

## THE JAPANESE COLLECTION OF ANTONIE URBÁNKOVÁ

Adéla Tůmová<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the Japanese collection donated by Antonie Urbánková to the Náprstek Museum in 1906, on the occasion of what would have been the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary of the museum's founder Vojta Náprstek. Although historically considered of lesser importance, a new analysis reveals that the collection contains authentic and diverse examples of Japanese craftsmanship from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The focus lies not only on the curated artifacts – such as lacquerware, wooden objects, baskets, toys, and metal pieces – but also on the donor's life story and her travels to Asia, including Japan. Of particular note are the items produced at the Sugamo Prison workshop, which are unique within Czech collections. The paper offers a new perspective on travel, collecting practices, and women's roles in exploring the cultures outside Europe in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech lands.

**KEYWORDS:** Antonie Urbánková – female traveller – Náprstek Museum – Japanese craftsmanship – Sugamo Prison production – Yamadaya Kichibei

## Introduction

The Náprstek Museum's Japanese collection consists of over 20,000 objects and has grown since the museum's foundation in 1873. In the early years, the donors, mostly friends and acquaintances of the museum's founder Vojta Náprstek (1826–1894) and his wife Josefa (1838–1907), contributed Japanese goods bought in European department stores, which reflected contemporary tastes for lacquer and porcelain designed for export. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that objects from early travellers found their way into the Náprstek Museum's collection. This distinction matters as department-store acquisitions mirrored European expectations of 'Japanese art'<sup>2</sup> while travellers introduced objects that more reflected everyday Japanese material culture. Alongside donations from well-known travellers and socially prominent figures connected to the museum's founders, the museum also received numerous objects from private individuals, about whom little to nothing is known regarding their lives or the way they acquired the items. Amongst these donors we can also find the name of Antonie Urbánková.

In the old acquisition book, where the objects were recorded as they became part of the museum's collection, a list of objects donated by 'Miss Antonie Urbánková' can be found on several pages. In 1906, a collection of Japanese objects was donated to the museum by her on the occasion of what would have been Vojta Náprstek's eightieth birthday. The curators did not

<sup>1</sup> Contact: Adéla Tůmová, National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic; e-mail: adela.tumova@nm.cz. This work was financially supported by Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (DKRVO 2024–2028/19.I.b, National Museum, 00023272).

<sup>2</sup> The contemporary European understanding of 'Japanese art' was shaped both by earlier imports – such as Arita porcelain and lacquerware – and, above all, by the presentation of Japanese craft at the World's Fairs in London (1862), Paris (1867), and Vienna (1873). These exhibitions promoted Japan's progress and the high quality of its craftsmanship, often through objects specifically adapted to European taste. Everyday items used by the Japanese were also admired as small works of art, yet many of these belonged to the material culture of the samurai and the urban elite rather than to ordinary households. For more see Fajcsák 2020; Hánová 2010, pp. 40–45.

regard the collection as particularly valuable, as is evident from the way they treated the objects in later years. They rarely exhibited the objects, except for pieces that were visually appealing. This response probably reflected not her gender but her choice of objects, which did not fit the prevailing European ideas of Japanese art. Whilst contemporaries valued ornate lacquer with *maki-e* decoration, Urbánková brought back plain wooden utensils and simple toys. Today, however, these very same ‘ordinary’ objects make her collection important. They broaden our understanding of what counted as Japanese art in Central Europe and illustrate alternative ways of ‘collecting Japan’ at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than focusing on prestigious or decorative items, Urbánková acquired groups of objects that reveal the commercial and social contexts of their production. A substantial portion of her collection came from the workshop of Yamadaya Kichibei in Hakone, providing insight into the range of goods sold in such local craft shops. Equally remarkable are the metal objects made in the Sugamo Prison, which she evidently selected for their association with prison labour – an aspect of Meiji-era industry that was rarely represented in European collections.

Several objects were discarded in the 1960s as so-called ‘duplicates’, a practice common in the Náprstek Museum at the time. Whilst the precise reasons for the disposal are not recorded in the acquisition book, it was part of a broader museum policy rather than a judgement of Urbánková’s collection alone.<sup>3</sup>

This article re-evaluates the Japanese collection donated by Antonie Urbánková to the Náprstek Museum in 1906. By situating her objects within the broader European practices of collecting Japan and by highlighting Urbánková’s role as an independent female traveller, the article demonstrates how her modest but carefully documented acquisitions expand our understanding of what constituted Japanese art<sup>4</sup> in Central Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Life of Antonie Urbánková

