

# The Periphery of the Periphery: “Typical” East Asian Objects in Slovenian Households

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## Abstract

On the basis of individual East Asian objects from small Slovenian towns, which were not the subject of the collecting practices in Slovenia organised so far but were in the possession of individuals and used or held in a certain family, we will reconstruct a picture of the cultural and material connections between the Slovenian southwestern municipality Ilirska Bistrica and the East Asian region. We are particularly interested in who their owners were and what kind of East Asian objects they kept in their homes. Can we speak of “typical” East Asian objects in Slovenian households? The subject of this research will mainly be objects from the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, which coincides with the period when the most representative Slovenian collectors, such as Alma Karlin (1889–1950), Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947) and Ivan John Jager (1871–1959), gathered objects that today form the bulk of the East Asian collections in Slovenia.

**Keywords:** East Asian objects, object biography, Japanese export porcelain, postcards, Ivan John Jager, Ivan Valenčič

## Periferija periferije: »tipični« vzhodnoazijski predmeti v slovenskih gospodinjstvih

### Izvleček

Na podlagi posameznih vzhodnoazijskih predmetov iz manjših slovenskih krajev, ki niso bili predmet organiziranega zbiranja, temveč so bili v lasti posameznikov, bomo rekonstruirali sliko kulturnih in materialnih povezav med jugozahodno slovensko občino Ilirsko Bistrico in vzhodnoazijskim prostorom. Še posebej nas bo zanimalo, kdo so bili njihovi lastniki in kakšne vzhodnoazijske predmete so hranili v svojih domovih. Ali lahko govorimo o »tipičnih« vzhodnoazijskih predmetih v slovenskih gospodinjstvih? Raziskava se osredinja predvsem na predmete, ki sodijo v obdobje konca 19. in začetka 20. stoletja, kar sovpada z obdobjem, ko so najbolj reprezentativni slovenski zbiratelji, kot so Alma Karlin (1889–1950), Ivan Skušek mlajši (1877–1947) in Ivan John Jager (1871–1959), zbirali predmete, ki danes predstavljajo glavnino vzhodnoazijskih zbirk v Sloveniji.

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**Ključne besede:** vzhodnoazijski predmeti, biografija predmeta, japonski izvozni porcelan, razglednice, Ivan John Jager, Ivan Valenčič

## Introduction

We have currently identified 21 collections in Slovenia so far, which, alongside individual objects donated to museums by private individuals and those located in Slovenian castles that are still being researched, make up the majority of the East Asian objects in the country (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 97–99). Their bearers were mainly seafarers, travellers, missionaries and diplomats who travelled to Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among them, some of the most significant were the traveller and writer Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950), who travelled the world for eight years, with Japan being one of her most important stops, and brought objects from Asia such as miniature figures of people and animals, models of buildings, musical instruments, souvenirs, Japanese lacquerware, woodblock prints, fans, postcards and other things (Trnovec 2019; Shigemori Bučar and Veselič 2021; Hrvatin 2019); Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947), a high-ranking officer of the Austro-Hungarian cruiser S.M.S. Kaiserin Elisabeth, whose 500 objects of Chinese origin such as furniture, decorative screens, paintings, Buddhist statues, ceramics, porcelain, textiles, musical instruments, coins, books, photographs, albums and many other small everyday objects, today form the largest collection of Chinese objects in Slovenia (Berdajs 2021; Vampelj Suhadolnik 2020); the architect and urban planner Ivan John Jager (1871–1959) who, as a scientific and professional collaborator participated in the rebuilding of the Austro-Hungarian government embassy in Peking in 1901, gathered collection of 300 woodblock prints, textiles, netsukes, tsubas and others.

The period in which the objects arrived in Slovenia coincides with the last two centuries, one of the most significant periods in which Europe became aware of or enthusiastic about both Japanese and Chinese objects due to social and political influences, as well as market dynamics. Unlike the so-called first “programme” collections (Kreiner 2003, 18), which were organised as early as the 1870s, and coincided with the visits of collectors to Japan and the opening up of galleries and the art market for Asian art in the West (with Paris as a very important centre), and ultimately with participation in world exhibitions, the majority of our collections tend to be more or less the type of collecting Kreiner calls “random collecting” (ibid., 31–34), or “collections by chance”, a term that covers the smaller and most numerous collections that were not gathered by dedicated collectors but by travellers who visited distant lands during the period in question. The same is true of small collections donated to museums by sea captains (ibid., 31).

This article aims to provide an insight into a survey attempt on objects of East Asian origin in small towns that were not the subject of an organised form of collecting, let alone one that could be classified as random collecting, but were owned by individuals and used or kept in a particular family, but coincides with the period when the most representative Slovenians brought back their objects mentioned above. Their owners were not collectors themselves, nor sailors, nor in any of the domains of the people who usually brought such objects home. The title “Periphery of the Periphery” symbolically indicates that the objects in question are located outside the former major colonial centres of power and also outside the regional centres such as Ljubljana and Trieste.

The aim of the survey was first to collect and identify the East Asian objects in order to determine which ones dominate or are the most frequently found in households from the late 19th century onwards. Are these objects different from those brought home by travellers, sailors and diplomats during the same period? More importantly, we wanted to gain an insight into the history of the objects: who are or were their owners, what were their professions, education and work, what name had been coined for the object itself, the owner’s stories and discussions about the objects, their provenance, age and description, all which could help reveal the cultural-material connections they point to. At the same time, they could help us gain an insight into the understanding of the East Asian space in the region and reflect on the trade and other possible routes by which the objects came to this site.

The research was carried out in the small town of Ilirska Bistrica and its municipality in the southwestern region of Slovenia. This town is important because of its historical geostrategic position, which could be a possible reason for increased contact with foreigners and, consequently, more exchanges of objects. The research began in 2021 in cooperation with the Culture of Japan programme, organised within the framework of the University for the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica, which has been led by the author of the article since 2014 and which is yet another reason why this town was chosen as a target for the survey. The members of the University for the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica were mainly focused on finding, bringing and finding out about East Asian objects in the district of Ilirska Bistrica, and also being asked about them in the interviews.

