

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Edmund de Waal's Unfinished Business

"The Hare with Amber Eyes" has become an international phenomenon. Fiammetta Rocco follows the author to Vienna and finds the saga continuing ...

Fiammetta Rocco



Picture: Edmund de Waal at his studio in south London, photographed by Jonathan Root

They were well into the wine before they started telling stories. All day long the delegates at the 2005 Harvard conference on 20th-century studio ceramics had been listening to presentations on the Mingei movement in Japan, debating the role of folk art and the importance of Bernard Leach, a British potter who settled in Japan and became very influential. But as the main course was cleared away, those sitting at a table to one side of the room became captivated by a tale being recounted by another British potter, Edmund de Waal. It was about the Japanese netsuke his family had bought in the 1870s. Within half a century, they were one of the richest in Vienna, with a grand house on the Ringstrasse. At the Anschluss in 1938 the netsuke disappeared; stolen, the family thought. It was only after the war that they discovered they'd been hidden from the Nazis by a faithful servant, Anna. "This would make such a great book," said Michael Goldfarb, a New York collector and one of those listening. "Edmund, you've got to stop talking and start writing. This is the book you were born to write."

Published in June 2010, “The Hare with Amber Eyes” has become the most successful family memoir of the decade. The tale of the vitrine of little Japanese figures passed down through five generations of the same family, from Paris to Vienna to Tunbridge Wells and Tokyo and back to south London, has seen 63,500 copies printed in hardback, 376,000 in paperback, and now there is an illustrated edition too, priced at £25. And that’s just in Britain.

“The Hare with Amber Eyes” has been translated into 22 languages; not just the obvious ones to do with the story, like German and Hebrew, but also Serbian, Finnish and Chinese. When the book came out in Germany, it sold so fast that it had to be reprinted repeatedly in the first six weeks. In Austria it topped the bestseller list two months before its launch.

It is hard to know what makes a bestseller. If it were easy, no publisher would have turned down “We Need to Talk About Kevin” or Harry Potter. Yet dozens did. And so it was with “The Hare with Amber Eyes”. Eight British publishing houses passed on it. Only one bid came in for the book when the proposal was submitted. Yet from the very start, reviewers and readers were united in their embrace of this intimate story of a lost family and a lost time. Waterstone’s, one book chain, failed to order it at first, but the reading public defied its lack of imagination. The book sold by word of mouth and with the enthusiastic backing of independent booksellers who did what good booksellers are meant to do: they read it, recommended it and re-ordered copies, over and over again.

For years Edmund de Waal has worked alone. First with his hands, practising throwing pots, and then in his head, memorising Japanese *kanji* characters and learning to be a writer. Even now that he has become well known, he is uneasy in the spotlight. He starts and re-starts his sentences, gathering up the words and rearranging them as if his phrases were inelegant pots to be scrapped and thrown afresh. “The longer I live with the book, the more I go on thinking about it and talking about it, the more I really do register that there is something extraordinarily basic about it. There’s the journey element, that arc of going in search of something that’s hidden. But the real heart of the book is that thing about family silences, about not knowing something about your family. That, I think, is common to everyone.”

Family silences are a way of controlling secrets, assuaging fears, leaving behind the terrors of the past. But what happens when the silence is broken? Who owns the story then? From whom is it taken? And to whom is it given?

“The Hare with Amber Eyes” describes the rise and fall of one family in Europe. Having written about them, the author was faced with the unintended consequences of his discoveries: that just as every national history belongs in a different way to every nation, so every family story belongs to each relation, and every narrative contains elements claimed in equal measure by the teller and the told.

In the de Waal family, third-born Edmund was the free spirit. A natural scholar who got a first at Cambridge, he could have been an academic but instead became a potter. Two of his brothers, Alex (older) and Tom (younger), are the writers. In the family narrative, Edmund the potter was never meant to become Edmund the writer, never mind the bestselling chronicler of the family’s story, star turn at literary festivals and the darling of book groups up and down the country.

