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**Edmund de Waal on his new exhibition, A
Thousand Hours**

**The thinking man's potter, Edmund de Waal, has
created his largest ever piece for his new
exhibition, A Thousand Hours**

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Edmund de Waal with his artwork A Thousand Hours

Is Edmund de Waal a potter who writes or a writer who makes pots? He has always equated writing with making, and finds that one very much informs the other. Though he is probably more widely known as the author of the bestselling book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, he has long been revered for his ceramic art, incorporating elements of architecture, sculpture, installation and poetry, which is held in collections at major museums all over the world.

One morning in May I found de Waal sitting at his wheel in his light, airy studio in south London in jeans and a yellow T-shirt, producing exquisite little pots the size of slender egg cups for his new exhibition, *A Thousand Hours*. It is soothing to watch because it looks so effortless, but the truth is that he has been doing this for more than 30 years, ever since he was a 17-year-old apprentice, sweeping up clay, learning about glazes and making clumsy attempts at pots.

This morning he is making the final 100 pots for the centrepiece of the exhibition, at the Alan Cristea Gallery in London, his biggest yet. Each one takes little more than a minute to make.

Turning to yesterday's pots, which have dried to the texture of leather, he selects one and pares it at the bottom, then signs it with a little stick that leaves a mark about a quarter-inch square. He bought it in Japan, and originally it had the Kanji symbol for the West on it, but now it is totally smooth, leaving nothing but a homoeopathic imprint of him. He has had it for 20 years but if he were to lose it, 'I wouldn't grieve,' he says, with characteristic lack of sentimentality. 'I'd just make another one.'

De Waal is a modest man, as befits the idea of a potter. Few people know that he was awarded an OBE last year, or that the work at his new show will sell for between £65,000 and half a million pounds. He lives in West Dulwich, London, with his wife, Sue, who works for the Department for International Development, and their three children, Ben, 14, Matthew, 13, and Anna, 10. He hosts a pottery workshop at the summer fair at his children's school. He is tall and friendly, effusive in an English way, with an open, responsive face: as he speaks a whole series of expressions cross his face in a minute ballet of innuendo.

We are talking about time, which is the theme of *A Thousand Hours*, and also the name of the biggest piece he has ever made: two giant vitrines containing 1,000 pots. 'It's like a building really, or two buildings, that you pass between. I'm so anti-monument. I hate grandiose stuff, so the challenge was to make something really big, without being grand. And how you can make people walk through it and round it and past it and it not be some terrible egotistical monument, but be really beautiful – how do you scale that hubris?'

There is no average day in de Waal's studio. There is usually a bit of making and a bit of writing, de Waal moving from one to the other in an organised way. He writes at a table upstairs, sitting on an unrestored 18th-century Chinese chair (swapped with a furniture dealer in San Francisco for a huge porcelain pot). He has four full-time staff and his research assistant, Nerissa Taysom, organises everything. She is also the DJ. 'Sometimes Edmund will want *Koyaanisqatsi* or a bit of Bach. And sometimes it's Florence and the Machine, or Talking Heads.' The atmosphere is calm and de Waal is a generous, urbane patron. Taysom can't remember him ever losing his temper.

The pots he has just made will dry overnight and will then be biscuit-fired, waxed on the base, then glazed by his assistants and fired. The kiln room has a pleasing atmosphere of alchemy and art. There is a gas kiln and an electric kiln, which produce different finishes, and sample pots stand on a shelf on the wall with varying glazes for reference. On the table is an exercise book labelled edmund's glaze book which contains recipes.

Rejected pots go into the shard pile. In counterpoint to the Cristea exhibition, de Waal is also working on his first piece of public sculpture, just installed at the new Alison Richard Building at the University of Cambridge. Three glass vitrines have been sunk in the courtyard outside that you walk across on the way to the building, each containing shards of porcelain and pots from de Waal's archive. 'All stacked up on top of each other, pots from the past, so in itself it's like a sort of archaeological dig.' The vitrines won't be signposted; you'll come across them if you're lucky. It's a typical de Waal idea: arcane, poetic, shadowy. As Francis Bacon said, 'The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery.'

Edmund de Waal has an unusual and esoteric background, filled with grand buildings and gothic spaces and scholarly atmospheres. Born in Nottingham in 1964, he is the son of the Rev Victor de Waal, a Dean of Canterbury Cathedral for 10 years, and Esther Moir, a historian. One of four boys, he grew up first in Lincoln in an unheated medieval house next to the cathedral, and then in

Canterbury. When he was five his father went to an evening class in pottery, taking him along. That was all it took to spark an obsession and de Waal can still remember his first pot and how he realised that he had found his vocation.