Very little is known about Antonie Urbánková’s life; not even her date of birth has been preserved. All we do know is that she was the sister of Miroslav Urbánek, a doctor who spent some time in Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> Despite extensive searches in the archives of the Náprstek Museum, the National Museum, and the Prague City Archives, no further information about Antonie Urbánková or her brother Miroslav has been found. This absence itself highlights the difficulties of provenance research and the marginal position of less prominent donors within contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> In the early years of the Náprstek Museum, there were no trained specialists capable of systematically assessing the suitability of objects for the collection, and the museum’s collecting priorities changed considerably over the following decades. In the early 1960s, numerous items – both European and non-European – were removed as bazaar or souvenir type. In some cases, objects were also deaccessioned when several typologically similar items were found within a traveller’s collection. This policy affected a range of holdings, from the collections of well-known explorers to aristocratic donations acquired after the Second World War. Today, however, many of these once-discarded items would be regarded as valuable, reflecting a broader shift in how ethnographic and historical collections are interpreted. See Jünová Macková 2023, pp. 232–233.

<sup>4</sup> Contemporary definitions of ‘Japanese art’ in Europe were strongly influenced by publications such as Rutherford Alcock’s *Art and Art Industries in Japan* (Alcock 1878), which emphasized decorative forms – metalwork, *cloisonné*, lacquer, porcelain, carved ivory, and embroidered textiles – as representative of Japanese artistic achievement. In contrast, Antonie Urbánková’s collection consists largely of undecorated and utilitarian objects, demonstrating that such items also reached Europe, even if they were not initially recognised as ‘Japanese art’ in the contemporary sense.

<sup>5</sup> The author would like to thank PhDr. Dagmar Pospíšilová, CSc., Curator of the Collections of South and Southeast Asia and the Near East at the Náprstek Museum, for her valuable advice and suggestions, which significantly contributed to the identification of Antonie Urbánková.

cultural networks. In particular, the case of Antonie Urbánková reflects how female travellers could remain invisible in official records despite their active participation in collecting and donating. When examining contemporary newspapers, we discover several references to a woman named Antonie, or Tonča,<sup>6</sup> Urbánková, mainly in connection with Prague balls, charity fairs, and other social events. However, as we cannot find any further information in the newspapers and the surname Urbánková is fairly common, we can only speculate as to whether this is the same person who donated the objects to the museum or if it is just a coincidental match of names.

It is not until 1905 that an accurate note about the donor can be found in the papers. A short note in the May 1905 issue of the illustrated fortnightly *Český svět* (Czech World) mentions that: 'Miss Tonča Urbánková and her brother Mr. Dr. Miroslav Urbánek set out on a trip around the world.'<sup>7</sup> The note is provided with their photographs and no further details [Fig. 1]. It is unclear why the magazine found the journey worthy of mention. Any explanation must remain speculative: it is possible the two siblings were well known in Prague society and the press found their journey interesting. Or that the novelty of a woman undertaking a round-the-world trip attracted public attention. However, no contemporary evidence confirms these assumptions.



Fig. 1. Photographs of Antonie Urbánková and her brother Miroslav Urbánek accompanied by a note announcing their trip around the world; *Český svět*, 1905, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> 'Tonča' is a common Czech hypocoristic (diminutive or familiar) form of the name Antonie.

<sup>7</sup> *Český svět*, 1905, p. 28.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travelling abroad attracted considerable attention in Czech society, as evidenced by the popularity of travellers such as Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), famous for his journeys in South America, and Emil Holub (1847–1902), who travelled to Africa. Round-the-world journeys were popularised by Jules Verne’s 1873 novel *Le Tour du Monde en quatre-vingts jour* (Around the World in Eighty Days). By 1905, this novel was translated into Czech three times, which testifies to the extraordinary popularity of this topic amongst Czech readers. In 1893, the Czech teacher and traveller Josef Kořenský (1847–1938) undertook a great expedition known as the Round the World Voyage. He presented his travels to the public through lectures, some of which were given directly at the Náprstek Museum, as well as delivering them in the form of best-selling travel books.<sup>8</sup> During his travels, Kořenský acquired many artefacts from the places he visited and subsequently donated them to the Náprstek Museum shortly after his return.<sup>9</sup>

The reasons behind Antonie Urbánková’s world travels and her decision to donate the objects to the museum remain unknown. It is possible that the Urbánek siblings maintained some form of closer contact with the Náprstek Museum or with Josef Kořenský, who was himself connected to the circle of Czech travellers around Vojta Náprstek. No archival evidence confirms such contact beyond the donation of objects in 1906, yet the social and professional networks of Prague’s educated travellers make this possibility plausible. However, other references to the Urbánek siblings confirm an indirect connection to the museum.

