

When Objects Go Wandering—Lost and Found Objects from the Skušek Collection

*Helena MOTOH**

Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of “wandering objects” through the lens of the Skušek Collection, the largest collection of East Asian objects in Slovenia, which was brought to Ljubljana by Ivan Skušek Jr. and his Japanese wife, Tsuneko Kondō Kawase, in 1920. This collection, which traversed private ownership and eventual institutionalisation, illustrates the dynamic mobility of artefacts. This study focuses on the movement of these objects both within and outside the family network, exploring how they were dispersed and sometimes reintegrated into the collection. By analysing specific cases, such as the three Japanese screens and other key objects, this paper identifies unique mobility patterns that differ from more common notions of dissociation and “orphaning” in the research of museum collections. The findings highlight the symbolic roles these “wandering objects” played in reinforcing social ties and cultural identity. This research contributes to a broader understanding of object mobility and provenance, offering a new conceptual framework for the research of private and institutional collections.

Keywords: wandering objects, Skušek Collection, East Asian collections, object mobility, provenance, cultural heritage

Predmeti na poti: izgubljeni in najdeni predmeti iz Skušekove zbirke

Izvleček

Članek obravnava fenomen »potujočih predmetov« skozi prizmo Skušekove zbirke, največje zbirke vzhodnoazijskih predmetov v Sloveniji, ki sta jo v Ljubljano l. 1920 pripeljala Ivan Skušek ml. in njegova žena, Japonka Tsuneko Kondō Kawase. Zbirka, ki je prešla iz zasebne v institucionalno last, ponazarja dinamično mobilnost artefaktov. Članek se osredotoča na gibanje teh predmetov znotraj in zunaj družinske mreže ter raziskuje, kako so se razpršili iz zbirke in bili potem nekajkrat celo ponovno vključeni vanjo. Z analizo posameznih posebnih primerov, kot so trije japonski paravani in drugi ključni predmeti, članek identificira specifične vzorce mobilnosti, ki odstopajo od bolj uveljavljenih konceptov disociacije in »osirotelosti« v študijah muzejskih zbirk. Ugotovitve poudarjajo simbolno vlogo, ki so jo ti »potujoči predmeti« imeli pri krepitvi družbenih vezi in kulturne identitete. Ta raziskava

* Helena MOTOH, Assistant Professor, Senior Research Associate, Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia.
Email address: Helena.Motoh@zrs-kp.si



prispeva k širšemu razumevanju mobilnosti in provenience predmetov ter ponuja nov konceptualni okvir za proučevanje zasebnih in institucionalnih zbirk.

Ključne besede: potujoči predmeti, Skušekova zbirka, vzhodnoazijske zbirke, mobilnost predmetov, provenienca, kulturna dediščina

Introduction: The Example of the Three Screens

It was often somewhere in the background. Providing a welcome and distinctly Asian tone to the portraits of the family and perhaps serving as a functional tool to hide the door or the neighbouring building, a Japanese embroidered screen can be seen in several photographs of the Skušek family, especially those that show Tsuneko Kondō Kawase¹ (1893–1963), the Japanese wife of Ivan Skušek Jr. (1877–1947), a former Austro-Hungarian navy officer, and her two children.² Ivan Jr. and Tsuneko arrived in Ljubljana from China in 1920 with a large collection of furniture and other objects. Most of these were purchased by Ivan Skušek Jr. in Beijing between 1914 and 1920, while some objects—especially the Japanese ones—could also have been his wife’s personal belongings.³ The couple moved around Ljubljana several times with the entire collection, which was mostly stored in their living spaces. Tsuneko was the first Japanese woman to ever live in Ljubljana and therefore attracted understandable interest. She took on a very active role in presenting Japanese culture in interwar Ljubljana, participating in radio shows, organising lectures, performing, etc. (see Hrvatin 2021). In one of these public displays, a photograph (fig. 1) of which was used as promotion for a later series of her lectures usually held under the title “A Japanese on the Japanese Woman”⁴, we see one of the Japanese embroidered screens for the first time. Tsuneko is kneeling in front of it, dressed in a kimono and displaying several Japanese and Chinese objects that are still in the collection today.⁵

1 After conversion to the catholic religion and marriage to Skušek, she alternately used her Slovene name Marija Skušek, sometimes combining the two into different compound names.