Edmund de Waal first saw the hare with amber eyes and the 263 other netsuke when he was 17. They perched in a glass vitrine in a flat in Tokyo that his gay great-uncle Iggie shared with his friend Jiro Sugiyama. “I thought they were precious, fiddly, horrid little objects,” says de Waal. “But they have been in my life now for 30 years, and I have begun to have a different relationship with them.” The netsuke had been bought as a job lot in Paris a century earlier by de Waal’s great-great-uncle, Charles Ephrussi, who was Proust’s patron. It was the moment when *Japonisme*, the first wave of European Japanomania, took hold in France, in the 1870s. When Ephrussi grew tired of them, on the cusp of the new century, he packed them up—along with two other more important family gifts—as a wedding present to his cousin, Viktor, by then Viktor von Ephrussi, Iggie’s father, who had moved up in the world, from Odessa to Vienna.



Edmund de Waal's great-uncle Iggie with his family's netsuke

Iggie’s three siblings, all born in Vienna like him, would die variously in Monmouth, Mexico and New York City. Iggie himself would die in Tokyo in 1994, having first become an American and fought with the allies in the second world war. Odessa, Paris, Vienna: the mansions that the Ephrussis built in the great cities of Europe stand as elegant milestones in the dark tumult of the 20th century, when a family of grain traders from the Black Sea rose to become bankers as rich as the Rothschilds, first in Paris and then in Vienna.

The two other family wedding gifts to Viktor and his young bride, Emmy Schey von Koromla, were a Dutch Old Master painting of two ships in a gale and a beautiful Louis XVI marquetry desk with tapering legs ending in little gilt hooves. Grand and showy, these were easy pieces to place in the elegant palais the Ephrussis built on Vienna’s opulent Ringstrasse, a place so popular with newly wealthy Jews it was known as Zionstrasse. The netsuke were more of a problem. They were small and full of secrets; their vitrine less a showcase for display than for opening, reaching in and picking up—“a moment of seduction, an encounter between a hand and an object that is electric,” de Waal would write later. The netsuke found a home in Emmy’s dressing room, where the children used to take them out and play.

Forty years later, the Palais Ephrussi was invaded by the Gestapo who smashed the furniture and carried away the paintings, the globes in the library and the suites of Meissen porcelain. Only the

netsuke were saved. As German stormtroopers emptied drawers and cupboards and Nazi art historians made inventories of works that might appeal to Hitler, Emmy's lady's maid, Anna, opened the vitrine and took down the netsuke, hiding them in small handfuls in the pockets of her apron. Downstairs in her narrow room, she pushed them inside the horsehair of her mattress and sewed it up. It took her two weeks to gather them to safety. Seven years afterwards, in 1945, Emmy's daughter, Elisabeth, returned to Vienna. The Palais Ephrussi was by then the offices of the American occupying authorities. The lieutenant in charge knew a woman who had worked in the house before the war. Anna retrieved the netsuke from their horsehair sanctuary and Elisabeth took them back with her to Tunbridge Wells. No one knows what became of Anna. No one even knows her surname.

By the time Edmund was born, in 1964, the family had been in Britain for more than a quarter of a century, and felt themselves to be English through and through. Edmund's father, the Rev Dr Victor de Waal (named after his grand-father, Viktor), had become an Anglican convert, a Cambridge vicar who was appointed the 37th dean of Canterbury cathedral. The four de Waal boys grew up with English hearts, fed on cricket and sacred music.

"My father, chaplain of King's College [Cambridge], dean of Canterbury. And my uncle Constant, who becomes Sir Henry de Waal, QC, Parliamentary Counsel. You couldn't get two more conventional Englishmen. And yet they both have this unknown hinterland," de Waal explains. Here and there a glimpse of a Mittel-european heritage: Victor consciously spelt the English way despite his antecedent; a handful of flimsy, desperate letters between Elisabeth de Waal and her parents, Viktor and Emmy, who were trapped in Vienna after the Nazi invasion in 1938. The Anglican reverend never spoke of his family history to his sons. Yet when Elisabeth died, Victor de Waal, "born in Amsterdam with a childhood everywhere in Europe, stood in his Benedictine-black, rabbinical-black cassock and recited the Kaddish for his mother in the English parish church near her nursing home." And when Dr de Waal had himself painted for the Canterbury deanery, he asked to be portrayed not as an English clergyman but in the manner of his ancestors, as a Jewish rabbi.

The netsuke that Victor de Waal remembered from his childhood visits to the Palais Ephrussi had been brought to England by Elisabeth after the war, given to her brother, Iggie, who took them "home" to Japan. When Iggie died in 1994, Jiro Sugiyama and Edmund packed up his things. Jiro then took out his brush and ink and wrote a document and sealed it. It said that, in due course, Edmund should look after the netsuke.



