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Objects and Ideas from Japan: Through the Research on East Asian Collections in Slovenia

Abstract: The project „East Asian Collections in Slovenia“, started in July, 2018. In cooperation with national and regional museums and libraries, various collections and individual materials were examined in order to reconstruct the intercultural connections between the Slovene and East Asian territories.

Research on artefacts and written materials from Japan and about Japan showed:

- that between the 1890s and 1910s, many Austro-Hungarian navy members of higher middle-class background from the Slovenian ethnic region experienced Japan and East Asia on their missions;
- In the Taishō period, Alma Karlin, adventurer and journalist, stayed in Tokyo for a year and visited many religious and touristic sites. She also had special ethnological interests in Japanese culture.
- For the travellers with not very abundant financial means, there were certain types of „souvenirs“. Japan was eager to reproduce such souvenirs for foreign (western) visitors in the Meiji and Taishō periods.

Keywords: East-West exchanges, objects and ideas from Japan, Slovenia, Meiji, Taishō

Introduction

In the framework of our project in the Department of Asian Studies in Ljubljana, „East Asian Collections in Slovenia: Inclusion of Slovenia in the Global Exchanges of Objects and Ideas with East Asia“ from 2018 to 2021¹, we have conducted research

¹ Lead by Dr. Vampelj Suhadolnik (Chinese Studies and Art History specialist), Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

on East Asian collections and individual materials found in today's Slovenia. The theoretical part of our project is to identify the position and role of the collectors in the Slovenian region in relation to similar collections in the surrounding countries. The project team was composed of Chinese, Japanese and Korean-studies specialists.

Slovenia is a region that has long been on the political periphery: First within the Habsburg monarchy, and later as one of the founding nations of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Slovenia had little political or administrative power (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021: 7).

Fig. 1 is a map of Austria-Hungary in 1911 on which we see the purple color where the Slovenian people resided.

*Fig. 1: Historical Atlas by William R. Shepherd, 1911
(wikipedia:Image:Austria_hungary_1911.jpg)*



Most of the objects of East Asian origin were left as legacies of various people who travelled to China or Japan in the late 19th and early 20th century, as a result of Austria-Hungary's diplomatic relations with East Asia since 1869. In the last decades of the 19th century, a growing number of Austro-Hungarian merchant- and military-ships headed for East Asia. People from the Slovenian ethnic region also sailed on these ships. Table 1 below outlines the political and historical periods of the Slovenian nation on one side, and Japan on the other.

Some individual objects brought to the Slovenian territory found their way into museums already in the 19th century, but most of the larger collections entered Slovenian museums after the deaths of their owners in the 1950s and 60s. With few exceptions, the collections were mostly put into storage, and slept in depots and attics, forgotten by museum curators and academic scholars. They also lack detailed object records, information on their provenance, and accurate identification and categorisation. The socio-political circumstances in Slovenia during the 20th century, with two world wars and the establishment of four different states, further contributed to the period of oblivion for the East Asian objects. This often led to the loss of the history surrounding individual collectibles (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021: 7-8). Our project now tries to catch up in identifying, analysing and categorising objects from East Asia, and further explore the social and historical background of the East-West exchanges, with individual stories of the people who were involved in these exchanges. With our research activities, the specific position of a small nation in Central Europe becomes visible in the history of Euro-Asian exchanges.

In this paper, I limit the focus on Japanese objects and ideas found in today's Slovenia, mainly on the basis of exchanges up to the 1930s. I would also briefly introduce some objects and ideas obtained in later years, up to the 1960s, and in conclusion mention our activities in the context of the on going research.

