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Edmund de Waal: a passion for pots

Edmund de Waal's last book was an unlikely bestseller about a family heirloom. Now he's written a history of his first love, ceramics. Laura Barnett talks to him about life behind the wheel

Laura Barnett



Storm in a teacup ... Edmund de Waal. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

When Edmund de Waal was five, he asked his dad to take him to a pottery class. They went. He made a pot. He decided that this was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. "I remember making that first pot," he says, "and thinking, that's it – that's what my life's going to be about: making pots. I am really lucky because I had that moment. I've never taken it for granted."

Now 47, De Waal has been a potter and ceramic artist for 25 years; respected for decades, but only truly famous beyond the pottery world since the publication, in June last year, of his book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. In synopsis, the book – a history of a set of Japanese *netsuke*, or miniature carved kimono toggles, bequeathed to him by his urbane great-uncle Iggy – sounds like something destined to gather dust next to *Fly Fishing* by JR Hartley. The reality is anything but dry or arcane: beautifully written and meticulously researched, the book sweeps effortlessly from fin-de-siècle Paris to wartime Vienna to American-occupied Tokyo. Five thousand copies were originally printed; the book has now sold around a quarter of a million copies, been translated into 24 languages, and a film adaptation is in the offing.

When I meet De Waal at his south London studio – pristine white walls, sloping glass ceiling, four potters' wheels in a neat row – I ask him if the book's success has taken him by surprise. He laughs gently. "What do you think? It's unbelievable. Extraordinary."

De Waal's own work as a potter is not central to *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, though the book is underpinned by his potter's feel for the importance of everyday objects, and their relationship with the people who own them. In his most recent book, however, De Waal has returned to his primary obsession. *The Pot Book*, published by Phaidon, is a weighty compendium of more than 300 pots and ceramic artworks, dating from the third millennium BC to the present day.

If *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is a delicate miniature, honing in on one family and one set of objects, then this is a large-scale, ambitious work, painting the history of ceramics with the broadest of brush strokes. We jump from a soup tureen emblazoned with the face of US artist Cindy Sherman dressed as Madame de Pompadour, to a creamy-white Japanese sake bottle; from a rough vase thrown by Picasso in 1950 and painted with large-bottomed female nudes, to a room in Berlin's Charlottenburg Palace decked out in brash gold and porcelain.

The pots are ordered alphabetically, one colour photograph and short history, written by De Waal, to a page. This ordering is at the heart of the book, which has taken him five years to research. "It's completely serendipitous," he says. "You pick it up, and there's a contemporary Chinese ceramic artist here on the left, and an amazing unknown art-deco Czech person on the right. You end up with some fantastically weird and wonderful combinations. It's a book that anyone can pick up – a teenager, or a student, or an art lover, or whatever – and get completely taken over by how broad and deep the history of pots actually is."

'Pottery is more than a tea cup'

That early revelation at a potter's wheel has made De Waal something of an evangelist. He had great trouble whittling down the 700 objects and artists he originally wanted to include in the book; of those who did make it in, he counts the Vienna-born potter Lucie Rie among his favourites. "She was a Jewish Viennese emigre who came to London in 1938, and had her flat packed up and brought with her," he says. "She made this really beautiful body of work: very austere, very exacting. When you've got a Lucie Rie pot on your table, or near you, you always feel slightly shabby."

At the heart of *The Pot Book* is De Waal's long-held belief that ceramics have been marginalised – thought of as purely decorative and not compelling works of art in their own right. He admits that things are changing: the 2009 redevelopment of the V&A's ceramics galleries has boosted the art form's profile, along with major recent exhibitions of artists such as Grayson Perry. But there is still, he thinks, a way to go before pottery is taken as seriously as painting or sculpture. "There are still deeply conventional people out there in the art world who are trying to guard the barricades. They're keeping pottery out. But there are also people within the ceramics world who go, 'Well, that's a bit arty. Can you drink from it?' What the book is saying is that there's this enormous cultural richness and scope about what pots can be – which is more than just a tea cup."

Alongside purely functional vessels (ancient amphora, a pretty 18th-century Sèvres tea set), *The Pot Book* includes challenging works by young ceramic artists. There's 35-year-old Caroline Slotte, from Finland, who seeks out old willow-pattern plates from junk shops and layers them together to create deep, intricate designs; and Britain's Tamsin van Essen, also 35, whose unsettling "psoriasis" jars use cracked glaze to resemble flaking, puckered skin.

A large number of the featured artists are women – many more than you'd find in the average art history compendium. "I haven't done a count," says De Waal, "but yes, there are a lot of women. I think it's to do with the fact that historically, pottery has been linked with eating and drinking and the domestic rituals of looking after people, with nurture. There are still cultures where you have to be a woman to make pots. When I was travelling in Ethiopia, for instance, and my wife introduced me as a potter, it was met with howls of laughter."

A quirk of alphabetical ordering places Chinese artist Ai Weiwei on the third page of the book, with his 2006 work *Coloured Vases*: a group of 51 ancient Chinese vessels, daubed with brightly coloured household paint. It feels like a timely statement about the fact that ceramics can be used to convey contentious political messages. De Waal agrees: "It's quite a polemical book. One of the things that I really hate is this idea that pots are a dull, suburban craft. They're absolutely in there in the middle of really complicated social and political moments. People use them because they're the Trojan horse: they're everyday, quotidian objects, so people think they're harmless. But they're a brilliant way of saying very profound things."

A thousand years of porcelain

His own artworks, while not overtly political, are about taking everyday objects and presenting them in a new light. While he was still at school in Canterbury, De Waal was apprenticed to the potter Geoffrey Whiting. He went on to study English at Cambridge, but then returned to turning out beautiful, functional pots (such as the heavy blue-grey coffee cups, pockmarked like lunar rubble, that we're drinking from as we talk) before moving into what he reluctantly terms "installations". "I absolutely hate the word, but I haven't found a better one."

These installations, for the most part, consist of display cabinets – some small and plain as picture-frames; others huge and compartmentalised, like kitchen dressers – filled with pots of varying sizes, each one glazed in milky white, or yellow, or gun-metal grey. He has shown them all over the world, most significantly at Tate Britain and the V&A museum, where, to mark the opening of the new ceramics galleries, he had a huge, red metal disc slung from the ceiling, and filled it with pots.

Next up is an installation for a faculty building in Cambridge: De Waal plans to embed a group of pots in the ground, beneath a glass floor. He's also writing a new book – a history of the colour white. "It's a story of porcelain over 1,000 years," he says, "but it's actually about why white matters. What white means." He looks around his bright-white studio; he smiles. "I am slightly obsessed with white."

Why does he think pots have remained so appealing across the centuries? He is silent for a long time. Then he says: "I think that there is a very, very core experience about holding a pot, about having something which is that scale in your hand. For me, it's like asking, 'Why do we still have a relationship with song?' You'd answer that by saying, 'Well before I even knew, my mum would sing to me'; it's part of what defines you as a person. Pots are that, too. They're with you all the way along."

The Pot Book is published by Phaidon. An illustrated edition of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, published by Chatto & Windus, is out now; also available as an ebook.