Besides the participation of members of the University of the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica, the search for East Asian objects spread to the local community. Thus the target group of the research was divided into (1) members of the

University of the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica<sup>1</sup>, and (2) individuals outside the University of the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica group itself, such as local historians and journalists, retired professors and artists. The author contacted relevant people in the city, whose knowledge and references could lead to collectors or holders of East Asian artefacts, or to gather information on any links between the region and East Asia related to the timeframe of the survey. Thus, Hrvatin conducted interviews with journalists, local historians and people who are well-versed in local history, retired professors, artists, etc., many of whom are or were members of the Association for Local History and Culture of Ilirska Bistrica.<sup>2</sup>

The methodology of the research and retrieval of objects related to the East Asian region was qualitative. The main method used was an in-depth interview. An interview was prepared in advance for each participant in the survey, which provided the interviewer with some basic orientation and a framework for asking questions. Most importantly, Hrvatin also asked about the biographies of the owners of the artefacts: about their parents and profession, and about their work, education and studies. Each participant used his/her networks to create new and further contacts.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 The programme offers a series of lectures on the cultural history, society and art of Japan, and invites participants to take part in discussion. Each year, Hrvatin tries to prepare a programme that best relates to current topics in Japanese Studies and presents current events in Slovenia related to Japanese Studies. Hrvatin is also trying to include them in the projects of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana. For example, in the past two years they have participated in the "European Researchers' Night" (Tomšič and Šajn 2020; UTŽO Ilirska Bistrica 2024).
- 2 The association is the editor of the local historical and cultural publications, *Ilirske teme* (Illyrian themes, with different topics), and *Bistriški zapisi* (Bistrica records, with one central theme), in which the members contribute with papers related also to the fields of history, art history, archaeology, ethnography and ethnology, etc. of municipality of Ilirska Bistrica.
- 3 Another thing that contributed to awareness of the project was the event organised in the local Maksa Samsa Library of Ilirska Bistrica, in cooperation with the *East Asian Collections in Slovenia* project, the library and the University of the Third Age of Ilirska Bistrica, while an exhibition of some of the objects collected by the two target groups of the research took place at the same time (Knjižnica Makse Samsa Ilirska Bistrica n.d.; Knjižnica Makse Samsa Ilirska Bistrica 2022; *Primorske novice* 2022). As part of the *East Asian Collections in Slovenia* project, we also presented the collected objects on the Vitrine starih mam (Grandma's glass cabinets) Facebook page (Vitrine starih mam 2023), where the objects can be regularly posted and commented on, with new information shared and accessible to a wider audience. At the same time, we used both the exhibition and the Facebook page to invite the citizens of Ilirska Bistrica to collect and share information about possible East Asian objects, memories or stories related to the aforementioned topic. To make even more citizens aware of the VAZ project and the research on Chinese, Japanese and Korean objects, we also published the call and the current activities of the project in the Ilirska Bistrica municipal online portal and in the local newspaper *Bistriški odmevi* (*Bistrica Echoes*) (*Bistriški odmevi* 2024), which every household in the municipality receives monthly.

This article will first present the region of Ilirska Bistrica, which was used as a target for the survey, and then try to point out the crucial aspects of the history of the municipality that could relate to the paths of the East Asian objects arriving here, emphasising its history around the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries when the objects entered the country. All the collected objects, as well as their quantity and the path of their arrival, will be described next. Especially two of the most common and numerous groups of objects that show interesting data—Japanese export porcelain and pottery, dating from the first half of the 20th century and later, and postcards from the 1900s. Consideration will be made of how the objects entered the Slovenian environment of a particular family and how the area was connected to the East Asian world.

### **Ilirska Bistrica—the Small Town in the Southwestern Region of Slovenia that is the Target of the Survey**

The survey was conducted in the small town of Ilirska Bistrica and its surroundings (fig. 1), which lies on the edge of the Reka Valley. The municipality covers 480 km<sup>2</sup> and has about 14,500 inhabitants (Geocaching 2000–2024). The settlement developed along the Reka (Fiume) River, which was of great economic importance as people were able to build mills and sawmills here. The timber trade, agriculture, charcoal, ice and hay production were also important (ibid.). The end of the 19th century saw rapid economic and social development. In 1896 a dairy was founded in Ilirska Bistrica, at the time in the region of Carniola, and in 1899 the first pasta factory—the Pekatete factory was established. The development of education was also very important for the town, from the first folk school, which was founded in 1814, to the convent of the Sisters of Notre Dame, which operated a girls' school from 1888. Numerous associations were also founded during this time. Ilirska Bistrica is known for having a reading society as early as 1864, one of the first in Slovenia, and the third branch of the Slovenian Sokol gymnastic organisation (Orel gymnastic section) in Carniola, founded in 1867 (ibid.).

First mentioned in written sources as Bistrica in 1300, it changed its name frequently. In the time of the Austro-Hungarian state, which falls within the time scope of the research, Emperor Franz Jožef I granted the town market rights in 1911, which put it on a par with the large towns in Carniola and Istria and had a significant influence on the further development of the town (*Bistriški odmevi* 2011; Dolničar 2019). Between 1918 and 1946, the area of what is now Ilirska Bistrica fell under the Kingdom of Italy. In their eagerness to Italianise the place

names, the Italians first changed Bistrica to Bisterza and in 1927, it merged with the neighbouring village of Trnovo (or Torrenovo) under the fictitious name Villa del Nevoso (a place under Snežnik). Italy's capitulation in 1943 was followed by the German occupation of the region, which lasted until 1945. After the Second World War, it was given the name Ilirska Bistrica again and became a town in 1952 (ibid.).