2 When leaving Beijing for Ljubljana with Ivan Skušek Jr., Tsuneko Kondō Kawase brought with her two children from her first marriage to a German official in Beijing, Erika and Matthias (later known as “Matis”).

3 So far, it has unfortunately been impossible to reconstruct the precise provenance of these objects due to the lack of information available in the surviving documentation in the SEM archive.

4 Source: Newspaper clippings, stored in the “Archive on Marija Skušek – Tsuneko Kondō Kawase” (Arhiv o Mariji Skušek – Tsuneko Kondō Kawase), SEM archive. Where the photo was taken is not stated, but it might be a photograph from the display at the Ljubljana fair where Tsuneko performed in autumn 1930 (cf. Motoh 2020a, 34, 37).

5 Most recognisable: The cloisonné figurine of Budai, a low hexagonal table, a vase and a musical instrument.



Figures 1 and 2. Tsuneko Kondō Kawase in front of the Japanese screens. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

Another image (fig. 2) shows her writing at a low table and yet again an embroidered screen serves as the background. In a series of photographs (figs. 3 and 4), which include her two children dressed in Chinese robes (the photo must have therefore been taken before 1933 when her son passed away), a screen appears more visibly again, hiding a building in what appears to be an impromptu outdoor photoshoot setting.



Figure 3. Tsuneko's daughter Erika and son Matis in front of a Japanese screen. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)



Figure 4. Group photo of probably the same occasion, Tsuneko with her children in front of a Japanese screen. (Source: Archive of Janez Lombergar)

The last time we see a Japanese silk screen displayed in the Skušek collection archival material is a few years before her death, in a 1957 film clip (see fig. 5). This time it is decorating the background of Tsuneko's living room.⁶

⁶ The clip was part of the *Filmske novosti* short news item shown in the cinemas before film projections (see Perišić 1957).



Figure 5. Capture from the Filmske novosti clip, showing the back of Tsuneko's living room in 1957. (Source: Perišić 1957)

What at first glance may seem like the same object, under a closer view turns out to be a different, although very similar embroidered screen, which is decorated with various types of flowers, but can be distinguished by the bird motifs. While the one in previous photographs shows cranes in flight, the one in the video clip shows smaller birds. The Skušek collection, as it was placed in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum after Tsuneko's death in 1963, only contains this last screen (fig. 6). The other one that we see in the early photographs, decorated with flying cranes, disappeared from the photographs after the early 1930s (after the photographs of the children were made). Surprisingly, it reappeared in the museum in 1972, though not as a part of the Skušek collection (fig. 7).⁷ It was bought from a private owner, Marica Dolničar, who told the curators (as is recorded in the Acquisition Book) that the "screen was embroidered by the late Ms Skušek" (Nakupna knjiga n.d.), which was most probably false information, but nevertheless shows a clear link with the Skušek collection. As well as these two screens that appear in the photographic material, a recently identified third screen (fig. 8) was not present in the photographic archive at all. This third screen, decorated with embroidered flower motifs (and no birds) left the collection through family con-

7 I would like to thank my research project colleague Tina Berdajs for pointing out this object when she was making a thorough list of the Skušek collection in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. More on her analysis in Berdajs (2021).

nections. It was inherited by Janez Lombergar, a grand nephew of Ivan Skušek Jr. as a bequest of Ivan's youngest brother Franci.⁸



Figure 6. Japanese screen that is part of the Skušek collection. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)



Figure 7. Japanese screen that was owned by Marica Dolničar. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)



Figure 8. The Japanese screen inherited by Janez Lombergar. (Source: Private collection of Janez Lombergar)