Picture: Edmund de Waal's ceramics, photographed at his studio in south London (Jonathan Root)

Edmund de Waal was five years old when he learned to mould clay. He badgered his father to take him to an evening class, and soon he would steal off every day after school to a pottery workshop and throw pots. He was like a musical prodigy, turning the wheel instead of practising arpeggios. After Cambridge he spent seven years perfecting his pots in “silent, ordered studios” on the Welsh borders. He summered in Japan, tracking down the “severe masters in pottery villages across the country”, and sat with his great-uncle Iggie and Jiro in their Tokyo sitting room with the vitrine of netsuke, listening while Iggie picked at the threads of the past, unveiling memories only to let the curtain fall upon them once more.

Long before he knew how he wanted to write down his family story, Edmund de Waal had made up his mind what he did not want to write. He did not want it to be biography with its “slightly clammy feeling”, its “sense of living on the edges of other people’s lives without their permission”. Nor did he want “to get into the sephia saga business, writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss”.

“It would come out as nostalgic. And thin.” He felt he was “not entitled to nostalgia about all that lost wealth and glamour from a century ago”. He was “not interested in thin”. And so he stuck to the shallows, dipping about in the safety of art history and facts. He became a flâneur in Charles Ephrussi’s Paris, hung out with his younger brother, Tom, in Odessa, burrowed about in libraries, and made lists of the netsuke:

A fox with inlaid eyes, in wood
A curled snake on a lotus leaf, in ivory
A boxwood hare and the moon
A standing warrior
A sleeping servant
Children playing with masks
Children playing with puppies
Children playing with a samurai helmet
Three toads on a leaf
Dozens of ivory rats.

Rats were popular, he wrote, “perhaps because they give the maker the chance to wrap those sinuous tails round each other, over the pails of water, the dead fish, the beggars’ robes, and then fold those paws underneath the carvings.” The more he held them, the more de Waal learned about the netsuke. “Hard and tricky and Japanese,” they are, he decided finally, “a small, tough explosion of exactitude”. They deserved “this kind of exactitude in return”.

When he came to write it all up, though, it sounded a little like something from a university cultural-studies programme. “It was ‘can I provide a really accurate bit of cultural history about where things have been and if things had been, and make it communicable to other people?’ That was my way of protecting myself. And then, of course, it all fell apart.”

He wrote eight chapters and found he could not go on. “They were written in this slightly arch, rather professional, detached way, a bit wry, a bit knowing. And completely removed from what was going on. It was just phoney. I read it and it was completely phoney. It was just a construct... You’re a writer for goodness sake. You know when it doesn’t ring true at all. I hated writing it. I was absolutely hating writing it.”

So he began again. He took inspiration from Vasily Grossman, who had written one of the greatest novels of the second world war, “Life and Fate”. Like Joseph Conrad and the Ephrussi, Grossman came originally from Berdichev in the Pale of Settlement. His own family story there had taught him that “we can survive anything if we have stories to tell.” Drawing both on the exacting nature of the netsuke themselves and the muddled human experience of those who had owned them, de Waal set off afresh on his polemic against nostalgia and melancholy. “Part of the complexity was to navigate my way between the stuff and the story, because there’s the stuff and there’s the story, and sometimes they match each other and sometimes they don’t.” Writing was still hard, but the hard part this time was different. It was Vienna in 1938.

To write that climactic chapter, de Waal took himself off with his dog to a small cottage he and his wife had bought years before, on the Ardnamurchan peninsula on the west coast of Scotland. By day, he walked the beaches with the dog and arranged and rearranged his thoughts. By night, he wrote, ticking off the crucial dates of that fateful spring almost as they unfolded: 1938, March 10th, hopes high for the plebiscite on Austria’s independence. March 11th, German troops cross the border. Nazi flags hung from government ministries. March 12th, Austria declared National Socialist. The first Jewish shop windows broken. Youths in swastika armbands swarm through the Palais Ephrussi, ransacking closets and tipping the globes from their stands. Viktor and Emmy pushed against the wall. The marquetry desk, which came with the netsuke as a wedding present from Paris, heaved over the handrail, the wood, gilt and marquetry splintering on the stone flags of the courtyard two floors below.