The city has a strategically interesting location, serving as a link between central Slovenia and the Adriatic Sea. As early as Roman times, the *viae vicinales* road ran through Ilirska Bistrica, connecting Postojna and Rupa, where it joined the *viae itineraiae* road linking Aquileia with Rijeka (Rustja 2003, 7). This link served as an important source of income for the present-day town, initially through cargo transport on mules, donkeys and horses, then by supporting horse-drawn carriages (transportation services) and finally the transport industry (Kocjančič 2023, 703; Kirn Vodopivec 2019a). Its geostrategic position led the place to become an important garrison town during the Second World War. The southern section of the Vienna-Trieste railway line built in 1873, the Pivka-Reka railway, was also important for its development, including its development into a market town, which also benefited the bourgeois class. At the beginning of the 20th century, the place flourished as "it was economically very developed at that time, and was an important centre between Rijeka, Trieste and Ljubljana. In addition to mills and sawmills, trade was also very developed" (Kirn Vodopivec 2019b). "There were ten shops here in our district alone. In the house next door to Kakež, there was Čenar's shop, in Plac there was Šket's shop, the Hodnik family had a drugstore, the Milostnik family had a tailor's shop, behind the firemen's house there was Hreščak's shop, and the Verbič family had two shops. There were also many taverns and two bakeries. There was a lot of trading with flour" (Janez Ličan in Kirn Vodopivec 2019a). All of these facts were interesting in the current context as they could be significant in terms of the possible routes through which East Asian objects came into the possession of people from the region or a possible reason for more contact with foreigners.



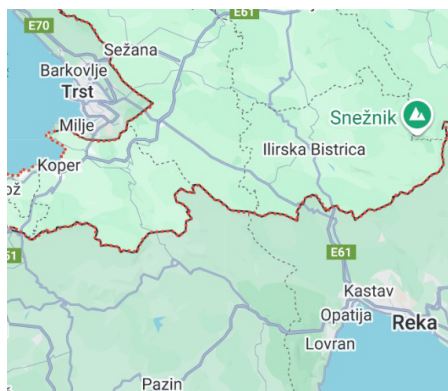


Figure 1a. Map of the area of Ilirska Bistrica, which is located near Italy (city of Trieste/Trst) and Croatia (city of Rijeka/Reka). (Source: <https://zemljevid.e-informacije.com/>)



Figure 1b. Location of the municipality of Ilirska Bistrica in Slovenia. (Source: Wikipedia n.d.)



Figure 2a. Images of the city Ilirska Bistrica on postcards from the turn of the century and later: the Hotel Tomšič around 1906. (Source: *kamra* 2011)

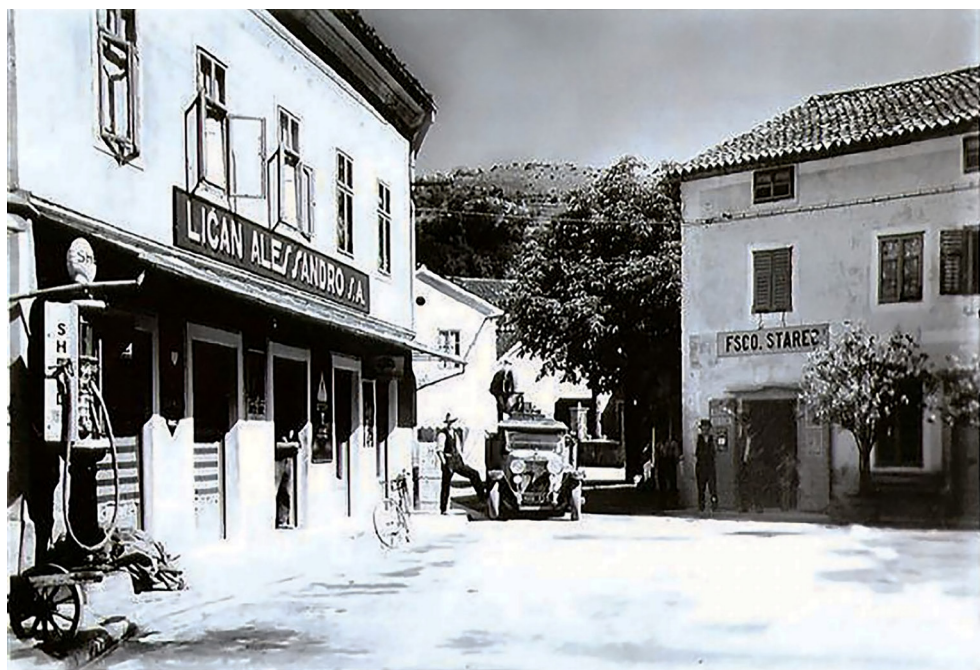


Figure 2b. The Ličan store in 1932. (Source: Dolničar 2019)

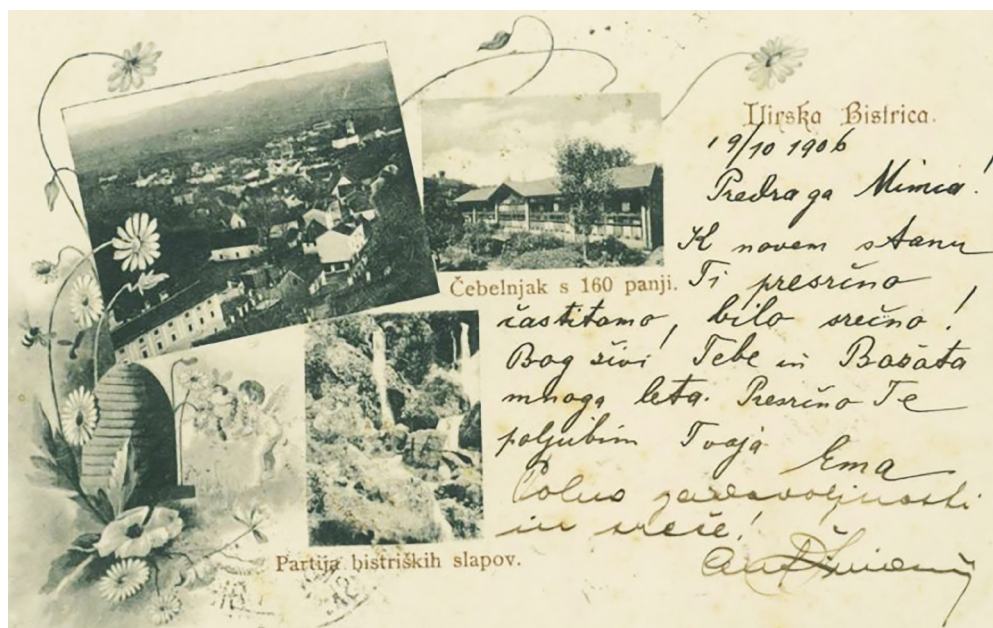


Figure 2c. Motifs from Ilirska Bistrica such as the Sušec waterfall and apiary with beehives from 1906. (Source: Pokrajinski muzej Koper 2015)





Figure 2d. Black and white postcard and a Sale e tabacchi. (Source: Geocaching 2000–2024)



Figure 2e. Coloured postcard<sup>4</sup>, “Greetings from Ilirska Bistrica” (in Italian “Saluti da Villa del Nevoso”) from around 1930. (Source: Wikimedia n.d.)