The construction, identical dimensions and similar embroidery type show that they most probably come from the same workshop, or at least related ones. The relationship between them, however, becomes even clearer, when observed from the back. The three canvas paintings that decorate the back of the screens are painted in a very similar style (figs. 9, 10 and 11), the colours and brushstrokes match, and the scenes on the back seem as though they could be segments of the same or similar landscape painting.⁹

- 8 The reason why the screen does not appear in photographs could be that Franci Skušek got the object as either a gift or a purchase early on (the family members mention that he allegedly supported his brother Ivan Jr. through financial difficulties upon their arrival in Ljubljana by buying pieces from his collection—see below).
- 9 The back of the screen that was part of the collection depicts a landscape of mountains, a hut and a person paddling a boat on the lake or a river. The back of the screen with cranes that came back to the museum depicts a lake/river scene with boats and Mt. Fuji in the background. The screen that was owned by Franci Skušek also shows a landscape scene with mountains and a river/lake.



The fates of the three screens show a fascinating aspect of many private collections, namely that although their core array of objects remained more or less stable through time, different ownerships and subsequent institutionalisations, collections tend to have fuzzy boundaries, an array of objects that wander out of the original collection to other owners or even other institutions, only to sometimes wander back into their original collection. In the present paper, I will explore this particular mobility pattern, choosing to dub it—in a perhaps rather poetic way—“wandering objects”. In the first part of the paper, I will overview other identified wandering objects from the Skušek collection to show the different ways in which the objects were



Figures 9, 10 and 11. Three screens from the back, arranged according to the landscape scene. (Sources: fig. 9: Private collection of Jan- ez Lombergar; figs. 10 and 11: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

leaving it (and some of them coming back) and other specific aspects of this mobility that can be discerned. In the second part, I will explore the need for this new conceptual framework by juxtaposing it with other similar theoretical concepts used for describing the mobility patterns in collecting practices. In the third part, I will use the results of this analysis to identify the key characteristics of this mobility pattern. In the final part, I will then place the concept of wandering objects into the context of the research on the mobility of East Asian collections in Slovenia and the region, to identify further possibilities for application.

Wandering Objects from the Skušek Collection

In the long period between the arrival of Ivan Skušek Jr. and Tsuneko Kondō Kawase in Ljubljana in 1920 and the transfer of the collection to the museum in 1963, the collection was moved several times, packed and unpacked, the owners lived with it and also gave and sold individual pieces to their relatives, friends and acquaintances (cf. Berdajs 2021; Motoh 2021). After the arrival of the collection at the museum, it also moved several times, was transported through different storage rooms, displayed in a museum venue, then put away again and is now mostly in museum storage in the new building of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Taking into account this dynamic biography, it is not surprising that the collection is markedly smaller than it initially was, which Tina Berdajs explored in more detail by comparing the few available packing, transport and inventory lists that survived (Berdajs 2021). As Berdajs shows in detail, reconstruction of the number of lost objects is virtually impossible due to the different approaches to counting and grouping them in the different lists and also due to the fact that until the inventorisation in 1965, the items were not listed systematically as museum objects but were grouped and counted primarily for practical purposes (ibid., 154–55).

Until some recent developments, the objects that went missing could only be assessed by spotting the missing objects in the early photographs kept in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) archive that show the Skušek collection in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to these, a few objects could be identified because they came back to the museum through donations or by purchases from their subsequent owners. The latter is the case with one of the three Japanese screens, and at least one more object that returned can be identified in the collection of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. As Berdajs shows (2021, 158–59), the Acquisition Book lists the purchase of a porcelain vase in 1982 from a woman who lived in Strossmayerjeva 10, just across the street from the last apartment of the Skušeks, where they had lived since the Second World War. In the Acquisition Book, the *famille verte* bottomless porcelain bowl (fig. 12) is listed as a “Chinese vase”, which subsequently turned out to be a later misunderstanding. A photograph found among the archival documents of the Skušek collection shows an identical object (fig. 13), but mounted on a porcelain stand as part of a display of porcelain lamps, a piece of information that was probably lost together with the stand that the lamp was originally placed on.