These references come from the private correspondence and records of Josef ‘Joza’ Šrogl (1861–1924). Šrogl was a Czech musician, violinist, and conductor, who worked abroad for many years. First as a professor at the music conservatoire in Havana, and later in Russia. From 1894, he worked in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in the territory of the then Dutch East Indies.<sup>10</sup> Between 1900 and 1903, Šrogl donated around 20 Indonesian objects to the Náprstek Museum, further items entered the collection after his death.<sup>11</sup> He was acquainted with Josef Kořenský, who visited him in Indonesia. In Batavia, Šrogl also met the Urbánek siblings in the autumn of 1905, as evidenced by references in his letters and diaries:

A new compatriot and the first lady compatriot, whom I was pleased to welcome in the beautiful Insulinda,<sup>12</sup> also visited Batavia. I had met Dr. Urbánek earlier when he began his career as a military doctor in the Netherlands Indies. However, he did not like the new surroundings to the extent that he would keep his entire commitment (I think 5 years), so he returned the advance on his armament fees instead. Dr. Urbánek is headed for Shanghai, accompanying his sister around Java in the meantime.

She is certainly one of the few women from our country who are allowed to experience the fabulous regions of Oriental fantasy first-hand. I have enjoyed the company of a fellow countrywoman as time has permitted. I was pleased to see that Insulinda’s beauty impressed the visitor. Perhaps she will be able to offset the hardships of a long journey with the charm of new regions, so that the lady will remember the interesting countries she has travelled through and the kind people she has doubtless met.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> e.g., Kořenský 1889; Kořenský 1894; Kořenský 1895; Kořenský 1903.

<sup>9</sup> Tůmová 2024, pp. 133–135.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the life of Josef Šrogl see Pospíšilová and Winklerová 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Pospíšilová 2024, pp. 249–252.

<sup>12</sup> Insulinda, or Insulindia, is the archaic term for Malay Archipelago.

<sup>13</sup> Pospíšilová and Winklerová 2023, pp. 297–298.

The siblings spent several months in Indonesia, as Šrogl further mentions that he wanted to spend Christmas with them. We have no further information about their stay. However, it is certain that in addition to travelling, they were also collecting. They collected not only Indonesian weapons, donated to the Náprstek Museum by Miroslav Urbánek,<sup>14</sup> but also natural specimens and animals. The periodical *Zpráva o Museu království českého* (Report on the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia) for 1906 mentions that Antonie Urbánková became an active member of the Museum Society thanks to ‘abundant and valuable gifts,’<sup>15</sup> including ‘a huge Indian flying lemur (*Galeopterus variegatus*) and reptiles from Java’<sup>16</sup> to the National Museum.<sup>17</sup>

We have one more news report in connection with Indonesia, although it cannot be linked directly to our donor. In 1930, a travelogue in letters titled ‘*Na cestě do Indočíny*’ (On the way to Indochina) was published by the periodical *Ženský svět* (Women’s World).<sup>18</sup> Written by Tonča Urbánková, it recounts her journey through Southeast Asia. In it, the author reminisces about her trip to the region many years ago and recounts the changes she observed in the country and her experiences.

Antonie Urbánková also visited Japan during her travels. From the available evidence,<sup>19</sup> it is most likely that Antonie Urbánková visited Japan during her world journey in 1905–1906, shortly before donating the objects to the Náprstek Museum. No exact dates of her stay in Japan have been preserved. Upon returning to her homeland, she donated Japanese objects to the Náprstek Museum and natural objects to the National Museum. It is unclear why her trip to Japan – where she was amongst the first Czech women to travel – did not gain her more attention. If Urbánková was indeed the author of the 1930 letters, it is also questionable why she did not publish her notes in some form after 1906. The only source of information about her visit to Japan is the museum’s accession book.

## The acquisition of Urbánková’s collection

The accession book indicates that the collection of Japanese objects was donated by Miss Antonie Urbánková to commemorate what would have been the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Vojta Náprstek, the museum’s founder and philanthropist. The accession book serves as the principal source for reconstructing the circumstances of the donation, since no other archival documentation has survived. This reliance on a single source underlines the descriptive nature of the present study. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive provenance history, which is currently unattainable, but to situate Urbánková’s act of donation within the broader European practices of collecting Japan at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – that is, to understand how Japanese art and everyday objects were acquired, interpreted, and valued by European collectors, regardless of whether the purchases were made in Japan or in Europe.

Within this framework, the accession book becomes a key historical document. It lists Urbánková’s Japanese objects under Acc. Nos. 5452–5571, recording a total of 119 items, although in some cases a single number covers more than one object [Tab. 1]. Eighty-one of these items can still be traced in the museum’s collection today. Some were removed as duplicates, a com-

<sup>14</sup> Pospíšilová 2024, pp. 247–248.

<sup>15</sup> *Zpráva o Museu království českého za rok 1906*, 1907, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Zpráva o Museu království českého za rok 1906*, 1907, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia is former name of today’s National Museum. Although today the Náprstek Museum is part of the National Museum, in 1906 these were two institutions independent of each other.