4 Black and white postcard with hand-coloured floral motives. Postcards of this kind were popular in all major towns belonging to the newly formed province of Rijeka at the time and all major towns in the newly formed province of Rijeka had them and aimed especially for Italian soldiers who inhabited Yugoslav-Italian border.

## Collected Objects: “Typical” East Asian Objects?

For a quantitative evaluation of the survey, the following table (Table 1) shows the number of owners, the objects found in the survey and their number, with a brief note on how the object came to be in the Slovenian environment. The table only presents respondents who actually own the objects, most of whom are at least the second owners of the objects. At least a third of the respondents actually keep the East Asian object in their homes. However, it should be noted that the survey excluded owners with properties dating back to later than the first half of the 20th century.

The table shows that those who own Asian objects tend to have more objects in general. In particular, it is clear that the dominant objects in the holdings are either coffee and tea services or individual porcelain or ceramic pieces, with some of the latter owning multiple services. Other East Asian objects found through the survey include Japanese rice paper wallets, Chinese paintings, embroidered handkerchiefs, handmade wooden *kokeshi* dolls, decorative sticks, postcards from Japan and Chinese paper money.

In addition to porcelain and ceramics, another important category of objects that will be focused on and presented in the research are postcards, which are closely linked to the region thanks to a then-important personality present in East Asia at the turn of the 20th century.

Table 1. Articles Collected during the Survey and their Paths of Arrival in their Present Household.

Owners	Objects	Pieces	Route of arrival
1	a saucer	1	railway (father worked on the railway)
	a plate	1	railway (father worked on the railway)
	rice paper wallet	1	railway (father worked on the railway)
	a small cup	1	railway (father worked on the railway)
2	a teacup with a lithophane of a geisha	3	inheritance (gifted to the mother of the owner)
	Chinese paintings	3	gifted to the owner
3	coffee service	17	inheritance (sister's husband was a merchant)
	souvenirs from mariners	1	gift (the owner's brother was a mariner)
4	coffee service	11	shop owners with 100 years of tradition
	tea service	6	shop owners with 100 years of tradition
5	postcards	12	family connection with Ivan Jager

Owners	Objects	Pieces	Route of arrival
	a Japanese calligraphy brush	1	family connection with Ivan Jager?
6	a Japanese vase	1	purchase of the item by the owner abroad
7	postcards	4	postcard collector
	Chinese paper money	1	postcard collector
8	a wooden doll <i>kokeshi</i>	1	gifted by a Japanese
	decorative chopsticks	1	gifted by a Japanese
	an embroidered handkerchief	1	gifted by a Japanese
9	coffee service	9	war confiscation
	tea service	8	war confiscation
10	coffee service	13	inheritance (relatives were shop owners)
11	a coffee cup	1	inheritance (from the owner's mother)
	a coffee cup saucer	1	inheritance (from the owner's mother)

### *Japanese Export Porcelain from the First Half of the 20th Century*


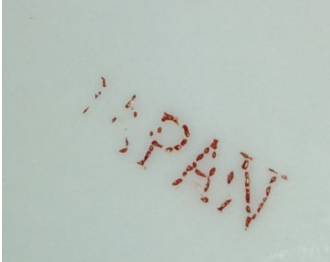
The survey showed that in most cases, the most common type of East Asian object that people from the municipality of Ilirska Bistrica kept in their homes was Japanese porcelain. In some cases, there were only a few pieces that were leftovers from whole sets, such as a saucer or a plate, maybe from larger coffee or tea sets, while the other parts had been broken or lost, but in many cases there were more or less complete sets.

Among the non-set pieces (Table 1), for example, we can find a small colourful Thousand Faces design saucer (with the fan logo above which, right to left, there is the mark *Dai Nippon* (大日本) or Great Japan in English and the mark *Abe* (阿部) written under the logo); small cup with the *Dai Nippon* (大日本) mark, a hand-coloured plate with three figures in kimonos with the mark *Japan*; three Kutani lithophane cups, or cups with a picture of the face of an oriental woman impressed in the porcelain (phoenix bird design) without a mark on the cup but with the mark *Japan* on the saucer (figs. 3 and 4); a vase in a style of Satsuma with motives of Kannon with Rakan, with the *Made in Japan* sign.

Among the larger sets, i.e. the two tea and three coffee sets, the “Satsuma appearance” or Satsuma-style Japanese export porcelain with *moriage* 盛り上げ (the

layering of small beads or lines of slip clay (thick liquid clay)<sup>5</sup> placed onto the surface of the cups and mugs by hand to produce a three-dimensional effect) are most common (figs. 5 and 6). After glazing, it produces a significant relief and the beads or lines are then painted in different colours. That adds to the object's overall design, which is more decorative and colourful than more solemnly painted pieces. Japan started to produce this decorative technique at the end of the 19th century reflecting Western preferences. Over time, its styles and materials have changed.<sup>6</sup> The general name for this style is Kyoto Satsuma or decorated Satsuma-style porcelain. If we compare it with true Satsuma ware, they are not as detailed, but simplified and moriage applied with a slip serves as a part of their decoration (Nilsson 1998-2023b).





Table 2. Articles—Porcelain and Ceramic Collected in the Survey in the Municipality of Ilirska Bistrica




Objects	Number of items	Marks	
a saucer	1	Dai Nippon i Abe (大日本 イ 阿部)	
a plate (larger)	1	Japan	




5 The raised parts of the moriage were often added to the pottery using a technique known as slop-work. The mixing of clay with water was inserted into a mould and then added to the item before the firing process (Satsuma Pottery 2009).

6 At the end of the 20th century, this technique was developed by the Chinese porcelain industry using bright enamels on a porcelain base, combined with raised gilded slip enamels (Nilsson 1998-2023b).



