot, which also served as a private museum that was open to visitors several times a week.

The objects were housed in three rooms on the first floor of the house at 3 Strossmayerjeva Street in Ljubljana, where Marija Skušek and two other lodgers each lived in their own room. Marija lived in the middle room, where she also cooked and washed (fig. 7).<sup>12</sup>

In 1948, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments declared the Skušek collection a monument of cultural, historical and artistic significance,<sup>13</sup> and a pre-agreement was signed two years later, in September 1950, between Marija Skušek and the Government Presidency of the People's Republic of Slovenia, in which the conditions for the takeover of the collection and inventory were laid down.<sup>14</sup> Prior to this, in May 1950, an inspection of the collection was carried out.<sup>15</sup> In October and November 1950, the collection was taken over and inventoried in Marija Skušek's flat (373 items were inventoried). Some of them were moved to the basement of the Modern Gallery—after which a fair number

12 See the Minutes of the examination of Marija Skušek's Chinese arts and crafts collection in 3 Strossmayerjeva Street of 31 May 1950, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

13 Decree, Institute for the Protection and Scientific Study of Cultural Monuments and Natural Sights of Slovenia, 11 September 1948, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

14 Pre-agreement between Marija Skušek and the Government Presidency of the People's Republic of Slovenia, 22 September 1950, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

15 Minutes of the examination of Marija Skušek's Chinese arts and crafts collection in 3 Strossmayerjeva Street of 31 May 1950, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.





Figure 7. Photo of the interior of the Skušeks' apartment at 3 Strossmayerjeva Street in Ljubljana. (Source: Photo archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

went through yet another transfer, to Cukrarna, a mid-19th century sugar factory that was more or less abandoned in the 20th century and partially assigned to residential use—while the rest were left to Marija Skušek for safekeeping and care, whereupon she received a handover and a monthly annuity and payment for keeping the collection. The official contract between Marija Skušek and the Executive Council of the People’s Assembly of the People’s Republic of Slovenia was not signed until April 1957.<sup>16</sup> The following year, the collection was taken over by the cultural historical department of the National Museum,<sup>17</sup> which transferred the collection to the Ethnographic Museum in 1963, just six days before Marija Skušek’s death (Štrukelj 1980–82, 140, 157). The collection was then exhibited in the Museum of Non-European Cultures, which was housed in a baroque mansion in Goričane. It remained there until 1990, when restoration work began on the building and the items were moved to a storage facility. After the building was denationalised in 2001, the collection was transferred yet again, to the new building of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Metelkova Street in Ljubljana (Čeplak Mencin 2012, 117).

This complex process of multiple relocations meant that many objects were misplaced, damaged or lost. This is already evident from the “Minutes of the acquisition of the collection” by the National Museum. For instance, the lantern supposed to be in the attic of the flat was not there, the numismatic collection was mixed with Marija Skušek’s private coins, the base of a vase was missing. It was also not clear whether the parts of the “pavilion”, which were previously kept in boxes and as individual sections in the Modern Gallery and later moved to Cukrarna, were all present. Some objects suffered major or minor damage as a result of the overcrowding in the flat. The 1948 Decree document mentions damage in transit to a large carved piece of furniture worth 200,000 dinars, probably this refers to an accident during one of the Skušeks’ own moves. The fact that some items were lost during the Skušek family’s various moves is evident from the report on the inventory process in 1950, in which Marija Skušek mentions that a box with carved doors and various pictorial material is missing. According to the report, it was lost during transport from China to Ljubljana or during their move from Karlovška to Strossmayerjeva Street in 1945.<sup>18</sup>

16 Contract between Marija Skušek and Executive Council of the People’s Assembly of the People’s Republic of Slovenia, 23 April 1957, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

17 Minutes on the acquisition of the Chinese-Japanese arts and crafts collection of comrade Marija Skušek, National Museum, 1 June 1958, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

18 Record of the takeover of the art collection of Mrs. Marija Skušek, Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the People’s Republic of Slovenia, 21 November 1950, preserved in the archives of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

This brief account of the fate of the Skušek collection shows the complexity of the transfer from the private to the public sphere. Transfers within the public sphere itself—for example, between institutions—were likewise not uncomplicated. The case of Snežnik Castle and its furnishings illustrates the process of transferring objects between different government residences. From 1853 to 1945, the castle was owned by the Schönburg-Waldenburgs, a German aristocratic family from Hermsdorf near Dresden.<sup>19</sup> They renovated it, turning it into a comfortable hunting country residence, and furnished it with furniture, stoves, family pictures, old photographs, prints, books, porcelain and other decorative objects, while a piano, a billiard table and a theatre room contributed to the congenial atmosphere. In keeping with the European fashion of the time, the castle was also decorated with Chinese and Japanese objects, in particular porcelain, embroidered folding screens, a cabinet and other small decorative lacquer, ceramic and metal objects. After the Second World War, it was nationalised and became one of the protocol residences of the People's Republic of Slovenia.