Figures 12 and 13. The porcelain bowl in its present state and as shown in an early photograph from the SEM photographic archive. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

Judging from the record in the Acquisition Book, the information about the object's original ownership and its link to the Skušek collection has also been lost, which would then already place this wandering object in the orphaned object category, its true provenance having only been identified due to a lucky coincidence. We can see a similar oblivion in perhaps the most representative object from the Skušek collection that ended up outside of it, namely, the dragon-feet table, which was still mentioned in the first transport lists and shown in an early photograph (fig. 15)¹⁰, but was then never again mentioned or present in surviving photographs after the Skušeks moved into their first apartment in Ljubljana. The research group East Asian Collections in Slovenia found it by chance in Strmol Castle near Ljubljana (fig. 14) when researching Slovenian castles and mansions for any remnant East Asian objects.¹¹ As with the previous example, the dragon-feet table could be seen as what is usually dubbed an “orphaned” piece (see below), with the knowledge of its provenance being lost.

10 A series of photographs taken in what seems to be an empty room showing only the objects from the Skušek collection, survived in the archive. It is possible that they were taken to document the objects before shipping or, at the latest, before the Skušeks moved into their first location at Pred Škofijo 3 in 1920.

11 Due to the castle being inaccessible to the general public (it is used by the Slovenian state protocol) and the sensitive historical events that led to the nationalisation of the castle (the controversial assassination of its previous owners, the couple Rado and Ksenija Hribar, during WWII), the archival material that could explain how the table got there is unfortunately missing. Similar precious objects at Strmol Castle, however, are said to have been obtained by Rado Hribar in exchange for unpaid debts by individuals and institutions (Interview with a staff member at Strmol Castle, March 2024).



Figures 14 and 15. The dragon-feet table in its present location at the Strmol Castle and in an early photograph from the SEM photographic archive. (Source: Strmol Castle and Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

With many other objects that left the Skušek collection, however, we see an essentially different dynamic. This situation, which was surprising in many ways, only became evident after recent developments. In the preparation for the major 2024 exhibition of the Skušek collection in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, a call was issued for potential owners of lost objects from this collection to contact the museum and provide some information about the objects that they ended up owning, as well as any surviving stories linked to the Skušek couple and their collection. The response was surprising. It became clear soon after the call that these objects were especially scattered through the family network, but also reached the wider circle of friends and acquaintances. Ivan Skušek was the oldest son in the family and had three brothers, Oskar (1878–1963), Engelbert (1882–1940) and Franci (1893–1989), and one sister, Valerija (1889–1918). All of them, except for Ivan himself, had children, which in subsequent generations resulted in a large family network of nieces and nephews and their families. We were lucky to have been able to identify that objects were inherited through all four family lines, with the narratives of how that happened differing only slightly from one family member to another. Some of the family members volunteered to bring their objects to be analysed and some even agreed for their objects to be displayed as part of the exhibition, while others only told us that they had them in their possession but were reluctant to show them or to show photographs of them.

Nevertheless, the objects that were identified in the process of preparing the exhibition shed a completely new light on the mobility patterns of the Skušek collection. In the call and in the previous research, I have so far identified 44 objects that were part of the original collection. There are some more objects that I have only heard about from secondary sources but I have so far been unable to confirm this information.¹² With this large group of objects to explore, some patterns can be identified. Out of 14 identifiable owners today, almost all of these are Ivan Skušek's relatives, mostly descendants of his siblings, with a few objects also being owned by Ivan Skušek's cousins (now having been bought by the SEM). The interviews with the living relatives of Ivan Skušek confirmed that the couple gave out the objects as gifts for special occasions or sold them to Ivan's brothers (they allegedly used this exchange to considerably help their brother in times of financial difficulties). So far, only two objects—porcelain plates—have been identified, which left the collection via Erika Lenarčič (née Schmidt), Tsuneko's daughter. The archival material about her in the Maritime Museum of Piran also confirmed that she owned objects from the collection—furniture and some other objects. What happened to the objects owned by Erika after her death in 1957 is not yet known. A few other objects were held by neighbours or acquaintances of the Skušeks. For these, it is more difficult to discern any information about how these objects left the collection and whether they were given or purchased. It is difficult to speculate whether the rather small number of such pieces and the lack of information about them is due to the early stage of our research and the fact that the family members understandably have more knowledge on the pieces they own and therefore reached out more and provided more information, compared to the more remote members of Skušeks' social network. Based on the knowledge obtained so far, it could be said that most of the objects from the collection were either purchased or received in the rather narrow circle of Ivan Skušek's close relatives. Some of the largest objects were confirmed to have been purchased (based on interviews with the relatives, see bibliography), which could lead us to speculate that the Skušeks used larger and more prominent objects as "currency" in times of need (see the example of the attempted donation of the carved mirror in the next part of the paper).