Objects	Number of items	Marks	
a small cup	1	Dai Nippon (大日本)	
a teacup – geisha litho- phone cup with a saucer	3	Japan	
coffee service	11	I Abe (イ 阿部)	
tea service	6	I Abe (イ 阿部)	

Objects	Number of items	Marks	
Japanese vase	1	Made in Japan	
coffee service	9	Dai Nippon (大日本)	
tea service	10	Dai Nippon sa Saitō (大日本 サ 斉藤)	
coffee service	17	Dai Nippon (大日本)	

Objects	Number of items	Marks	
a coffee cup saucer	1	Made in Japan (⊕九二)	
a coffee cup	1	Made in Japan (⊕九二)	
coffee service	13	Dai Nippon (大日本)	

Moriage is also a commonly used feature on dragon ware, as is the case on the white-gold tea set (figs. 7 and 8) with the mother and child motive. Dragon ware has a characteristic or heavily stylized relief design, a dragon form moulding built up using fine layers of slip clay, making a deep relief of the dragon that curls around the outside of the upper part and merges with the jug lid. The dragon ware is then usually painted in bright colours with scenes or images of Japanese life, as can be seen in the example (figs. 7 and 8). Although first produced in the late 19th century during the Meiji period in 1868–1912, when Japan opened its borders to foreign trade and began exporting its goods to the West, it is still popular today, being made and exported to different parts of the world (Nilsson 1998–2023b).



Figures 3 and 4. A Kutani lithophane cup with a phoenix bird design. (Source: Owned by Ivanka Mikuletič. Photo by Klara Hrvatin)



Figures 5 and 6. A Satsuma-style moriage coffee set with floral design. (Source: Owned by Marija Gaberšnik. Photo by Klara Hrvatin)

Most of the surveyed porcelain ware has the *Dai Nippon* (Great Japan) mark in Japanese characters (大日本), which is generally accepted to date from the Meiji period (1868–1912). Some sources claim that these wares were also mass-produced for export during the Taisho (1913–1926) and early Showa (1926–1988) periods (Nilsson 1998–2023c). Still, the label also suggests that the pieces could date as late as 1940 as stamped versions of the label could have been used on mass-produced export wares well into the 1930s (ibid.; Nilsson 1998–2023a). From the period of 1891 to about 1921, pieces were (required to be) marked with the word *Nippon*, while they were later replaced with the mark *Japan* or *Made in Japan*. The mark *Abe* 阿部 written right to left under the fan logo and *Dai Nippon* probably relate to the Taisho period (Blue Cherry Antiques n.d.), but details on this mark could not be found. It probably represents its maker or



even merchant. The same goes for the mark *Dai Nippon sa Saitō* (大日本 サ 齊藤) (fig. 9). The *Made in Japan* mark in a circle printed in red, with a Shimazu crest in its centre and the number 九二 (92) could indicate the inter-war or early post-war period (ibid.).



Figure 7. White-gold tea set with a stylized dragon figure. (Source: Owned by Snežana Dekleva. Photo by Klara Hrvatin)



Figure 8. A saucer with a mother and child design. (Source: Owned by Snežana Dekleva. Photo by Klara Hrvatin)



Figure 9. Mark on the tea set—*Dai Nippon sa Saitō* (大日本 サ 齊藤). (Photo by Klara Hrvatin)

Therefore, the oldest item could possibly date from the early 20th century, but for most of the pieces, it has been concluded that they are ordinary porcelains made for export to Europe and the US in the 1930s, probably in Nagoya or Yokohama (Filip Suchomel, message to the author, February 13, 2022). The mark *Dai Nippon I Abe* 大日本 イ 阿部 found on a single saucer is not clear, but it could be a sign of a porcelain producer from one of the above-mentioned places (ibid.). None of the surveyed items can be said to be of great quality. Many similar objects were available in the special “orient shops” (ibid.) in central Europe and we can buy them easily at antique markets even today.

### *Ownership and the Stories Behind the Japanese Ware*

Interestingly, most of the owners of the earliest examples of Japanese export ware in the survey were either the owners of storehouses where porcelain was sold or were related to such owners and (mainly) inherited the sets (Marija Gaberšnik, interview with the author, 26 January 2022; Janez Ličan, interview with the author, 9 February 2022; Antonija Šircelj, interview with the author, 27 January 2023). Below, we can read the story of a Japanese coffee service, acquired by its present owner's aunt, who owned a shop in Gorizia in the first half of the 20th century.

A coffee service made of Japanese or Chinese porcelain was brought back from Gorizia (Italia) by my aunt in 1940. The service was sold in a porcelain store, which unfortunately went bankrupt, and my aunt was lucky enough to save it from the robbers and bring it to Dobropolje near Ilirska Bistrica.

This service had a special place in our kitchen cupboard. It was stacked on the top shelf behind a glass door. It was never used. As a child, I was not allowed to pick up these cups. It was cleaned twice a year by my mother or my aunt, at Easter and Christmas. They washed them in a little water with a drop of vinegar, placed them on a clean tablecloth and wiped them with a soft cloth.

The service travelled with our family. It ended up in an apartment in Rijeka in a beautiful glass display case, but even here it was very well guarded and never used. After my aunt died in 1998, it came back to me in Ilirska Bistrica, where I have lived since I finished high school. Unfortunately, I do not have a suitable display case, and for fear of damaging the porcelain, I keep the individual bowls wrapped in paper in a box.

I have very fond memories of this service from my childhood, when I was only allowed to admire these bowls but not touch them. When I was little, I would pull a chair up to the credenza, stand on it and admire the motifs on the cups. I always did that when I was alone at home and I will never forget it. The family was afraid that I would break something and they scolded me every time I went near the credenza. (Antonija Šircelj, in an interview with the author, 27 January 2023)

In some cases, the owners of the objects are the direct owners of the store, a family tradition continuing for hundreds of years. This is the case for one owner of Japanese porcelain coffee and tea sets, whose family business continues to this

day. “My father had a wholesale and retail business and supplied small stores with groceries while importing items from Italy. He also sold porcelain and hardware” (Janez Ličan, interview with the author, 9 February 2022). Another possible way was that the owner received the sets through his mother’s brother (Joško Kregar), who was a captain in the navy (*ibid.*), which shows that sometimes the owners were not sure where the items came from.