At the King's School in Canterbury he had a pottery teacher called Geoffrey Whiting. 'He was a wonderful, tough, austere man and when I was about 12 he said to me, "If you're serious about this, you know what to do." ' So de Waal would go there every afternoon after school. When he was 17, having got a scholarship to Cambridge to study English literature ('I lived and breathed poetry'), he took two years out and went to work for Whiting as an apprentice, sweeping floors and scraping asbestos walls (long before health and safety considerations; his lungs have reaped the damage) and learning from Whiting, who sat at his wheel with a Capstan Full Strength hanging from his mouth.

De Waal was a dedicated student, but making pots did not come naturally to him. 'It was a learnt thing for me, but I absolutely loved form, and the seriality of it. You make one thing and it's not so great, so you make another.' Whiting infused in the young de Waal the importance of repetition in acquiring a skill. 'He said, "You're going to do it for ever." It's the same with people who learn music – everyone accepts that's how long things take. I got my 15 years in early on.'

Whiting was a disciple of Bernard Leach, the definitive potter of the 20th century, and he made conventional pots in the Leach tradition – functional pieces in blues and greys and browns. 'That's the mantra I had, that you make things for use. My breaking away from that – realising that it wasn't a model that made sense to me – was very slow and quite painful in coming.'

When he left Cambridge he moved to Herefordshire, borrowing his parents' cottage for two years, and living the life of the rural potter. 'The whole Leachy thing: I dug my own clay, I made my own wood ash, I built my own kiln. And I made absolutely god-awful functional pots.' It was a time that de Waal now describes, with understatement, as 'a bit dogged'. He sold a few things, at craft shops and Hereford market – 'one year I made £980' – and lived very cheaply, on an awful lot of root vegetables.

In 1986 he moved to Sheffield, having discovered that it was the cheapest place to live. 'It was a toss-up between Barnsley and Sheffield. Sheffield won.' He bought a terraced house with a yard and a little workshop for £13,000 and became an urban potter, making exactly the same pots as in Herefordshire. And then he started, gradually, to work in porcelain. And it changed everything.

It's not exactly heresy in Leach world to use porcelain but it was used only in a very precious way. 'Very occasionally, and only for teapots and fine bowls. I wanted to make functional pots out of porcelain, so I retrained myself. And I realised I was in a different game. None of the truths I'd grown up with about pots made sense. But actually, what I was interested in and had read about and thought through was all present in porcelain. It was actually poetry, it was a poetic material.'

In 1991 de Waal had an invitation to go to Japan, on a two-year Anglo-Japanese foundation scholarship. Mornings were spent learning Japanese, afternoons working in a ceramics studio, or in an archive studying Leach for a book he was planning. By this time he had got together with his future wife, Sue Chandler, whom he met at Cambridge, but she was in Tibet working for Save the Children, and they could communicate only by letter. For company de Waal would visit his Uncle Iggie, who had moved to Tokyo in 1947, and it was here that he first saw the collection of netsuke (Japanese miniature sculptures) which became the subject of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.

His experience in Japan resolved things for him, liberated him. 'My pots got freer, it was like shedding something.' If there was a pre-Japan pot, and a post-Japan pot, de Waal says now, 'the pre-Japan pot would be standing to attention, quite rigidly. It would hold its profile quite exactly. It would be beautifully balanced, but very self-conscious. The post-Japan pot would be much happier in its own skin. It would be a bit more wayward, hold some randomness within it. One would be me, projecting something into the world, and the other would be me happier.' Porcelain became his language. 'And I learnt I could use that language to make tactical groupings of things.'

Returning to England in 1993, he got himself a studio and began showing his work at Chelsea Craft Fair. By the end of the first day almost everything had sold. 'I sold some in groups, and there were some teapots that were barely functional. I made beakers and not mugs, so you could actually hold them. And some lidded jars. It was softly thrown porcelain, you wanted to pick it up – and there was this extraordinary response.'

Immediately there were invitations for exhibitions. He married Sue in 1997, and the following year published his book on Leach, which was controversial and upset the order of things in pottery circles; he even got hate mail. Two years later he wrote a book on 20th-century ceramics, which also addressed things in a different light. 'Those attempts to write a bit around the subject will always be a way to make a space that my work can inhabit,' he says. 'In a world where there isn't any real writing about ceramics, I felt I had to get it out there, in order to do the next thing I wanted to do.'

