

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE SUNDAY TIMES magazine

One man and his pots

He shares a dealer with Jeff Koons and can command up to £500,000 for his work. Andrew Billen meets Britain's superstar potter, Edmund de Waal

PORTRAIT Jude Edginton





Edmund de Waal
and dog Isla in his
South London studio

Can potters be superstars? Possibly not, but in Edmund de Waal's hands, or, more literally, from out of his hands and kiln, plain white porcelain pots have in the past decade become stars of a sort – fêted, fetishised, worshipped objects of unattainable desire.

De Waal is Britain's best known ceramicist after Grayson Perry, but he no longer sells his creations individually – he anthologises them behind glass. A cabinet may sell for £500,000, but check with his dealer, Larry Gagosian (champion of Jasper Johns, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst), a Californian millionaire whose parties attract celebrities worth as much as the art on his gallery walls. The prices at a De Waal London exhibition in late 2012 started at £65,000. You may be lucky and find somewhere one of his early domestic pieces – a large beaker circa 1990, say, slightly dimpled by a trademark squish of his thumb – but, even then, leave aside £400.

So if you want a De Waal, you had best settle for *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, his unexpected bestseller from 2011 that's half art history, half memoir of one of the richest families in Europe (his own) written in prose as enviable in its clarity and power as his pottery. The poet William Blake saw "a world in a grain of sand". De Waal tells two centuries of European and Far Eastern history through a collection of 264 Japanese *netsuke*, carved ornaments that were worn on the sash of a kimono – one of which, in the shape of a hare, has been in his family for 140 years.

In the closing pages De Waal describes how the *netsuke* made their final – for now – journey to his home in Dulwich, London. The account of the old vitrine where they will be displayed being hauled in amid much swearing provides some necessary bathos. Because, De Waal writes, his pottery is minimalist. "It is assumed my wife and our three children live in some temple to minimalism with a concrete floor, perhaps, or a wall of glass, some Danish furniture." They don't. That is just the kind of place in which he pots. They live in an Edwardian street "amid the clutter of family life".

I tell De Waal that one of the less remarked-upon of his achievements is not so much combining a career as one of the world's hottest potters – I love that thought – with writing, but with bringing up a family. He has been with his wife, Sue Chandler, since they were students at Cambridge. How has he managed it?

"Well, they come first by a million miles," he says. "When I was writing the book, I used to do a lot of work at night, and then make pots during the day. I suppose an answer is that it all weaves in together. So when I'm researching or writing or travelling, I'm thinking about making, and when I'm making, I'm also... you know, how you kind of start paragraphs."

It would be easier, I say, if he were a gay hermit.

"I shall tell the kids that," he says. "They'll be terribly amused. No, I have a robust family life; a good, argumentative, cheerful family life in the background of everything I do."

He is a tall, thin, impeccably polite, fearsomely articulate man who this year turns 50. His architect-designed studio in South London comprises a large white space shared on one side by an assistant at a long table. Off it, leading to the kiln, is a room where 82 small, neatly irregular white pots, some as flat as ashtrays, some tall enough to hold a snowdrop, are lying glazed, and tempting thievery, on a table. I ask if I may hold one, a request that would be absurdly cautious normally were De Waal's pots not, until this moment, familiar to me only from the no-touch zones of galleries, museums and the occasional stately home.

At the side of the main room, one installation, destined for Southwark Cathedral,

'It is assumed my family lives in some temple to minimalism, with a wall of glass, a concrete floor, some Danish furniture'

is not even properly visible. It is obscured in a semi-opaque glass tower.