They mostly come from middle-class families and families whose members were professionally better placed for the acquisition of objects. In one case, for example, we know that an object came into the family thanks to the father’s service on the railroad in Pivka (Ilonka Pipan, an interview with the author, 26 January 2022). Again, one of the most interesting stories is the case of the moriage porcelain (figs. 7 and 8), which, based on oral sources, is thought to have come into the household or to have been inherited as a result of war loot presumably from one of the Slovenian castles (Dekleva Snežana, an interview with the author, 30 April 2022). The family did not distinguish between Chinese and Japanese porcelain, calling the service “Chinese something”, “Chinese service” or “that kitsch” (*ibid.*).

The service (coffee and tea service) was allegedly confiscated from the Germans by the Partisans. My father lived in Brezovica (central Slovenia) with my aunt and he gave it to my aunt. He was a Partisan in the Brkini area, from the Vipava Valley. They captured some Germans who were supposed to have robbed a castle in Slovenia. The aunt in Brezovica was afraid to have this service in her home. When her father introduced her girlfriend (the mother of the current owner of the garage), she immediately handed the service over to her. (*Ibid.*)

Each object has its own story, which will be analysed further in detail. We can conclude that the ways in which the objects entered the country are varied and indicate the historical-political connection of the Ilirska Bistrica area at the time. Through the biography of an object, we can observe the individuality and intimacy of both the object and its owner, as well as the relationship of the object to the “public politics” of the time (Drazin 2020, 72). The specificity of the area of Ilirska Bistrica in the first half of the 20th century, the period to which most of the export ware has been dated, is specific and shows the attachment of the area to Italy (at the time, the Kingdom of Italy), as is also evident in the trajectories of objects coming from there. Perhaps the most revealing evidence of this is the story of the moriage of a flower-decorated coffee service (figs. 5 and 6) that came to us from Italy, and there is also a story related to the object itself that describes

the situation in the Ilirska Bistrica region at the time. The owner of the object explained that the service was inherited by his mother from her sister, the present owner's aunt, who lived close to Lake Garda. During the Second World War, the aunt fell in love with one of the Italian soldiers positioned in the region. She left for Italy. The Italian soldier left his army job after the war and became a merchant. The service belonged to the aunt, but after her death, the present owner inherited it as the aunt did not have any descendants (Marija Gaberšnik, an interview with the author, 26 January 2022).

The handling of the objects shows a similar attitude towards all the owners. Porcelain was most often enclosed in a vitrine or a box and stored separately in a cellar or in the household, only taken out and washed for the main feasts, while being handled with care so as not to damage it.

*Early 20th Century Postcards Revealing Ivan Valenčič of the Ilirska Bistrica Sever Family and His Relationship with Ivan-John Jager (1871–1959)*

Among the postcards we found in the region, an interesting acquaintance and friendship between Ivan Valenčič (1871–1954) of the Sever family ("Severjevi"), one of the richest families in Ilirska Bistrica, then in an independent settlement called Trnovo, with the Slovenian architect Ivan Jager, later John Jager, was particularly valuable.<sup>7</sup> Jager, one of the most important Slovenian collectors and architects, as well as a critic, philosopher and pioneer of horticulture, spent most of his life in Minnesota and is considered one of the responsible figures in the planning of the city of Minneapolis (Kambič 1999; Tehniški Muzej Slovenije 2022). Crucially for this story, he travelled to Asia in the early 20th century, as he was tasked with restoring the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Beijing, which had been destroyed by the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901). He also travelled to Japan, which was to have a great influence on his work as an architect. He was described as one of the first to succeed in creating "a synthesis of Eastern and Western architectural traditions" (Pajsar 2005, 117). His fascination with Asia is also reflected in his avid collection of objects related to Japan and China (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021, 106–07). The Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU) holds part of his collection of East Asian objects, which includes around 300 woodcuts, books with woodcuts, textiles—Chinese embroidery, netsuke statues and sword handles (Hrvatín 2020, 73–74; Pirnat-Spahić and Koman 2005).

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7 For Jager's rich history of writing postcards from Asia (mainly to his fiancée Selma Erhovnic), see Shigemori Bučar and Veselič (2021, 69–85).

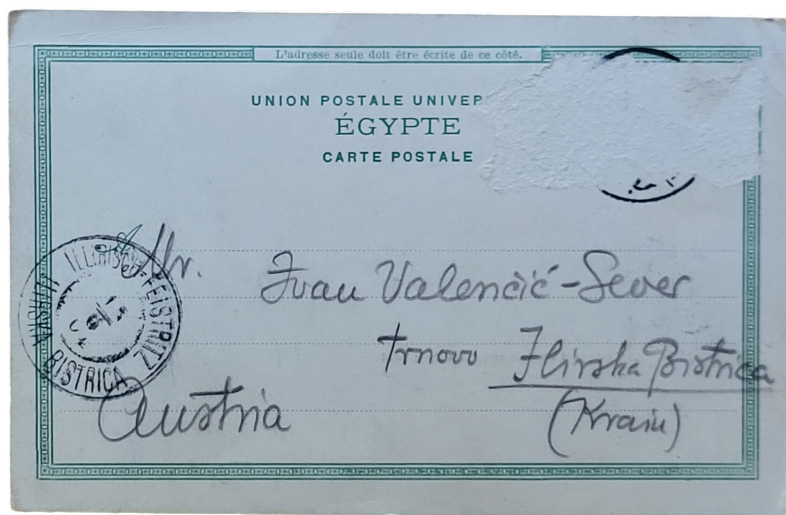


Ivan Valenčič, an Austro-Hungarian reserve officer and landowner, was closely associated with Ivan Jager. From 1886 to 1892, both attended the Realka in Ljubljana, one of the first of eighteen Realkas in the Hapsburg Monarchy. They were also both members of the Sloga student association, which advocated Pan-Slavism (Ivan Valenčič Jr. (grandson of Ivan Valenčič), interview with the author, 3 September 2023; Šlenc 2014, 111). The result of their close bond and friendship can be seen in Jager's design for the Sever family's furniture and dining room, which chronologically and stylistically follows Jager's first independent work—the interior design of the Narodna kavarna (National coffeehouse) on Dvorni trg in Ljubljana—as well as in the reconstruction of the Severs' house and outbuildings in 1898 (Valenčič 2005). Jager also designed a plan for a dairy in Ilirska Bistrica, which he drew up in 1900 and which was realised in 1907.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Valenčič tried to help Jager in times of financial hardship, and as such he is also mentioned in relation to Jager as a “patron” of his early, rare works, which he created while still in Slovenia (Valenčič 2014, 122–52).