<sup>18</sup> Urbánková 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Náprstek Museum accession book IV., pp. 169–176.

mon practice in the 1960s when objects existed in multiple copies and were not regarded particularly valuable. One object, a cricket cage, was given to a chain of state stores Klenoty (Jewels) in 1961. We have no documentation of the exact fate of the other items marked as ‘duplicates’, but it is likely that these items were also transferred to the store Klenoty and sold off. Some of the items were in such poor condition that they were shredded, this applied to one of the Japanese dolls.

The book does not provide new inventory numbers for some items in the Urbánková’s collection, like the Japanese fabrics (Acc. Nos. 5552–5561) or the *kakemono* scroll inspired by one of Hokusai’s prints. This means they cannot be reliably identified in the collection. It is possible that these items are no longer in the collection as the Náprstek Museum, then a private institution, faced financial problems and lacked suitable storage space in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This adversely affected the condition of some objects. Following the state’s takeover of the museum in the 1940s, an extensive revision was carried out. However, many objects from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries could not be traced. Others have simply not been identified, and it is possible that some of the objects are still in the museum but cannot with certainty be attributed to Antonie Urbánková.

The accession book also includes details of where objects from Urbánková were acquired, often including the Japanese term or a note on its use in Japan. For example, we find a note on a cricket cage stating that it is a ‘bamboo cage for various Japanese crickets. A favourite hobby of the Japanese.’<sup>20</sup> Similarly, information showing the many uses of various trays, bowls or baskets commonly used in Japan is provided. For example, we learn that bamboo chip boxes were used to store towels, food, or items for knitting.

The notes also provide information on the places the siblings visited in Japan. Large quantities of products were purchased in Hakone, specifically from the workshop of the local artisan Yamadaya Kichibei, possibly connected to the Yamadaya establishment known in Hakone since the Edo period for selling wooden objects and porcelain. They also visited a town Atami, famous for the *onsen* hot springs, where one of the wooden cigar boxes was purchased, and the capital city of Tokyo. In Tokyo, several items were acquired, including lacquerware and dolls, as well as a set of metal products, for which there is a note that they are items recorded as made in ‘Sugami Prison’ – almost certainly a misspelling of Sugamo Prison, one of the Japan’s largest and best-known penal institutions at the time. Antonie Urbánková’s notes reveal a genuine interest in her acquisitions, as evidenced by her ability to provide Japanese names for the objects, although often inaccurate. Such notes, even if sometimes linguistically imprecise, reveal her curiosity about the objects’ cultural context and her effort to document their origins.

## The Japanese collection

### *Lacquerware*

From the beginning of trade with Japan, Europeans had a keen interest in lacquerware and porcelain. During the Edo period the country was isolated and trade with Europe was only possible via the Dutch East India Company. From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Dutch traders were selling either Arita porcelain, or lacquered objects. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, these items were desirable luxury goods purchased by the wealthy and European aristocrats, as evidenced by their presence in the inventories of castles and aristocratic residences.<sup>21</sup> After Japan

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<sup>20</sup> Náprstek Museum accession book IV., p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> Suchomel and Suchomelová 2002, pp. 29–39.

opened-up, lacquerware remained popular with smaller, more affordable items such as bowls, sake cups, and jewellery boxes imported to Europe. These became a popular part of middle-class households.

The collection consists of fourteen lacquer-covered objects. Of these, only five are the usual black or red lacquer. An inkstone box *suzuribako* (Inv. No. 494), a cigarette case *makitabako* (Inv. No. 476), and a lacquered dose (Inv. No. 426) are covered in red lacquer and decorated with gold *maki-e*.<sup>22</sup> The two black lacquer objects are a square box with a modern design featuring a bird in silver *maki-e* (Inv. No. 475) and a set of small candy dishes housed in a round box (Inv. No. 420). The remaining eight items are decorated using the *rankaku-nuri* technique, which involves creating the desired pattern using small pieces of eggshell.

*Rankaku-nuri* probably developed during the Edo period and was mainly used to create delicate white decorations – mostly the white body of a crane against a black lacquered background. On Urbánková's objects (Inv. Nos. 483–486, 488, 490–492) on the other hand, the shells form a white ground and cover practically the entire body of the boxes. The other details, such as birds (like the crane, hen, rooster) or trees, are instead depicted in gold *maki-e*. Amongst the objects we find an inkstone box, a heart-shaped dose (Inv. No. 490), a hexagonal case filled with smaller doses, and a box for sweets *kashibako* whose wings could be opened to reveal smaller boxes decorated with *rankaku-nuri* (Inv. Nos. 486, 490, 492) [Pl. 1]. The complex shapes suggest that these goods were mainly intended for foreign markets.<sup>23</sup> All objects decorated with *rankaku-nuri* are labelled as having been purchased in Tokyo.