In the postwar period, the interior of the castle underwent major changes in its interior design and furnishings. Many of the former princely furnishings were lost, including decorative vessels made of 'blue porcelain' or, more precisely, Chinese or Japanese vases with blue decoration, as local witnesses recall (Bučić 2000, 76). Only one such larger vase, depicting children at play, is still kept in the castle (fig. 8). Many objects were moved to other government buildings, to Strmol Castle or mostly to Brdo Castle near Kranj, which served as the summer and protocol residence of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) after the Second World War. There are a few documents about such transfers in the government archive, but the identification of the objects is very difficult, because objects were described in only a general way (e.g. old wardrobe, chairs, teacups), while the inventory numbers were lost during restoration or cleaning and the items were re-inventoried afterwards (*ibid.*, 76). Some objects lost their context during parties or games of billiards in the castle, at times when no protocol or hunting events were taking place and the interior was not closely supervised (*ibid.*, 77). The archive also lists pieces of porcelain, although their identification requires further examination. We must also bear in mind that some objects from the Federal Collection Centre, from which confiscated objects were taken to furnish the protocol residences, may have been transferred to Snežnik Castle.

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19 For more about the history of Snežnik Castle and its owners, see Slana (2000).





Figure 8. Blue and white porcelain vase, China, 17 century. (Source: Snežnik Castle, S 308. Photo by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik)

Two world wars and five different countries in the 20th century have made the Slovenian situation very complicated, what with changing systems, the establishment of new museums, the transfer of objects between different museums, the closure of museums, the relocation of artefacts to different sites and storage facilities, the transfer of objects between different protocol residences, etc. The general lack of museum experts made the inventory of all objects according to museum criteria a huge challenge, while the transfers within protocol residences were initially carried out without consulting museum specialists or other experts at all. As a result, many objects were only partially inventoried, inventory numbers were lost or the inventory only took place several years after the transfer. The objects thus sometimes ended up in other collections, were considered lost or were genuinely lost, while they often suffered damage as a result of long-term storage in museum depots without proper documentation and treatment.

### **Challenges of Provenance Research: Methodological Nationalism and Lack of Specific Knowledge of East Asian Societies**

All four of these developmental processes were poorly documented. The sparse descriptions make it very difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the provenance of objects and the composition of the original collections. Most of the available documents have not yet been digitised and are scattered across various institutions. If any specific information about individual objects exists, it takes several months of intensive searching through different documents to find it. In addition, records alone cannot usually confirm provenance, so photographic material of interiors is crucial. The pre-war photographs of the interiors of castles and manor houses by France Stelè are a fundamental source for the study of the interiors of castle buildings and at the same time make it possible to track down individual orphaned objects that are now kept in museums. They have mostly been analysed from the point of view of furniture and painting equipment. As part of the *Orphaned objects* project, we are currently examining Stelè's rich photographic material in search of individual East Asian objects. However, it is still very difficult to identify exactly the objects in a photograph and sometimes a match cannot be confirmed with certainty. Moreover, not all interiors of manor houses have been photographed, so we are still faced with the lack of this material, especially for the manors in the Štajerska region, from which most of the confiscated objects in the Celje Regional Museum originate.

In the region of the former Austria-Hungary, it is also often the case that collections fall victim to methodological nationalism, i.e. the methodological fallacy



whereby phenomena are examined primarily within the boundaries of currently existing nation-states. The East Asian collections in Slovenia, for example—comprising objects which witness to the mobilities of people in former imperial and other transnational networks—are commonly considered through the lens of “Slovene national history”. If seen in the framework of the Slovenian nation-state, however, they are depleted of their larger historical context (Austria-Hungary and the two Yugoslav states). One such example is the Japanese lidded cup with red and gold overglaze decoration in the Imari style in the National Museum of Slovenia. It was bequeathed to the museum by Josef Schwegel (1836–1914), a diplomat and politician of Slovenian descent in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, who was also involved in organising the exhibitions of the “oriental” countries at the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873. For many decades, it remained in the museum depot as an isolated object, without curatorial interest. Only by looking beyond the existing national borders was it possible to gain a more comprehensive historical understanding of the biography and origin of this Japanese cup. During her research into the mobility of the object and its provenance, Tina Berdajs came across an identical cup in the current Asian collection of the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna. Further research into their connections and provenance revealed that both objects were once part of the collection of the former Oriental Museum in Vienna (founded in 1875, two years after the Vienna World Exhibition, and renamed the Austrian Commercial Museum in 1886) and had most probably come to the museum via the same exhibition (Berdajs 2025). If one continued to view the Japanese cup solely within the framework of the Slovenian nation state, it would be detached from its wider historical context.

