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**Bloomberg
Businessweek**

De Waal's Nazi-Dodging Netsuke Yield to Gagosian Ceramics Show

Lili Rosboch



Ceramic artist Edmund de Waal, author of the family memoir "The Hare with Amber Eyes," in front of one of his works at Gagosian Gallery. His show "Atemwende" runs through Oct. 19. Photographer: Mike Bruce/Edmund de Waal/Gagosian Gallery via Bloomberg

Edmund de Waal, author of "The Hare With Amber Eyes," which retraces the adventures of a family collection of netsuke, has filled Manhattan's Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue with his porcelain pots.

We spoke over breakfast at the Mark Hotel about de Waal's forebears, the Ephrussis of Odessa, and his own work in ceramics.

Rosboch: The netsuke are now in your home in London thanks to your great-grandmother's maid Anna, who hid them in her mattress when the Nazis marched into Vienna in 1938. Do you know why she did it?

De Waal: I never asked my grandmother, who would have known. But the netsuke were in my great-grandmother's dressing room and that was Anna's room, that's where she dressed Emmy. So she must have known just how precious the netsuke were.

Gold snuffboxes or Faberge eggs, taking those would have felt like playing the game of the Gestapo, stripping the house. I think she took what she felt emotionally closest to, which is really moving and extraordinary. And that's why the story happens at all.

Rosboch: How did you decide to turn the story into a book?

De Waal: I actually never intended to. In my late 20s, I went to Japan for a year on a scholarship. My great-uncle Iggie was in his late 80s then and I used to spend afternoons with him. That's when the stories began to come.

Patchwork

He knew about his own life, but he didn't know anything about Charles Ephrussi or Odessa. So there were the beginnings of it all, and my grandmother would talk wonderfully about her childhood, but it was a patchwork.

When I inherited the netsuke, my father was old, my children were young and I wanted to be able to talk to both generations at the same time and I thought that the book would be a way to make it happen.

Rosboch: What was the research like?

De Waal: I decided I had to listen to all Berlioz operas because Charles went to a lot of them, read Karl Kraus, listen to Strauss.

You have to do it all because you don't know it all and there's that one thing that you don't find. And you read and you write and it ends up being a line in the book, but it's no waste of time.

Moby Dick

Rosboch: Are you writing another book?

De Waal: Yes, about the meaning of white. It's a book about porcelain and Moby Dick and Malevich and death. It's a series of journeys, so in some ways a bit like "The Hare With Amber Eyes."

Rosboch: Which is becoming a movie?

De Waal: I had eight big Hollywood people saying, "We're going to be so faithful to the book!" And I thought, "This is just nonsense."

Then a producer whom I really like said, "I'm going to make this film. You might not like it, but it will be a good film." And that's true -- it will be something different.

Rosboch: The V&A asked you to do a permanent installation and you chose to place your work - a collection -- somewhere hidden.

De Waal: Everything in museums is carefully laid out in front of you, labeled and annotated. I wanted to say that collections are also hidden and broken and fragmentary.

Backwardness

I think that like with the vitrines I'm doing underground in the streets of London, having something that you discover yourself is more powerful than being directed to something which says "grand art, valuable art." What's the great moment in that?

Rosboch: When you were young you were fascinated by the backwardness of ceramics and at the same time you liked Motherwell, Agnes Martin and Newman, the scale and energy of American abstraction. Is that reflected in your work?

De Waal: I wanted to see whether or not I could slow the world enough like Newman or Martin or any of these people, who are truly extraordinary at making your sense of space change.

But I come from a tradition where people make mugs, tea pots, so how do I transform that long apprenticeship into something different? And that's really what my art is trying to do.