12 An additional object that is very likely from the Skušek collection, though we lack any documents to prove it, was found in the collection of the Plečnik house, a museum dedicated to the life and work of prominent Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik. In his collection, there is a tobacco water pipe of the goose-neck type, which could be one of the missing tobacco pipes from the Skušek's collection lists. Plečnik was a family acquaintance of the Skušeks and the professor of Tsuneko's son Matthias at the faculty of architecture. There is unfortunately, no documentation about the provenance of this object.

The typology of the objects is also very revealing. They range from the smallest objects (small round embroideries) to very large ones (the mentioned dragon-feet table and Japanese screens). Regardless of the size, however, the comparison of the typology of the privately owned objects compared to the typology of the museum collection shows important discrepancies. One of the outstanding parts of the museum collection is its wooden furniture, which includes some large and high-quality pieces. This type of object is almost entirely absent from among the objects outside the collection. On the other hand, a type of object that is very sparsely represented in the museum collection—porcelain—was obviously an important part of the processes of the Skušeks donating and selling objects from the collection. More than 10 individual porcelain pieces (vases, cups and plates) have been identified in private ownership, which is a lot compared to only a bit more than 20 that are kept in the museum collection.¹³ We can see the opposite pattern in the collection of Buddhist sculptures. Being doubtlessly one of the most prominent parts of the Skušek collection, it was also repeatedly given the central role in the living spaces of the Skušeks. Displayed on a carved dresser in all their subsequent apartments, the collection that is kept in the museum today is not missing many objects from its original scope. In the private collections identified so far, we could only find a very limited number of such objects: a small figure of Amitabha Buddha (fig. 16), a Tibetan prayer wheel (fig. 17) and a Japanese clay figurine (fig. 18) of a waking-up Daruma.



Figures 16, 17 and 18. Three Buddhist objects in private collections (Amitabha Buddha sculpture, Tibetan prayer wheel and Daruma figurine). (Source: private collections)

13 In addition to these, two tea sets were identified as part of the original collection, one is part of the museum collection today and another one came to the museum as a purchase from private ownership.

With some other types of objects, it can be seen that examples left the collection when there were a number of similar items. In a very understandable pattern, which we saw with the Japanese screen, we can see that out of a pair or set of identical or similar items, one or more were given away. One of the most evident examples of this is the blue-and-white vase with *prunus* decoration that was identified as a wandering object. It corresponds quite well to a similar piece that is still in the collection.



Figures 19 and 20. A vase from the Skušek collection (left) and a similar one owned by a relative (right). (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum, private collection)

Another nice example of this is the cut-out patterned brass containers, of which one remained in the museum collection (fig. 21) while several others (e.g. figs. 22 and 23) were identified in the ownership of family members.



Figures 21, 22 and 23. Brass containers: left one from the museum collection, the other two owned privately. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum, private collection)

While the representative and highest quality pieces have mostly remained in today's museum collection, some examples also prove otherwise. An excellent example of this is a large and exquisitely carved red lacquer quatrefoil box that is today kept by a descendant of one of Ivan Skušek's brothers. The only relatable piece in the museum collection is a much smaller and simpler carved lacquer box.