In March and April 1938, 160 Jews committed suicide. Jews working in theatres and orchestras were summarily dismissed, as were state and municipal employees. Jewish teachers, lawyers and public prosecutors lost their jobs too. Frozen in indecision, Viktor, Emmy and Anna huddled in three rooms. On April 23rd, the Gestapo arrived. “They started out quite polite,” de Waal wrote.

“They asked for keys, rifled through the little tables in the salon, swept through the catalogues in the library, reached into the linen closets and jerked away the tapestries from the wall. They searched the 24 rooms in the family apartment, and opened up the safe, the silver-room and the porcelain store where the plates were stacked, service by service.”

Viktor and his son were arrested. Three days later Viktor signed it all away, “the Palais and its contents and all his other properties in Vienna, the accumulation of all the diligence of the family, a hundred years of possessions,” de Waal wrote. The netsuke nestled within Anna’s mattress, and 30 of the Ephrussi pictures were marked for redistribution to museums, stolen by the Nazis.

On April 27th, the property at 14 Dr Karl Lueger Ring, Vienna 1, formerly the Palais Ephrussi, was declared fully Aryanised. Six weeks after the plebiscite the family had been cleansed from the city. Years later de Waal returned to the Jewish archive in Vienna and looked up Viktor von Ephrussi. There was a red stamp across his first name. It read “Israel”. Someone had gone through every name on the list of Viennese Jews and stamped them with new names: “Israel” for the men, “Sara” for the women. The family had not been erased, he wrote, but written over. “Finally, it is this that made me cry.”



Picture: Charles Ephrussi, de Waal's great-great-uncle, who was Proust's patron and may have been the model for Swann

Talking in his south London studio, de Waal picks up the thread of how he came to write his book. “The idea of writing in a much more exposed way was pretty alarming. And rightly, as it turned out, because [I know] having written this bloody book, [that] it’s completely exposing. Ludicrously exposing.” He had solved the problem of trying to be an author when he stopped writing a book and started telling a story. That is what readers have responded to in “The Hare with Amber Eyes”. But the exposure of being published brought him new challenges.

The first came from his younger brother, Tom, the expert on Odessa who had long thought that he might write the Ephrussi story himself. Neither brother will speak in detail about what passed between them. Shock at the book’s success certainly seems to have played a part for Tom de Waal and a feeling of being supplanted as a chronicler, being robbed of the possibility of something. “There were mixed feelings on my part,” is all he will say. He had once written his own proposal for a book about Odessa and the Ephrussi family, but publishers who saw it thought it was “too diffuse”. When he was sent the manuscript of “The Hare with Amber Eyes” to read, Tom de Waal

felt his input hadn't been sufficiently recognised, and he asked that the wording be changed. The brothers no longer speak about this particular subject though Tom still hopes to write his Odessa book one day. "For Tom, who went on some of the travels with me and knew Odessa inside out, it's been particularly personal," Edmund de Waal says. "But I don't think that not writing something helps other people write things. I really will go to the wall on that one."

And then there was the public. The French objected to de Waal's claim that his great-great-uncle Charles Ephrussi, Proust's patron, had been the model for Charles Swann. "It was a sense of impropriety, that an Englishman should consider that Proust was available to be written about." One reviewer could read no further than the Proust chapter. The French publishers also seemed to miss the point, giving the book a silly, anodyne title, "La Mémoire Retrouvée". In France the book has been a rare failure.

In America, de Waal found that as an Anglican with a Jewish background married to a woman of Quaker stock, he faced questions of a different nature. His book tour opened at the Jewish Museum in New York, where he reached into his pocket and pulled out the hare with amber eyes. "Can I interest you in looking at a hare?" he asked the crowd. But all they wanted to know was about being Jewish. "You've written this book. So what does it mean for you?" one reader asked. "Does this mean you're Jewish? Does it mean you're back in the community? Does that mean you are bringing your children up as Jewish?" He found himself unprepared for the intense religious nosiness ("no one would dream of asking that in England"), and left audiences unconvinced when he told them, "I certainly do feel, having done this journey, very conscious of my Jewishness, which is a significant part of me. But the reality is that I don't know. I am still in a right muddle over all that."

And then there is the issue of Nazi looting. In contrast with Britain, in America "The Hare with Amber Eyes" has been held up as a book about the penalties and pain of restitution, he says, "about why people give up and others think it's still worth attempting to heal something, attempting to make a bridge with a lost past, attempting to try and connect with a bit of family history that's been taken away."