The same can be said of collections in other countries which formed part of a larger multi-national polity in the long nineteenth century. The objects are thus doubly marginalised—in the global history of collecting and in nationalised historiography and museology. It is regrettably the case that most studies of collecting East Asian objects in Europe concentrate on former imperial and colonial centres. The history of collecting is thus written as if it took place only in the political and cultural centres, while the role of perceived peripheries is not recognised. Due to this loss of context, many precious objects, along with entire collections, are hidden away in museum storage rooms, overlooked and undervalued. This eventually results in the neglect of these collections, the loss of documentation and even the physical decay of objects themselves. This is therefore another issue that makes it difficult to trace an object’s provenance. Such “halted mobility” means not only that the material heritage of East Asian objects is diminished but importantly also that information about the objects is not shared, that they cannot be studied and that insights into their production and wider

cultural relevance cannot be passed on. In their active “life”, these objects were an epitome of mobility, in stark contrast to their present state—having been produced in East Asia, travelled the globe, changed hands and, in these many mobile modalities, provoked and engendered an increase of interest in and knowledge of East Asia and its relations with Europe.

Another issue that has led to the neglect not only of the objects themselves but also of their provenance in Slovenia is the lack of specific knowledge about East Asian societies, cultures and arts among most museum staff. Various factors are at work here, from the classification of these objects in Slovenia to the orientation of art history and its tendency to establish a national identity by emphasising folk culture and art, as well as legitimising a country’s own identity by connecting to European art circles. The main focus of many museums has thus been the acquisition of Slovenian and European works. Since the East Asian collections did not play a major role in consolidating Slovenian national consciousness, they were excluded from the evaluation of individual objects as works of art and continued to be stored in museum depots. There was no need to train curators or art historians in the field of East Asian art, so most curators lacked the specific knowledge to deal with these objects.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion: “Circumstantial Framework” Approach**

Once East Asian objects arrived in Europe, they were often passed on to family, friends, and acquaintances. Later, collections and objects were transferred to public institutions through various channels (e.g. auctions, confiscations, donations after the death of the owners, or purchases). Once in public ownership, some objects moved back and forth between different institutions. As discussed in this paper, four different processes lie behind the impoverishment of the identity of East Asian objects in Slovenia that led to the loss of their context. During these processes, much was lost, misplaced, taken away, or resold. “Orphaned” objects, stripped of their context, thus mainly rest in museum storerooms and remain unknown to the public.

Currently, the accepted methodological approach is to focus on objects held in Slovenian museums, investigating the routes through which individual objects reached a collection and in what manner they were transferred. However, most of the challenges in provenance research and tracing the biography of objects are related to the scanty and sparse documentation scattered in various locations, as

20 For more on categorisation and classification of East Asian objects in Slovenia, see Vampelj Suhadolnik (2021).

well as the lack of photographic material documenting certain manor houses and castles. We are therefore introducing into our research on these objects a new element which I have dubbed the “circumstantial framework approach”<sup>21</sup> with a special focus on “ownership approach”.

This term covers the search for wealthier individuals or noble families in Slovenia who may have had direct or indirect contact with East Asia and kept individual objects in their collections, and thus different circumstances that led to the loss of the objects’ context. A detailed exploration of this approach (which will be explored in more detail elsewhere) is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth pointing out its key advantages. Principally, it helps researchers reconstruct the extent to which the nobility in Slovenia was involved in the trade in and collection of Chinese and Japanese objects and provides a framework to which individual “orphaned” objects in the museums can be related. Researchers looking for links between a particular object and an individual who may have had in their collection East Asian objects that were later publicly owned, will therefore be able to apply the “circumstantial framework” approach of provenance research, as well as examining documents and photographs. The combination of the methodological approach, which starts from the objects in the museums and tries to follow their path, with the “circumstantial framework” approach, where we obtain information about other people who might have acquired these objects, offers increased chances of linking objects of unknown provenance in museums to a particular person. By tracing the biography of “orphaned” East Asian objects, we can thus reconstruct their history and life phases and gain new insight into the cultural openness of the 19th century aristocratic milieu.

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21 I am grateful to Katherine Anne Paul for suggesting this term.

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