Figures 24 and 25. Carved red lacquer boxes, the left from a private collection and the right from the museum. (Source: Private collection and Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

We also find some types of objects in private ownership that are unique and do not have an equivalent in the preserved museum collection. Among the most unique in the framework of the Skušek collection are an ornately carved soapstone water container for calligraphy (fig. 26), a miniature Hasegawa Takejirō 1914 calendar (fig. 27) and a large bronze censer (fig. 28) with very complex decoration. Two paintings in the *gongbi* style that were found in a private collection are also unique since no such objects are present in the surviving museum collection.

The large number of identified objects is most probably still only a fragment of the number of objects from the Skušek collection that are scattered around Slovenia. But even with these and despite the different relations that we can identify with the remaining museum collection, one very important and interesting common pattern can be identified. Virtually all these objects (except for the above-mentioned porcelain lamp and the dragon-feet table) have not been lost, but were known to have been originally part of the Skušek collection. They were identified in the research process precisely because the knowledge of their origin survived, showing an interestingly regular mobility pattern that requires a further analysis and shows a sharp contrast with other mobility patterns that can be identified in similar cases.



Figures 26, 27 and 28. Soapstone water container, Hasegawa calendar and a bronze censer. (Source: private collections)



Figure 29. Display cases with a selection of the identified “wandering objects” at the exhibition Asia in the Heart of Ljubljana—Life of the Skušek Collection in Slovene Ethnographic Museum. (Source: Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

Wandering Objects as a Mobility Pattern

The case of the three screens¹⁴ analysed above already shows what an array of different mobility trajectories can happen to virtually the same objects in the same collection. One of the three screens followed the majority of the collection along the path that eventually led to institutional ownership and museum storage. The other two left the collection, one through family connections and then inheritance, the other through yet unidentified ways, but most probably through the network of acquaintances. The two most probably left the collection at different times, or at least this can be presumed based on the photographic material from the SEM archive, analysed above. The screen with cranes is still visible in the early 1930s photographs, but no later, while the flower one later owned by Franci Skušek is not shown in any photographs at all.

The dissociation of objects from the collections is a well-described phenomenon. In the typology of the so-called “agents of deterioration” developed by Costain (1994), Michalski (1994) and the Canadian Conservation Institute, the negative effects of dissociation were added to the list of mainly physical deterioration agents (ranging from theft to fire, water, pests, contamination, radiation, incorrect temperature and humidity) by Waller (1995). Dissociation and custodial neglect are further analysed in an overview of Cato and Waller (2023), where dissociation is described in rather philosophical terms as a result of “the natural tendency for ordered systems to fall apart over time” (Cato and Waller 2023). More specifically, they see the effects of dissociation as falling into three types: it can manifest as the loss of objects, the loss of object-related data, or the “ability to retrieve or associate objects and data” (ibid.). Cato and Waller call dissociation a “metaphysical agent” in the very literal meaning of the term, and compared to the other nine agents of deterioration that affect the *physical* state of the object, this one affects its “legal, intellectual and/or cultural aspects” (ibid.). Dissociation can result in “compromise or loss of objects, collections and the data that gives them value through context and meaning” (ibid.).

Other concepts are sometimes used to grasp this phenomenon. The things Cato and Waller list as effects of dissociation almost match the description—originating in archaeological theory—of “orphaned objects” (cf. Gill and Chippindale 1993), though there is a substantial difference between the two approaches. Cato and Waller study the processes that affect already musealised objects. Therefore the dissociations they describe are due to events, actions or failures to act in mu-

14 Several embroidered screens can be found in other East Asian collections in Slovenian museums and other institutions, for example in the Celje Regional Museum, Maritime Museum Piran, Snežnik Castle and others.

seum settings. The concept of orphaned objects, on the other hand, was initially developed for situations that occur earlier in the process in the case of archaeological discoveries, namely the loss of archaeological context (e.g. site and excavation data in the case of looting and smuggling). The way we have been using the concept when researching the processes that led to the loss of information about the context and provenance of East Asian objects in Slovenian museums (cf. Motoh 2020a) was developed from the latter idea—the orphaning of an object occurs when an object is deprived of its contextual information and/or separated from the collection it originally belonged to. Most of the orphaning in the case of East Asian objects in Slovenia, as Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik describes in more detail in her paper in the present issue, happened due to the turbulent political and historical developments in the 20th century.