Table 1: Slovenia and Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries

Austria-Hungary until 1918	Meiji 1868 - 1913
WW1 1914 - 1918	
Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Kingdom of Yugoslavia until 1941	Taishō 1913 - 1925 Shōwa 1925 -
WW2 1939 - 1945	
SFR Yugoslavia until 1990 Republic of Slovenia 1990 -	Shōwa until 1989 Heisei 1989 - 2019 Reiwa 2019-

1. Between the 1890s and 1910s, Austro-Hungarian navy members

Between 1890s and 1910s, there were many young men of similar higher middle-class background from the Slovenian ethnic region, who joined the Austro-Hungarian naval academy. After their education, they joined the Austro-Hungarian navy and some of them experienced Japan and East Asia on their missions on board their ships. During my research on picture postcards, old postcards from Japan were found in various institutions in the capital city of Ljubljana, in the National and University Library, the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and also in private collections. The oldest were used or brought back by an engineer on board the warship SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth (her 2nd mission), Joseph Obereigner, who always signed with his family nickname „Pepon” (Fig.2). He sent picture postcards to his family and relatives as early as in 1899, from Kobe, Nagasaki, Yokohama and even from the inland tourist town of Nikkō (Shigemori Bučar and Veselič 2021: 73). The second oldest postcard is kept by a relative of Fran Vilfan, who served the navy on board SMS Aspern which was sent for the negotiation of the foreign legation in the Boxer Rebellion in China (1899-1900). The ship also called at Yokohama from where Vilfan sent a postcard (Fig. 3) to his fiancée in Trieste (Shigemori Bučar 2019).

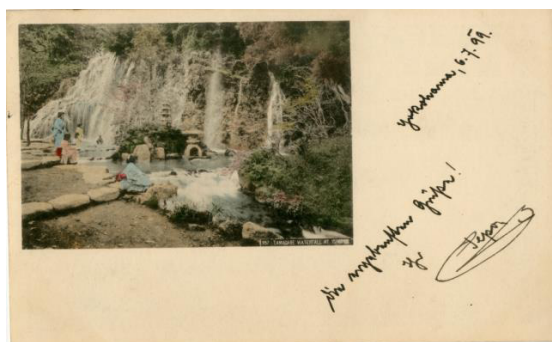


Fig. 2: The oldest Japanese picture postcard

The regional Maritime Museum „Sergej Mašera” Piran which is situated on the Adriatic coast of Slovenia, keeps numerous picture postcards and also albums of postcards and photos from the time of Austria-Hungary. In our research, the postcard album of the military chaplain Ivan Koršič was the most interesting. At the beginning of the 20th century, Koršič was stationed in the Austro-Hungarian port of Pula, and though he himself never travelled far, he received picture postcards from other navy members who went on board various warships all over the world. Among Koršič's seven albums of postcards, there is one with 92 postcards on 24 pages, most of them from China and Japan (Fig. 4 and 5).

The Maritime Museum in Piran stores also other albums of picture postcards and photographs, collections of navy members, all from the period between 1904 and 1913.



Fig. 3: The postcard sent in 1900



Fig. 4: Koršič's album²



Fig. 5: Inside of the album in Fig. 4

The curator of the museum Marinac in her monograph states that the construction and opening of the southern railroad connecting Vienna with Trieste, of which the last part was opened in 1857, greatly helped the people in this region for their mobility. The naval academy was also a means of a steady and rather cheap way to educate sons of middle-class families (Marinac 2017: 14).

² <https://pomorskimuzej.si/sl/digitalne-zbirke/>

In the course of the project, we analysed objects that the seamen brought home but were never closely analysed until now: two pieces of *kozuka*³, brought back by the sea captain Anton Dolenc who was in Japan on the cruiser Panther (Shigemori Bučar 2020), a *kutani* tea service brought back by Jožef Spetič (Spetich) who sailed as an engineer on ships of the Austrian Lloyd, fans (*uchiwa*), lanterns used for festivals, etc. (Marinac 2017: 176).