In 2001 he made an installation for the Geffrye Museum in east London, the Porcelain Room ('my first real stake in the ground'), a porcelain wall with about 400 pots and an attic space. The exhibition travelled in various adaptations before it was bought by a collector, Sarah Griffin, and adapted for her home. His pots were no longer sold individually – you could only buy the whole lot.

In the past 10 years he has done very few commercial shows, most have been in museums: these he calls 'interventions' – making work in response to their existing collections: Blackwell House and the National Museum in Cardiff in 2005; Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, and the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art in 2006, followed by Chatsworth, where he created a sort of porcelain corridor, inserting his work among the opulence and classicism of Chatsworth House, commissioned by an enthusiastic Duke of Devonshire.

De Waal won't make things to fit a prescribed space. In 2008 the V&A approached him with a commission, and said he could put it anywhere he liked. 'I said, "OK. The dome." They gulped, and said, "Oh God," but then they said yes.' So he made *Signs and Wonders*, presiding over the ceramic gallery, installed in the dome overhead, out of reach, almost part of the structure of the building. You have to look up high to see it, like a precious dinner service that has been put out of the way so it won't be used and broken.

In 2005 de Waal was at a dinner with some academics, where the conversation was about Japanese art in the West. Slightly drunk, he found himself telling them about the netsuke he had encountered at his uncle's house in Japan, which had made its way from a Paris salon to Vienna and back to Japan, surviving the Second World War. Telling them this story he felt 'slightly sickened by how poised it sounds', he writes in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. 'I hear myself

entertaining them, and the story echoes back in their reactions. It isn't just getting smoother, it is getting thinner. I must sort it out now or it will disappear.'

He sorted it out. He got himself a literary agent and wrote a proposal, which was rejected by about 20 people but taken up by Clara Farmer, an editor at Chatto & Windus. The advance was £10,000. And then he went off and wrote it, a story of restitution beginning with the life of his ancestor Charles Ephrussi in Paris, and ending in Japan with his uncle. It took five years to write. When the book was published in June 2010 Farmer expected great critical reviews and small sales. What she got was overwhelming reviews and a bestseller. *The Hare With Amber Eyes* has sold more than a million copies worldwide, and de Waal won the Costa Biography award and the Ondaatje Prize.

It was a perfect storm: a fantastic story within a beautifully written book; a public appetite for something more substantial than cookery books and misery memoirs, and an author who was personable and charismatic and keen to go out there and escort the book into people's consciousness. De Waal gave talks everywhere, from the Jewish museum in London to the Opera House in Sydney, each one different, every one impassioned.

After the book, he started putting his work into vitrines. Vitrines became his crucible. They have always played a part in his life – as a boy he displayed his fossils in a vitrine in his bedroom, and in the book the netsuke were displayed in a vitrine, 'as tall as a tall man'. Vitrines, he says, distil everything. He is passionate about touch, but also about not touching. Vitrines remove the work, separating it from the viewer, creating a threshold. The frosted glass puts the pots out of focus, like a Gerhard Richter painting. Accessible, but out of reach. A vitrine, de Waal says, is like 'wrapping up a bit of air and holding it in a special way.'

This year he was invited by Jacob Rothschild to do a show at Waddesdon Manor, the French renaissance-style chateau in Buckinghamshire. De Waal had to work out how to create installations to place on 18th-century console tables, hard up against Sèvres pottery, and he started to think of the whole house as a vitrine. A vitrine containing a giant art collection which he had to infiltrate.

It is a sunny morning in early September, and final preparations are being made for the Alan Cristea exhibition. De Waal's diary is being choreographed by Taysom – an imminent trip to New York, a secular sermon at the School of Life, a *Desert Island Discs* recording for later in the year. The work is all packed up in bespoke crates ready to be shipped to the gallery. There will be a week to install it, and de Waal is sitting at the table discussing this with Stephanie Forrest, his studio director, drinking strong coffee from one of his own beakers, made in an earlier, functional moment.

He has recently returned from a trip to Jingdezhen, home of the purest clay in China, where porcelain has been made for 1,000 years. He is talking about the hundreds of workshops and factories and people pushing around barrows of unglazed porcelain, how he bought some beautiful (faked) Tang dynasty tea bowls for a few pounds. This was a research trip for his next book, and also for a collaboration with the Chinese porcelain collections at the Fitzwilliam Museum, for an exhibition opening in February. De Waal is animated, inspired, gesticulating with his long-fingered hands; there is a hum of creativity around him. You can almost see the words fizzing in his head, feel the ideas taking root, springing up out of nothing and arranging themselves in little groups, to form stories and dramas, like his pots.