The case of the three Japanese screens, though, does not fall into the category of orphaned objects, nor does it completely match what Cato and Waller describe as the results of dissociation processes in museums. Dissociation did happen to the two Japanese screens that left the Skušek collection at a certain point in time, for they were separated from their original collection and changed ownership. The essential difference, however, is that in both cases, this did not result in the loss of context. The knowledge that these two were “Japanese screens” and that they were previously owned by the Skušeks was kept by the new owners, as we can see both in the records in the book of purchases kept in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and the information that was passed through two generations from Skušek’s brother to his grandson, who now owns one of the screens.

Objects that—metaphorically speaking—went “wandering” kept the knowledge of their home and sometimes even returned to it. And even more, instead of suffering from a loss of information, they actually become a vehicle for spreading the information about the collection and its context. Metaphorically, these objects can be seen as being on a journey, through time and changing locations (and owners) in a contingent fashion—very much in the sense of how we understand travel today. To explore the mobility pattern of “wandering objects”, we first need to identify the analytical categories that apply in this case, both in comparison to other types of dissociating mobility patterns and in relation to the integral parts of the original collections. In the next segment of this paper, I will use the previously mentioned examples of objects that wandered out of the Skušek collection in order to try to answer several key questions about this mobility pattern: Why do objects go wandering? What type of symbolic “baggage” do they carry on their wandering? What happens to them on the way? How do they sometimes return and what happens if they do? What issues can they help us solve in the research of collections?

What to Ask About Wandering Objects

As mentioned previously, most of the identified wandering objects from the Skušek collection were scattered in the family network of Ivan Skušek Jr. and are today kept by grandnephews and grandnieces of Ivan Skušek Jr. and their children. From the interviews with the living relatives of Skušek, it seems that the objects were partly given to the family members as presents or bought by Ivan's comparably wealthier brothers to help their oldest sibling in financial difficulties. For Ivan Skušek Jr., an Austro-Hungarian navy officer, the political transition into a newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians also meant the loss of a respected and well-paid job and the resulting social status. According to the diary of his brother Franci Skušek, Ivan tried very hard to be accepted into the navy of the new country and even tried to achieve this by attempting to donate the largest piece in the collection, the large ornate carved mirror frame, to King Alexander, but was not successful. The pieces from the collection, although he initially intended to build a museum out of it (Skušek n.d., 4–5), were then used as a type of capital, but even more importantly, they operated with an implicit or explicit value in Ivan's social network. The traces of this network can be seen today in the identified wandering objects. The stories that the relatives tell mostly describe the object as being bought by their ancestors¹⁵ (Interviews with family members A and B, 2024), Ivan's brothers, in order to help him, or they were donated by Ivan and Tsuneko for some special occasions such as weddings. They further used these objects in the same way among themselves, so a story was told about how a Chinese female robe was donated by Ivan Skušek's niece to her sister-in-law when she married her brother (Interview with a family member C, 2024).

The complex family relations in the Skušek family network are, of course, not the focus of this paper, but the role that these objects played in it says a lot about this particular type of mobility. An important difference that separates this type of mobility from other types of dissociation is precisely *why* it happens. In these cases, the objects were separated from the collection not by neglect or accident, but on purpose. Even more, the transfer of these objects had a symbolic purpose as it aimed to secure favours, to establish social ties and to confirm interfamily solidar-

15 The interviews with Skušek's grandnephews, grandnieces and their children were conducted in February and March 2024 as part of the call for Skušek collection objects and information that was issued by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum on February 6, 2024 (hereinafter: »Interviews with family members«). Due to privacy reasons, the individual names of interviewees A, B, C and D are not referred to in this text, but are kept in the records of the author of this paper.