In the 18 months since the book came out, de Waal has completed six overseas book tours, given dozens of talks, answered hundreds if not thousands of questions. He has also kept his porcelain-making studio busy and has plans for a subsequent book, about the history of porcelain around the world, which will take him from 18th-century Plymouth to the hillsides outside Jingdezhen where porcelain was first made in China, via Dresden, Marco Polo's Venice, Istanbul and Yemen. "Porcelain", he says, "is light when most things are heavy. It rings clear when you tap it. You can see the sunlight shine through. It is in the category of materials that turn objects into something else. It is alchemy. Porcelain starts elsewhere, takes you elsewhere. Who could not be obsessed?" There have been personal milestones as well. His father-in-law has died, his dog has died. He and his wife and their three children have moved to a bigger house in south London, the vitrine set up in the hall, the 264 netsuke unpacked.

He has made at least £500,000 from "The Hare with Amber Eyes". But more than money, the book has given him exposure. Lord Rothschild has commissioned an installation for his former family home, Waddesdon Manor, now part of the National Trust. Larry Gagosian, the world's leading art dealer, has taken on de Waal and promised him an exhibition in New York in 2013. And he was offered many, many times his £10,000 advance on "The Hare with Amber Eyes" for the new porcelain book. But first he had to return to Vienna.

The de Waal family gathered en masse in October for the launch of the Austrian edition. Edmund came by train, fresh from his German book tour. His wife, Sue Chandler, and their two sons flew in from London. His father Victor, now 82, was there too. Jiro Sugiyama came from Tokyo and invited the family to stay at the Grand Hotel which, like the Palais Ephrussi, had once been a private house, home to a Jewish banker and his grand-daughter.

The Palais Ephrussi is now owned by a law firm which bought it in 2009 for a reported €65m. (Elisabeth de Waal got just \$30,000 in compensation for it from the Austrian government after the war.) The law firm invited Edmund and the other Ephrussi descendants to tea. Victor, who hadn't been back to the house for nearly three-quarters of a century, showed his grandsons his old playroom and a hidden route to the roof. In the evening, the publisher's guests stepped over the initials "JE" (for Joachim Ephrussi, the founder of the family) set in the marble entrance and gathered around de Waal in the courtyard. In his familiar floppy dark suit and thin tie, he stood on the spot where Emmy's marquetry desk had come crashing down over the balcony, the first Ephrussi to address a gathering there since before the war.

"You cannot imagine how scary it is to do this," he began. "If I had understood quite what I'd been given when I was given these little Japanese things I would have run away. In my naivety, I thought I could take six months off from my studio, run to Paris, skip off to Vienna, write my book, give it to my father to read and that would be that.

"But I had made a very stupid and personal pact, which was to go to every single place and be in every single space that these things had been and try and understand the feeling of the people who held them. And that, of course, was madness.

"When I began this book, I had not thought through what it would take to tell the story of 1938. It is still history you can reach out and touch. It's history that unfolded hour by hour, day by day, in this house. The violence. The separation.

"When, after eight years, my grandmother returned, it was not to an empty house, but to an emptied house.

"I find that I am the same person and a different person. I make the same pots and I make different pots. I sit at my wheel and I think about the collections of porcelain that I make and I think about diaspora and stories and place. The process that has brought me here today has given back the story. Not the story about the dynasty, the banks, the gilding. That's not the point. The point is that it is a family story, and like all family stories it goes on and on. This family story was given to me when I was given these objects.

"Restitution is a very loaded word. It has so many cadences. It is giving what has been stolen and looted. Of my grandfather's library there is no trace. There are paintings hanging all over Vienna, all over Germany that were taken from this house. And that's a crime, a straightforward crime.

"Yet there is also another restitution; the restitution of the story. What Anna gave back to my grandmother was continuity, it was her story, and it was giving with incredible evenhandedness. For me 'The Hare with Amber Eyes' has been the restitution to Vienna of this story, this family and this place."

As he reached out to beckon his father and his young sons to join him on the podium, de Waal knew this was another milestone. But not the end of the story. The fellow guests who heard him tell the tale for the first time at that Harvard conference six years earlier had urged him to pick an unforgettable title. The original choice was “Anna’s Pocket”. Until de Waal finds out who Anna was and what became of her, there will always be a bit of the untold story driving him on.