#### Inv. Nos. 486, 490, 492 [Pl. 1]

Set of boxes

Material: wood, lacquer, *rankaku-nuri*, gold *maki-e*

Dating: 1870–1905

Measurements: h. 5.5 cm, w. 6 cm; h. 12 cm, w. 8 cm; h. 3.3 cm, ø 7.5 cm

#### Toys and games

The Urbánková collection contains thirteen Japanese toys. These can be divided into two categories: dolls and puppets, whether for play or as souvenirs, simple folk games, and wooden toys. Of the dolls, two puppets have survived: one is the so-called *Kōbe ningyō* (Inv. No. 375), a mechanical toy (*automaton*) carved from wood. A simple mechanism causes the figurine to move when the pin is turned. The puppet in the Urbánková collection represents a man cutting a cucumber with a knife and taking a bite out of the cut piece. Both the figure's hands and its mouth are movable. *Kōbe ningyō* puppets first appeared after 1868 and became associated with the port of Kobe, which was one of the first open ports in Japan. They were made by local craftsmen and, although the mechanisms were not especially complex, their creation still required the skill of an experienced artisan. These dolls were expensive and made for foreigners who sailed into Kobe harbour.<sup>24</sup> The dolls' popularity as a tourist souvenir was due to their small size and lightweight nature, making them a well-known and popular item in the United States and Europe.

<sup>22</sup> A Japanese lacquer decoration in which motif is painted in lacquer on the surface of lacquerware and then sprinkler with gold or silver.

<sup>23</sup> Suchomel and Suchomelová 2002, pp. 276–277.

<sup>24</sup> Gaudeková and Kraemerová 2013, pp. 25–26.

Urbánková also brought two dolls intended for play; only one remains in the collection (Inv. No. 1858) [Pl. 1]. The other was discarded in 1989 due to its poor condition, but it was of the same type. It is a *mitsuore ningyō* doll, i.e., a doll with movable limbs. There are many types of Japanese doll. These were often items intended for display during holidays, but the *mitsuore ningyō* doll was genuinely designed for children's play.<sup>25</sup> The doll in the Urbánková collection is simple in its construction. It has a solid body, the arms and legs are made of wood covered in white pigment. The limbs are attached to the body via the fabric; the limb movement is made possible by this connection. The head of the doll is made from a mixture of sawdust and binder. It is covered in gouache, finished with glass eyes, painted features, and real hair. In addition to this type of *mitsuore ningyō*, it is also possible to encounter a more luxurious type where the individual limbs were set in joints, such dolls then also move their hands or feet. Although the doll in the Náprstek Museum is simple, it was nevertheless a sophisticated toy for children. The doll depicts a young girl wearing a green kimono adorned with flowers, and it was crafted in Tokyo.

The remaining objects are wooden games and toys purchased in Hakone. Some of these are labelled as having been made by the Hakone craftsman, Yamadaya Kichibei. Considering the similarity of the objects, it is likely that he made them all. The collection includes a simple moving toy depicting two marching dolls on a rolling straw (Inv. No. 373), a spinning toy (Inv. No. 320), and several nesting dolls (Inv. Nos. 360–364) representing either the Seven Lucky Gods or the Buddhist monk Daruma. In addition, Urbánková purchased toys at Yamadaya's shop that she referred to as *teasubi* – in fact *teasobi*, a term referring either to playing with the toy or to any hand-based activity. These items are simple toys in the form of puzzles or jigsaw puzzles which, with some variations, are still made and sold today, and not only in Japan. One is a simple circular maze (Inv. No. 326) [Pl. 2], where the aim is to get all the marbles into the central circle; the other two are a set of wooden puzzles (Inv. Nos. 369–370) of various shapes that need to be assembled to cover the bottom of a hexagonal box.

#### **Inv. No. 1858 [Pl. 1]**

A *mitsuore ningyō* doll

Material: wood, ink, paintings, textile

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 27.5 cm

#### **Inv. No. 326 [Pl. 2]**

A maze

Material: wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Inv. No. 326

Measurements: ø 10.5 cm

#### *Wooden objects*

The most numerous part of the Urbánková collection consists of 35 wooden objects in total. Most of these items were purchased in Hakone, at the aforementioned Yamadaya Kichibei's shop. In addition to making toys, he also produced wooden household items. The name Yamadaya is historically associated with a well-known shop and inn in Hakone, operating in the Edo period and still active today, specialising in wooden objects and porcelain. Whilst it is not

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<sup>25</sup> Gaudeková and Kraemerová 2013, p. 92.

certain whether the ‘Yamadaya Kichibei’ mentioned in the accession notes refers to this establishment or to an individual craftsman, the reference nevertheless situates Urbánková’s purchases within a recognised local network of craft production and trade. Notably, the woodwork from his workshop encompasses a wide variety of types, highlighting the diversity of Japanese wood craftsmanship.