ity.¹⁶ As Tom Stammers identifies in his insightful analysis of collecting practices in post-revolutionary Paris at the turn of the 19th century, collecting pre-revolutionary objects was also a symbolic act that showed the changing power dynamics, a shift in the understanding of class and political reality in general (cf. Stammers 2020, 3). The mobility of objects, if we try to generalise Stammers' understanding, is a highly symbolic phenomenon when the provenance is deliberately obscured or erased, as it is sometimes the case with many "orphaned objects", but even more so when remembering, reiterating and retelling the provenance is an integral part of the motivation for why the objects changed hands. The symbolic weight of such an exchange also makes it more logical that almost a century later, these objects still travel with their stories attached, not only about the provenance but also about why the wandering initially happened. The network of the Skušeks' wandering objects literally maps out the family network and social network of the Skušeks. It is then possible to say that wandering as a mobility pattern does not imply a loss of meaning, but the opposite—it serves the meaningful function of establishing or strengthening the social fabric. In this case, the provenance seems to outplay the possession, if we apply the dichotomy proposed by K. J. P. Lowe (Lowe 2024). In his study of how Renaissance Italy collected acquisitions from the Portuguese conquered lands, Lowe recognises a pattern where the collectors primarily focused on the possessions, but largely ignored their provenance. In the case of travelling objects from the Skušek collection, we see an opposite pattern of provenance over possession, where the cultural baggage of the wandering objects, the epistemic value that the objects carry with them, mostly refers to the exchange itself. Even two generations after the change of ownership, most of the interviewees still knew who in their family either got or purchased the object from the Skušeks and at least partly how the exchange happened. Any additional information about the objects themselves, styles, datation, etc. mostly seemed to come from the owners' own research and not from inherited information that would travel along with the objects. Despite some misunderstanding, some cases of neglect, some creative misuse and other related phenomena, most owners of the wandering objects reported (Interviews with family members A, B and D, 2024) that the objects still occupy a respected place in their households and are displayed as decorative objects rather than used for everyday purposes (flower vases etc.). The overall condition of the identified objects is also fairly good, but this might be a result of positive bias in that the owners who contacted the museum were the ones who appreciated the objects and their stories.

16 A further exploration of the exchange of collection pieces in the case of wandering objects would require a debate about the anthropological concepts of gift-giving and symbolic exchange with at least Mauss', Malinowski's, Simmel's and other theoretical considerations, but this would go beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion: Wandering Objects and East Asian Collections in Slovenia

In the mobility pattern of wandering objects, the objects leave the collection but keep the knowledge of their provenance as symbolic baggage, which is often exactly the reason why they are even sent on the journey in the first place, donated or sold in a symbolic exchange of which they become the tokens. The Skušek collection, due to its complex history and the fact that it remained in private ownership for such a long time, is a good laboratory to observe this phenomenon. Many objects left the collection in this way and some of them even returned to the museum, thus completing a full circle of wandering. This mobility pattern, however, can also be identified in other East Asian collections in Slovenia, especially those marked by a long period of private ownership and then a complex transfer to the museum institutions. The obvious candidate for a similar exploration would be the objects collected by the world traveller Alma Karlin in Celje, of which many were scattered through her social network. In such cases, when this phenomenon is an important part of the biography of the collection, identifying the wandering objects is of key importance for several reasons. Firstly, it helps to reflect on the original scope of the collection, its structure and organisation, it enables us to see the relations between the objects, even reconstruct sets and pairs etc. Secondly, it enables the reconstruction of the social relations and networks in and of which the wandering objects sometimes become symbolic tokens. Most importantly, however, it enables us to see beyond the “static” institutionalised aspect of the collections and view them in their dynamic reality, as living entities with fuzzy borders and an ever-changing structure.

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Interviews

Interviews with family members A, B, C, and D, conducted by the author in February and March 2024. Names and records kept by the author.

Interviews with a staff member at Strmol Castle, March 2024. Name and record kept by the author.