Fig. 6: One of the *kozuka* knife handles brought back by A. Dolenc



Fig. 7: A *kutani* tea service brought back by J. Spetič

A special case in this Austro-Hungarian period was the ethnologist and architect Ivan (John) Jager (1871-1959), who was sent to Beijing in 1901 to reconstruct the Austrian Legation which was damaged in the Boxer Rebellion. He took an interest in East Asian art and started collecting objects during his four-month stay in China. He also visited Japan for a few weeks and after that emigrated to the United States. He settled down in Minneapolis and worked in the field of city planning and architecture (Shigemori Bučar and Veselič 2021: 75-79). Most of his collection of East Asian art was posthumously donated to the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts by his wife. Among his collection are *ukiyo-e* prints, *tsuba*⁴, Chinese old silk clothings, literature on East Asian art in European languages, e.g. the 1888 edition of *Ancient Japon* by Appert and Kinoshita, and so on, but we do not know which part of his collection was directly acquired in Japan. *Japonisme* was in fashion also in the United States, and he could

³ *kozuka* 小柄 = the handle of a small knife usually attached to a Japanese sword

⁴ *tsuba* 鐔 = sword mounting

purchase objects of Japanese art during his life in the States. In his case, we cannot talk about an East-West exchange in his time, since he did not directly return from East Asia to Slovenia. We can only say that he was a person of Slovenian ethnic origin who was greatly interested in Japanese culture and art, and that he wanted to leave his collection to the Slovenian people.

2. Alma Karlin, a female adventurer

Alma Maximilliana Karlin was born in a small Slovenian town of Celje (or Cilli in German) in 1889. She was the only daughter of a retired Austro-Hungarian military officer and a teacher in a German girls' school, and was raised strictly using the German language although both parents were of Slovenian origin. After learning several European languages in England and Scandinavia, she returned to her hometown Celje and opened her own language school, but after a few years decided to go on a journey around the world. Her journey lasted for 8 years. Her original plan was to travel firstly to Japan, but as a result of circumstances, lack of money or wrong papers, she went on a ship in Genoa bound for Mollendo, the port in Peru in 1919. She then travelled to Panama, the United States and Hawaii, and finally arrived in Yokohama on a ship in June 1922 and stayed mostly in Tokyo till July 1923 (Trnovec 2020: 9, 13). That was the 11th and 12th year of the Taishō period. Alma Karlin was a journalist and language teacher and earned her living in Japan by teaching English, and working for a machinery firm and at the German embassy. Her collection of picture postcards is enormous, with more than 500 pieces from Japan. Through her collection, we can identify some tourist destinations of lasting importance as well as some less known places of interest that were perhaps more popular in the Taishō period (Shigemori Bučar 2019). She also collected miscellaneous objects during her stay in Japan. Among them are *uki-yo-e* prints of not very high quality, lacquered trays and boxes, *yukata*, *uchiwa*, *tenugui*, *hagoita*⁵ and so on. In her travelogue and essays, we can see some correspondence with the items in her collection which is now stored in the Regional Museum in Celje. She was lucky enough to experience Japan during Taishō democracy, and leave Japan for the rest of her adventure without experiencing the Great Kantō Earthquake which occurred a few months after her departure. We have also noticed many small and trivial items in her collection, for example, the *noshi* envelope, *mizuhiki*, miniature kitchen and other toys, a wall calendar, a receipt from the newspaper company Nichinichi, paper bookmarks etc. They are trivial in the sense that they are small in size, light in weight and inexpensive, that is, „seemingly insignificant”. They are certainly Karlin's personal collection of souvenirs. For viewers of the museum collection, they may seem

⁵ For individual objects, see VAZ (<https://vazcollections.si/>) for detailed analyses.

to be a set of somewhat random items, but this is the only collection in Slovenia or in Central Europe, to teach us the small details of life in Taishō Japan. Some items reveal Karlin's sharp ethnographic eyes for the traditional customs of Japan (the ceremonial wrappings, miniature toys), and of very contemporary things towards the end of the Taishō period (the Kewpie and Yumeji postcards, Fig. 8 and 9) (Shigemori Bučar 2021). The year 2022 was exactly the 100th anniversary of Karlin's arrival in Japan and there was a small exhibition in the German Cultural Centre in Tokyo in June.