These products are turned from wood (cherry wood, bamboo, or *Zelkova serrata* known in Japan as *keyaki*) and are characterised by their quality workmanship. They are either undecorated or very simply decorated. They were probably used in Japanese households in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most common are small cups and teapots (e.g., Inv. Nos. 307, 308, 329 [Pl. 2]) bowls, plates for sweets *kashisara*, and boxes for tea or spices. Of particular note are the wooden candle holder and the folding drinking cup. Three objects are recorded in the book as *komaki*: today, however, the term is *itomaki*. *Itomaki* (Inv. Nos. 352–354) [Pl. 3] are thread reels in the form of a simple wooden plate on which the thread was wound.

In addition to these undecorated objects, the collection also includes more elaborate wooden pieces. The entries in the book are not very specific, but some of these items were made by Yamadaya Kichibei. One hexagonal case is filled with boxes decorated with *yosegi-zaiku*. This technique involves assembling multicoloured pieces of wood into geometric patterns, gluing them together and cutting them into narrow strips, which are then applied to a wooden base. This technique was developed during the Edo period and is typical of the Hakone region. It was also well-liked by the Japanese, but after Japan opened up to the outside world, items adorned with *yosegi-zaiku* became popular souvenirs taken out of the country by foreigners. However, the Urbánková collection contains only one such fully decorated piece.

Some other items also feature *yosegi-zaiku*, but only as minor decorative detail. This is the case with two sets of wooden boxes which are noted as being cigar cases. These boxes feature a small *yosegi-zaiku* motif on their sides and are decorated with embossed wood decoration on their lids. These two sets are similar, and the information in the book states that one was purchased in Atami (Inv. No. 378) [Pl. 3], a spa town near Hakone, and the other in Yamadaya Kichibei’s shop (Inv. No. 379).

The collection also includes a brush case (Inv. No. 356), a large wooden vase with carved decoration, a sculpture of the Buddhist monk Daruma (Inv. No. 409) [Pl. 4] or several small carvings of the ‘wise monkeys’, a popular motif associated with the Tōshō-gū shrine in Nikkō. The monkey carvings were also made by Yamadaya Kichibei in Hakone.

### **Inv. Nos. 307, 308, 329 [Pl. 2]**

Set of wooden utensils

Material: wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: ø 12 cm, h. 13.5 cm; ø 4.5 cm, h. 4 cm; ø 6 cm, h. 5.5 cm

### **Inv. No. 353 [Pl. 3]**

*Itomaki*

Material: wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 6.5 cm, w. 6.5 cm

**Inv. No. 378 a–k [Pl. 3]**

Cigar cases *makitabako*

Material: wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 10.5 cm, w. 20.5 cm; h. 9.5 cm, w. 18 cm; h. 7.5 cm, w. 15.6 cm; h. 6 cm, w. 13.2 cm; h. 4.8, w. 11 cm; h. 2.8, w. 8.5 cm

**Inv. No. 409 [Pl. 4]**

Daruma statuette

Material: wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 27.5 cm, w. 14.5 cm

*Wicker objects*

Urbánková also brought various wicker products. Only six objects have survived to the present day. Originally, the list of such everyday necessities was longer – for example, tea scoops did not survive. Thus, only the baskets and boxes remain in the collection (Inv. Nos. 946–950, 960), these are considered to be beautiful examples of Japanese basketry. They are all made of bamboo splits, a material that may appear fragile but is highly flexible and durable. Bamboo, a naturally occurring plant in Japan, was one of the most accessible and most durable materials. Bamboo splits were used to make fishing pots, various baskets, fans, and boxes.<sup>26</sup> The boxes in the Urbánková collection are export rather than folk products and combine several techniques for weaving splits of different widths. Amongst them, a basket for food is found, another for wet towels, as well as a basket for storing yarn balls. The baskets are generally traditional in form, most often square or round; only the basket described as a box for yarn balls (Inv. No. 950) [Pl. 5] differs. Its construction is reinforced with bent wood and is fan shaped.

**Inv. No. 950 [Pl. 5]**

A box for yarn balls

Material: bamboo, wood

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 6.1 cm, w. 12 cm

The bottom of the basket is woven from wider splits in a simple net pattern (called *ajiro-ami*), while the lid combines several basketry techniques – part is woven in a *mutsume-ami* and part in a *mutsume-kiku* technique.<sup>27</sup> The lid is further decorated with bamboo twisted into the shape of a half-chrysanthemum, along with an emblem in the *nawame*<sup>28</sup> technique.

*Metalwork*

Japanese metalwork has a history of nearly 2,000 years. After Japan opened to the world, metal objects became popular acquisitions. Japanese swords were particularly fascinating, but as these

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<sup>26</sup> Winkelhöferová 2022, pp. 271–274.