Their close relationship is reflected in their correspondence in the years when their friendship was at its closest, up until the First World War. The Sever family received regular correspondence—long letters and postcards from Jager, including during his trip to Asia, which took place from June to December 1901 (Koman 2017, 64–65). We know that he travelled to China in 1901 and stayed in Beijing from August to December 1901, having then travelled on to the United States, visiting Japan on the way. In his own biography, he describes this journey as foolhardy:

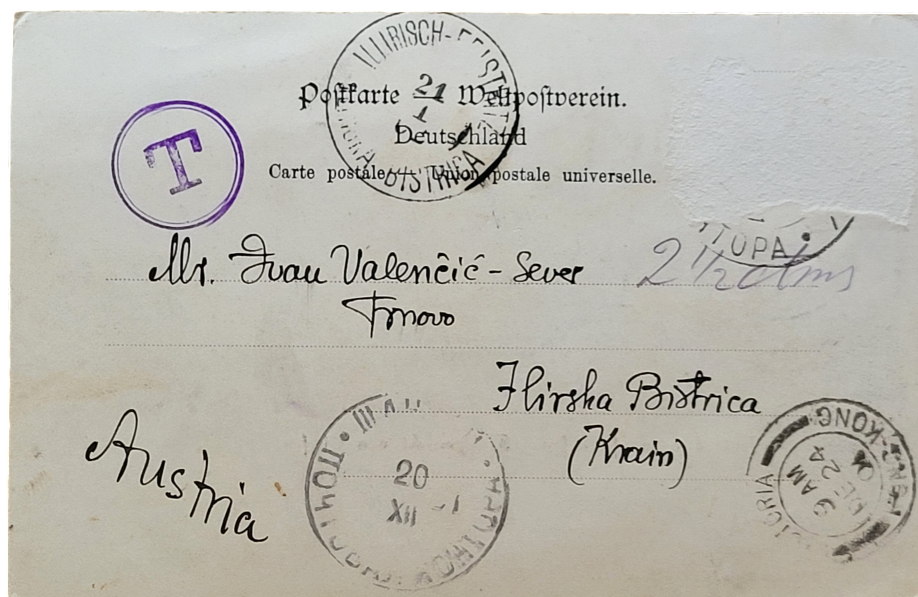
One of my extraordinary journeys of exploration took me via the Mediterranean, Egypt, India, the Straits of Malacca, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai to Beijing, where I was commissioned to carry out an architectural renovation with the help of a large number of domestic servants (1901). After completing the work, I travelled through Japan (Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama and Tokyo) and did some useful research before travelling across the Pacific to the United States ... (cited in Pajsar 2005, 400–01)

8 The facade of the now abandoned building still bears evidence of the founding of the dairy cooperative in 1896 (Valenčič 2014, 153; Šajn 2014).



Figures 10 and 11. A postcard from Ivan Jager's trip to China sent to Ivan Valenčič, dated June 9, 1901, from Port Said. (Source: Family estate of Ivan Valenčič Jr.<sup>9</sup> Photo by Klara Hrvatin)

9 In the Slovenian language: "Do semkaj srečno prispel. Vse dobro. Vožnja je prelepa. Port-Said je znamenito mesto. Arabci tulijo človeku v ušesa, da bi kmalu oglušil. – Zato ti ne morem pisati v tej priliki, ko sem zadržimo samo par ur obširneje. Srčne vsem osobito tebi pozdrave tvoj Ivan Jager [Happily arrived here. All the best. The journey is beautiful. Port Said is a celebrated city. The Arabs are howling in this man's ears, so I might soon go deaf. – That's why I can't write to you on this occasion, but will write in more detail when we stop for at least a few hours. Warm greetings to all, especially to you, your Ivan Jager.]" (Postcard from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič, 9 June 1901 (family estate of Ivan Valenčič Jr.)).



Figures 12 and 13. Postcard from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič on his way to Shanghai, written on 17 December 1901, issued by the publishing house of H. Sietas & Co. Chefoo (routed via Victoria, Hong Kong on December 24, 1901). (Source: Family estate of Ivan Valenčič Jr. Photo by Klara Hrvatin)



During the research, 12 postcards were found in the possession of the Valenčič family, including some that tell us more about Jager's journey to Asia. One is dated 9 June 1901, and was sent from Port Said (figs. 10 and 11).<sup>10</sup> Another was sent from Hong Kong (figs. 12 and 13) on his way to Shanghai, later that year (on 24 December 1901), with a view of the port city of Yantai (formerly Chefoo). Ivan Jager wrote: "Srčne pozdrave tebi in gospej soprogi v vsej naglici. V treh dneh sem v Shanhaju. Od tam naznanim ti svoj novi naslov. Tvoj Ivan Jager [Hearty but quick greetings to you and your wife. I will be in Shanghai in three days. From there I will inform you of my new address. Yours sincerely, Ivan Jager]" (Postcard from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič, 17 December 1901 (family estate of Ivan Valenčič Jr.)). This last was probably written on his travels shortly before he left Asia for the United States, before which he visited Japan.

The objects that Jager sent to the Sever family during his journey to Asia also play a decisive role in the research presented here. Valenčič Jr. remembers that there were many interesting objects in their house that were supposedly sent to them by Jager. Since the shipments were very expensive, Valenčič Jr. suspected that they were really good friends and that his grandfather really appreciated the things that were sent to them (Ivan Valenčič Jr., interview with the author, 3 September 2023). When Valenčič married (in 1901), Jager was travelling in Asia and sent the family a coffee service from Calcutta (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup> Among the objects that Valenčič still keeps in his house, though he is not sure they were sent by Jager, are some vases, Japanese brushes, Chinese figurative objects and other souvenirs (Valenčič 2005). Accordingly, Ivan Valenčič recalls that there were many other items that Jager sent to the family, such as a large amount of ceramics, porcelain, textiles and items made of bamboo, which the family used and that were later worn out and discarded (Ivan Valenčič Jr., interview with the author, 3 September 2023). Further evidence of Jager's shipments of East Asian objects can also be found in the message from Yokohama (figs. 14 and 15), in which Jager sends two Cloisonné vases to Valenčič as a wedding gift.