Fig. 8: The Kewpie postcard used in 1923

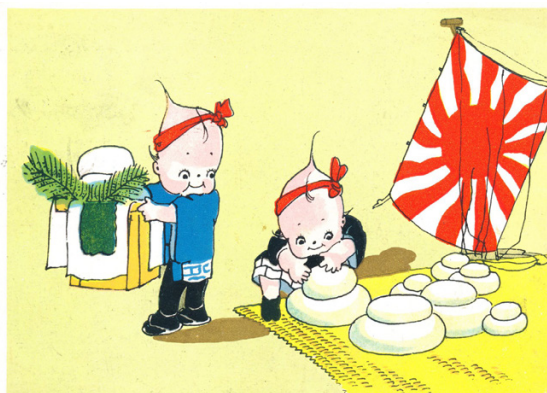


Fig. 9: A postcard of the famous illustrator Yumeji

3. Typical objects brought to Slovenia up to 1930s

Objects acquired in Japan or East Asia and brought back home vary in number, quality and size according to each individual traveller's status, economic power and nature of his/her travel. The most typical of Japanese souvenirs in the latter half of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, when *Japonisme* was in fashion in Europe, were *ukiyo-e* prints, ceramics and porcelain, lacquer ware, furniture and garden accessories like *byōbu* (folding screens) and *tōrō* (garden lanterns) etc. (Sosnowski 2017: 7, 16).

For travellers with not very abundant financial means, there were certain types of „souvenirs”. Japan was also eager to reproduce such souvenirs, so to say „export art” smaller in size, for foreign mostly Western, visitors in the Meiji and Taishō periods. The

most typical is the printing of picture postcards along with the technological development of photography and postal service (Shigemori Bučar and Veselič 2021:45-51). We have also noticed that one of the *kozukas* now stored in the museum in Piran has a very popular motif on the surface, *Sakura ni koma* 桜に駒 = „a flowering cherry tree with a horse” which was reproduced in the late Meiji period. Copies of this still circulate in the US and Germany, targeting certain antique lovers (Shigemori Bučar 2020:97).



Fig. 10: Kozuka with the motif „Sakura ni koma”

4. Ideas, knowledge and objects obtained in later years

Another unique case in Slovenia is Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877-1947) and his wife Maria Skušek (1893-1963). Ivan Skušek Jr. was born in Metlika, a small town in Slovenia, as one of four children of Ivan Skušek Senior, an Austro-Hungarian tax officer. After finishing his studies, he joined the Austro-Hungarian navy, where he was soon promoted to naval officer of the first rank. After a number of voyages across the Mediterranean, the Black and Red Seas, he was employed as an official at the Ministry of War in Vienna. In July 1913, he boarded the cruiser SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth (her 6th mission) as an intendant (accountant, cashier and economist). The ship left the port of Pula and arrived at the German concession of Qingdao 青島 on July 22, 1914. (Grčar 2021:5152). In Europe, the first World War broke out on July 28, 1914, and shortly after that, Japan declared war on Germany, demanding that it cede the port of Qingdao to Japan. The SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth with 12 officers, including Skušek, and 240 seamen, had to join the German forces in Qingdao. After weeks of fighting, Kaiserin Elisabeth sank on November 3, 1914. The conflict was resolved with the German and Austrian surrender and Qingdao fell into Japanese hands. The defeated German and Austrian soldiers were taken into confinement in Japan, while their officers, including Skušek, were taken into confinement in Beijing. Skušek retained his position of chief intendant officer, being in charge of supplying food and other necessities for his fellow officers in confinement. He was issued a pass that enabled him to exit the confinement camp and move freely around Beijing. Living among the higher social strata of Westerners in the diplomatic quarter in Beijing, Skušek built his own network and purchased larger and valuable objects for his private collection (ibid.: 52-53).