<sup>27</sup> There are various methods how to weave the bamboo splits together. *Ajiro-ami* refers to a net weave and is typical for the agricultural baskets and shovels. In the *mutsume* technique, the weave creates a hexagonal pattern – *mutsume-ami* creates a loose weave, while *mutsume-kiku* creates a delicate pattern in shape of chrysanthemum. For more see Brauen 2003.

<sup>28</sup> This technique uses twining of the splits to create a pattern.

were amongst the more luxurious and expensive items, many collectors and travellers brought smaller metal ornamental parts of Japanese swords from the country instead, with *menuki* and *tsuba* guards being particularly popular. Interestingly, the Urbánková collection contains no such objects, even though similar items were brought back by other travellers and also entered the collection of the Náprstek Museum via department store purchases in Europe.

Antonie Urbánková's metal collection is small, containing only nine objects. As one of the few parts of her collection to remain intact, none of the pieces have been discarded as duplicates. The quality of the objects played a part in this – they are excellent examples of metalworking – but the way they were acquired probably played a part too. In fact, all the objects are described in the acquisition book as prison work from Sugami, Tokyo,<sup>29</sup> i.e., they were made in Sugamo Prison in Tokyo.

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan embarked on a path of Western-style modernisation that touched all parts of Japanese society. In addition to building industry and infrastructure, the reforms affected school education and the prison system. A number of reforms have been implemented in the prison system since the 1880s, affecting the treatment of prisoners and leading to the construction of new prisons. One of the first was Sugamo Prison, at that time one of the largest buildings in the country, with capacity of up to 2,400 prisoners. Japanese prisoners lived under a strict regime. One re-education method emphasised both schooling and the importance of labour in penal institutions. Prisoners were used to build roads and railways or work in mines; in addition to this, they made various items in prison workshops.<sup>29</sup> The metal objects from Urbánková's collection are the only objects in the Japanese collection of the Náprstek Museum known to be made by prison labour, particularly significant. They represent a rare surviving example of Meiji-period prison production, providing insight into the types of objects manufactured by inmates as part of vocational programmes and demonstrating the often-surprising quality of their craftsmanship.

Amongst these are two objects marked '*bunzin*' – weights shaped like a hare (Inv. No. 282), and a tortoise (Inv. No. 280). There are also two identical handwarmers *teaburi* (Inv. Nos. 255, 256) [Pl. 5], which are common in Japanese households. These vase-shaped heaters are decorated with geometric engravings on the neck and their handles are formed into the embossed head of a *shishi* lion. There are also two vases *hanatate* in the collection, one is shaped like a pouch and designed to be hung on the wall (Inv. No. 292), while the other has a stand (Inv. No. 258). A pair of decorative sculptures *okimono* and an incense burner *koro* are also included. One of the *okimono*s depicts a crouching bronze *shishi* lion (Inv. No. 285) [Pl. 6], while the other depicts a heron standing on one leg (Inv. No. 273) [Pl. 6]. The *koro* is in the form of a pigeon (Inv. No. 251) [Pl. 6]. The heron and the pigeon are particularly well crafted with small details such as feather markings and leg workmanship. The similarity of the two objects confirms that they were produced in the same workshop – namely Sugamo Prison – and possibly even by the same individual. These two objects are amongst the finest and most beautiful examples of Japanese metalworking in a Japanese collection and demonstrate the high quality of prison work.

#### **Inv. No. 255 [Pl. 5]**

A handwarmer *teaburi*

Material: bronze

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: ø 20 cm, h. 30 cm

<sup>29</sup> Botsman 2005, pp. 188–197.

**Inv. No. 285 [Pl. 6]**

A *shishi* lion *okimono*

Material: bronze

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 15 cm, w. 14.5 cm

**Inv. Nos. 251, 273 [Pl. 6]**

Heron *okimono* and pigeon *koro*

Material: bronze

Dating: 1900–1905

Measurements: h. 34 cm, w. 26 cm; h. 18 cm, w. 24 cm

## Conclusion

Antonie Urbánková's Japanese collection has long remained in the shadow of the Náprstek Museum's more famous holdings. Curators rarely displayed her objects and often dismissed them as duplicates or minor souvenirs. They valued ornate lacquerware and porcelain that reflected contemporary European taste for Japanese art whilst they overlooked the wooden utensils, toys, and wickerwork that Urbánková had brought back.<sup>30</sup>

Yet these very choices make her collection significant today. By buying objects directly in Japan during her world journey of 1905–1906, Urbánková documented what travellers could actually encounter and acquire in the area. Her accession notes – even when linguistically imprecise – show that she cared about the origins and uses of the objects. She noted Japanese terms, recorded places of purchase, and preserved details about workshops such as Yamadaya Kichibei in Hakone or the Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. In doing so, she did not act as a passive tourist but as a traveller with a genuine interest in everyday culture.