Dear Ivan! I wish you a Happy New Year. To you and to your wife, I send here two Cloisonné vases, the most beautiful pieces of this exquisite metal and glazing technique. I have visited the factory. Everything is made and cast by hand. Our world has too steady a hand for anything like this. They work without preliminary drawing—just like a fantasy. I couldn't send you anything from Beijing as a wedding present. Please accept this.

10 There also exist postcards from Singapore, Tianjin and Yokohama (Ivan Valenčič Jr., in conversation with the author, 3 September 2023), which were also in their family's possession, but were donated to the Museum of Architecture and Design in Ljubljana and are permanently housed there.

11 The service was probably imported from England, as it bears a mark from Doulton Burslem (England), makers of earthenware, stoneware and porcelain, which was used as a mark between 1891 and 1901, which was a rather unusual wedding gift at the time.



From America, an extensive letter. Tomorrow I go to sea for 17 days. My address from 30 January onwards: Ivan Jager, architect, Minneapolis, 1410 8th South Minn. U. S. America. All the best. Greetings to all. Ivan Jager. (Postcard from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič, January 9, 1902 (kept at the Museum of Architecture and Design))<sup>12</sup>

Unsuccessful attempts were made to find the two vases among the items Valenčič Jr. suggested were sent by Jager, although the possibility of finding them in the future cannot yet be ruled out.



Figures 14 and 15. Message from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič from Yokohama, written on January 9, 1902, together with a wedding gift of two Cloisonné vases, written on the inner side of the lid of the shipping box. (Source: Museum of Architecture and Design (MAO). Photo by Klara Hrvatin)

12 The original text is as following: »Dragi Ivan! Želim ti srečno novo leto. Tebi in g. soprogi Tvoji pošiljam tu dve cloisonne-vazi, najlepše stroke te imenitne metalne in glazurne tehnike. Oglelal sem si fabriko. Vse delano in uleženo z roko. Naš svet ima preokorno roko za kaj tacega. Delajo brez risanje – kar tako iz fantazije. Nisem ti mogel iz Pekinga ničesar poslati za ženitovanjsko darilo. Blagovoli le-to vsprejeti. Iz Amerike obširno pismo. Jutri grem na morje za 17 dni. Moj naslov od 30. januarja nadalje: Ivan Jager, architect, Minneapolis, 1410 8th South Minn. U. S. America. Vse dobro inace! Srečne Tebi, vsem pozdrave Ivan Jager (Postcard from Ivan Jager to Ivan Valenčič, January 9, 1902 (kept at Museum of Architecture and Design)).

## Conclusion

The survey *The Periphery of the Periphery* has proven successful in establishing detailed object biographies: who the owners were, how they acquired the object and how the objects were treated. These subjectivities of the object were crucial for finding out how the objects were domesticated once they entered Slovenian households and what kind of understanding of the East Asian space existed at that time, as well as to uncover the possible routes the objects had taken.

The survey revealed that the most typical of the East Asian objects found in the Slovenian households of the Ilirska Bistrica area, then under Italian occupation, are Japanese porcelain and ceramics, dating from the early 20th century through to the 1930s. Most of the pieces are ordinary wares that were intended for export to Europe and the USA in the 1930s and were probably made in Nagoya or Yokohama. The most notable are the Satsuma-style coffee and tea sets, which are characterised by the moriage decoration technique in which clay is finely and delicately layered over the object. Satsuma-style export ware was one of the most popular styles at the time. It was characterised by low quality and was intended for the European and American markets, so it also found its way to Slovenia.

The objects show interesting and various paths of arrival in Slovenia. As expected, the geopolitical position of Ilirska Bistrica at the beginning of the 20th century, its connection with Trieste conditioned by the connection with the railway, and above all the occupation by Italy influenced the exchange and routes of the objects. People with higher status had more chance of getting the objects, especially, according to the research, traders and shop owners, or people directly or indirectly related to them. The stories of the objects show that in many cases, their owners did not know what the objects were or where they came from, even though they were well used, served as a dowry, a gift or as part of an inheritance and thus passed down from generation to generation. They were usually very well preserved in a display case (as they still are today in many cases), where they served as objects of admiration, or as “exotic” objects suggesting something “distant” and “unknown”.

The oldest objects in the survey—postcards, which are also worthy of mention, but cannot be called typical, date from the time when Bistrica was under Austro-Hungarian rule. They reveal the lifelong friendship between the local citizen Ivan Valenčič, an Austro-Hungarian reserve officer and wealthy landowner, and the renowned architect Ivan Jager, a contemporary of Max Fabijani and one of the prominent Slovenian collectors of Japanese art, whose early work can also be seen in Ilirska Bistrica. The postcards reveal their kinship, which also testify to Jager’s travels to China and Japan, and point to the wealth of East Asian objects that he was sending to the Valenčič family. This part of the research opens new chapters

in the collection and acquisition of East Asian artefacts in Slovenia, which was initiated by the patronage, and although the artefacts were probably not numerous and have not survived to the present day, it shows that wealthy individuals, even in smaller towns, were very well informed and aware of what was happening in Asia.

In this way, the results of the survey show a certain dichotomy between the objects that ordinary people kept in their daily lives, mainly porcelain and ceramics imported from Japan in the 1930s, which were of lower quality and cannot be compared to the type and variety of objects that personalities such as Alma Karlin, Ivan Skušek Jr. and Ivan Jager presented in the introduction (and which today have found their place in the most important Slovenian museums); however, at the same time, the postcards from the 1900s testify to a close connection and exchange of prestigious objects with Ivan Jager, which were the result of the friendship and sponsorship of Jager by the landlord Valenčič.

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