During his life in Beijing, he met his future wife, a Japanese woman and florist, Tsuneko Kondō Kawase. Tsuneko was born in Gifu and after Japan's victory in Rus-

so-Japanese War, moved to the Kwantung Leased Territory 關東州 in China with her parents. She studied to become a medical nurse and while she worked as a nurse in Qingtao, she must have met Ivan Skušek. Two of them returned to Ljubljana, Slovenia, in September, 1920 (a year after Alma Karlin left Slovenia), with Tsuneko's two children from her former marriage. According to one of our project members Grčar, Ivan Skušek Jr. may:

„be considered the first collector of East Asian objects in the Slovenian ethnic space to have built his collection systematically, examining and verifying the provenance, value, and significance of each item. His extensive collection can be compared to Western European collections of East Asian objects while at the same time bearing a stamp of local uniqueness.” (Grčar 2021: 47)

Most significant of his collection are the massive Chinese furnitures, and a newly discovered collection of Chinese coins. These were brought to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum after Ivan's death.



Fig. 11: Old Chinese coins in Skušek collection

While Ivan Skušek is known mainly for his Chinese furniture, his wife Tsuneko, or Maria Skušek, is known as the first Japanese woman to immigrate to this part of Europe (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021: 14). She gave lectures on Japanese culture and society in various cities in Slovenia and other republics of Yugoslavia, conducted classes on Japanese arts and crafts, demonstrated Japanese tea ceremony, gave private instructions of Chinese and Japanese languages (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021: 14). Her lecture manuscripts, newspaper clippings, photos, and some objects of her personal possession, such as kimonos and a dancing fan *mai ôgi* 舞扇, all archived today in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum have been newly analysed by our project members (Hrvatín 2021; Visočnik Gerželj 2021). Some of the older generations in today's Slovenia gained some ideas and knowledge about Japan and China through the Skušeks in the 1930s and 40s, from Maria Tsuneko Skušek up to the 1960s in the Socialist Yugoslavia.

There was also an ethnologist-turned diplomat from Slovenia after World War II. Dr. Franček Kos (1912-1966) was born in Maribor, the second largest city of Slovenia in 1912 and studied art history and ethnology in Ljubljana. From 1937 till 1943, he was a curator in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. After the Second World War, he went into diplomacy and worked in London and New York, and from 1958 to 1962, he was the Ambassador of the Socialist Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia in Tokyo, Japan. During his mission in Tokyo, as a hobby collector, he purchased Japanese art. His collection includes Japanese old paintings on scrolls, *ukiyo-e*, ceramics and porcelain. Among the scrolls and paintings are *Hyakki yagyō* 百鬼夜行 on a 4-meter long scroll, an album of *Sanjūrokkasen* 三十六歌仙, and some scrolls by the Kanō school 狩野派 of the 17th century. The whole Kos collection is in today's Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

5. VAZ (Vzhodnoazijske zbirke=East Asian Collections) and the on-going research

Research results and activities, including findings introduced in the main part of this paper are made public on the webpage „VAZcollections.si”, and regularly updated.

As for the Japanese part of East Asian objects, old printed books *wakosho* 和古書 and many pieces of ceramics (*satsuma*, *arita*, *imari* etc.) in various collections, are yet to be analysed in greater details.

Our project is further supported by the Slovenian Research Agency, thus extending the duration to September 2024, under the new title „Orphaned Objects: Examining East Asian Objects outside Organised Collecting Practices in Slovenia”⁶. In the framework partly expressed in this new title, we are conducting interviews with individual owners of East Asian objects. We also cooperate with regional museums and hold workshops mainly for local children to disseminate the East Asian culture and inheritance, such as *origami*, drawing figures on *uchiwa* fans, etc. We would also like to connect with the institutions in neighbouring countries and regions in order to capture a greater and more precise picture of the East-West exchanges in recent history.

The most part of this paper was presented at the 32nd EAJRS Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, on September 14th, 2022. The content was further supplemented based on the comments given by the audience.

⁶ Project leader is Dr. Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik.

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