We may therefore view Urbánková as a kind of proto-ethnologist. She collected not for artistic prestige but for insight into the material world of ordinary Japanese life. This perspective explains why her collection seemed undervalued in her own time, yet it also reveals why it matters to us now. The Sugamo Prison metalwork, unique within Czech public collections, connects her to broader Meiji reforms; the wooden toys and household objects broaden our view of what counted as *Japanese art*<sup>31</sup> in Europe.

Urbánková also belonged to a small group of women who travelled to distant regions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figures such as Vlasta Vrázová (1900–1989), the wife of Enrique Stanko Vráz, or Růžena Holubová (1865–1958), the wife of Emil Holub, or later Růžena Trnožková (1868–1936), who lived in Japan with her husband Vojtěch (1867–1926) and assembled a collection of Japanese objects later donated to the Náprstek Museum,<sup>32</sup> likewise undertook demanding journeys but left few or no records of their experiences. Urbánková's collection therefore represents a rare and tangible legacy of a woman's independent encounter with Japan and Asia more broadly.

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<sup>30</sup> The notion of 'European expectations of Japanese art' refers here not to a formal definition, but to the aesthetic and collecting preferences prevalent in Europe from the late nineteenth to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These preferences are reflected in museum acquisitions, exhibition displays, and art criticism of the period, which tended to privilege ornate lacquerware and porcelain over objects of everyday use.

<sup>31</sup> Alcock 1878.

<sup>32</sup> Tůmová 2023, pp. 87–107.

Her collection thus broadens our understanding of Japonisme movement in Central Europe – not as an artistic style, but as a wider cultural phenomenon shaped by travel, collecting, and the interpretation of Japanese material culture. It shows that female travellers could act as independent agents of collecting and that everyday objects, once dismissed as trivial, can offer crucial evidence of how Japan was encountered and represented in Europe.

Tab. 1. The list of Japanese objects from the collection of Antonie Urbánková.

Acc. No.	Inv. No.	Item	Material	Provenience
5452	494	inkstone box	lacquer	Tokyo
5453	426	dose	lacquer	
5456	476	cigarette case	lacquer	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5457	420	box with plates	lacquer	
5458	492	box for sweets	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5460	486	dose	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5461	485	dose	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5463	488	dose	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5464	484	box	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5465	491	set of boxes	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5467	490	box	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5468	483	box	lacquer (rankaku-nuri)	Tokyo
5476	355	set of boxes	wood	
5477	421	dose	lacquer	
5478	378	set of boxes	wood	Atami
5482	356	box for brushes	wood	
5491	379	set of boxes	wood	Hakone
5495	373	toy – wooden dolls	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5496	362, 363	toy – nesting dolls	wood	Hakone
5497	360, 361	toy – nesting dolls	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5499	375	toy – <i>kōbe ningyō</i>	wood	
5501	318	toy – miniature utensils	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5502	369	toy – jigsaw puzzle	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5503	370	toy – jigsaw puzzle	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5505	320	toy – spinning wheel	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5507	326	toy – maze	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5509	307	teapot	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	308	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	309	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	310	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	311	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	312	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	313	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	314	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	315	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	316	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
	317	cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)

Acc. No.	Inv. No.	Item	Material	Provenience
5510	1858	toy – doll	wood, paper, textile	Toyko
5512	343	bowl	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5513	344	bowl	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5515	345	plate	wood	
5516	346	plate	wood	
5517	947	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5519	949	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5520	948	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5521	946	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5522	965	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5523	950	basket	bamboo splits	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5525	348	dose	bamboo	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5526	349	dose	bamboo	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5527	352	spool	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5528	353	spool	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5529	354	spool	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5530	330	dose	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5531	319	dose	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5533	331	dose	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5535	358	box	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5536	419	box	wood	
5537	387	vase	bamboo	
5538	332	dose	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5540	321	folding cup	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5542	333	box	wood	
5544	475	box	wood	
5545	329	chandelier	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5546	409	statuette – Daruma	wood	
5547	408	toy – three Daruma	wood	
5548	407	statuette – monk	wood	
5549	400	statuette – three monkeys	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5550	402	statuette – three monkeys	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5551	401	statuette – three monkeys	wood	Hakone (Yamadaya)
5562	292	vase	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5563	258	vase	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5564	255	handwarmer	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5565	256	handwarmer	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5566	273	<i>okimono</i> – heron	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5567	251	incense burner – pigeon	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5568	285	<i>okimono</i> – <i>shishi</i> lion	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5569	282	weight	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)
5570	280	weight	metalwork	Tokyo (Sugamo)

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Inv. Nos. 486, 490, 492



Inv. No. 1858



Inv. No. 326



Inv. Nos. 307, 308, 329



Inv. No. 353



Inv. No. 378 a-k



Inv. No. 409



Inv. No. 950



Inv. No. 255

Pl. 6



Inv. No. 285



Inv. Nos. 251, 273