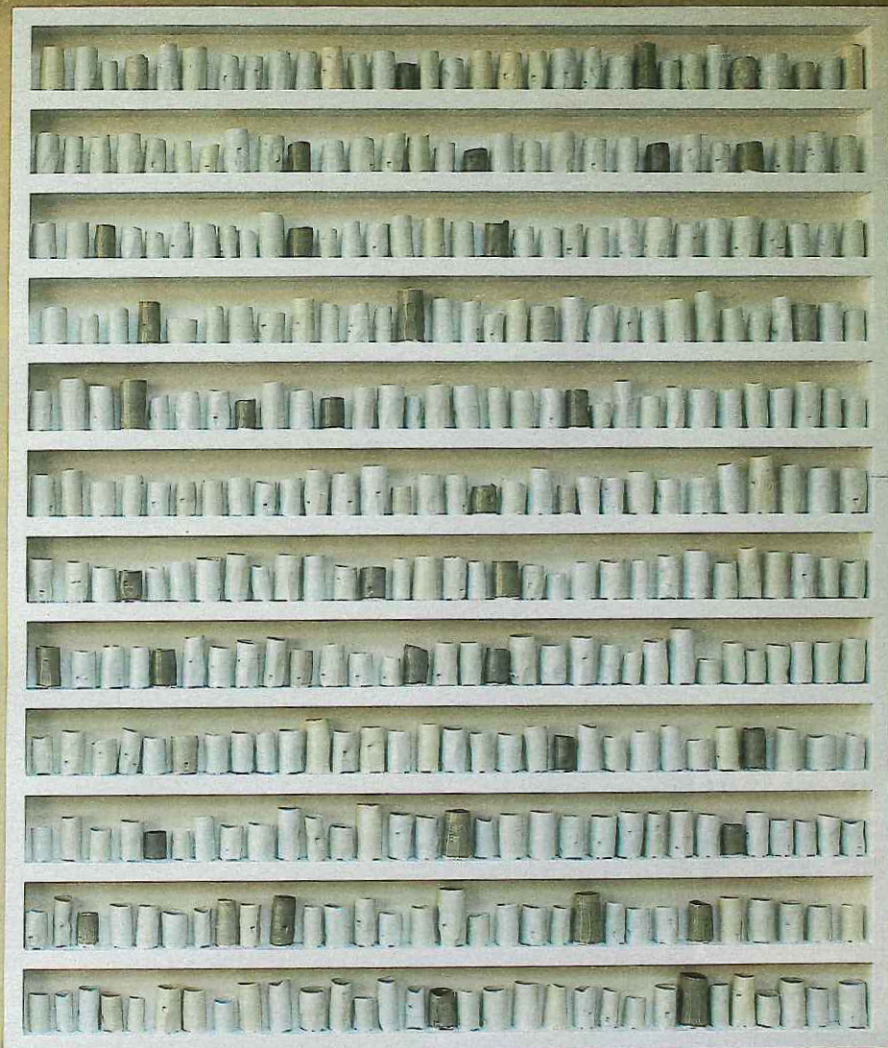
"I'm very clear about the opaque," he says, not betraying any disappointment when his play on words passes me by. "One of the ways you experience things is by not having them. They are there. It's just that they are remembered but lost, or remembered and found again."

This, as the million-plus readers of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* know, is the story of the 264 *netsuke* bought by De Waal's great-great-uncle in the 1870s and their subsequent adventures across Europe. The book's success has now sent them on another journey, into popular consciousness. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford sells *netsuke* in its gift shop. In the most recent season of *Downton Abbey* a *netsuke* went missing from Maggie Smith's *escritoire*. The irony is that De Waal's own miniature objets d'art are today just as covetable as those little icons of Japonisme were in the late 19th century, although only De Waal himself probably risks carrying his treasures in his jacket pocket as the Victorians did theirs.

In a BBC *Imagine* documentary last year, in which presenter Alan Yentob was too over-awed to ask him what he meant by it, De Waal said



he could pass a cabinet of his work and hear music. In their rhythmically spaced ranks, they do look like notes on a sheet of music. Yet it is words that his pottery inspires in *Edmund de Waal*, a new book celebrating his achievement. There is an essay by AS Byatt, a short story by Colm Tóibín and, from Peter Carey, something between an essay and a short story. Byatt writes that his pots give her "the same joy" as the poet Wallace Stevens does: "a blessed rage for order". Carey writes of the desire provoked by De Waal's installations. The viewer, he says, becomes



The installation entitled
A Change in the Weather;
2007. Right: De Waal at
work in his studio

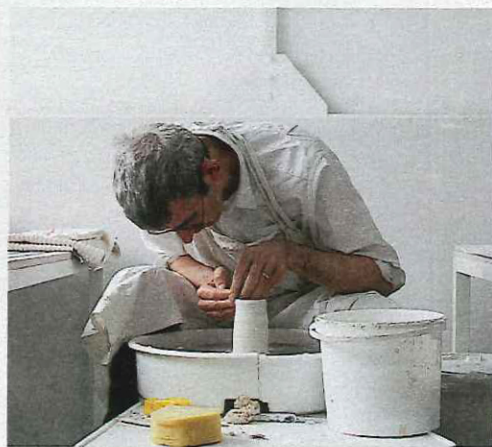
Pothos, "the god of desire who could never never [sic] caress the object of his lust".

It is all rather splendid and rarefied. I ask De Waal if he ever pines for another kind of fame for his works, the life of a piece of mass-produced crockery sold by Heal's or Habitat, in every home in Islington. "I think I probably am in every middle-class household," he says. "I did make an awful lot of honey pots in my time. I think every dresser in the Welsh borders probably has a couple of my jugs hanging up on it."

In the village in the Welsh borders where

De Waal worked in his youth, you still, he adds, cannot move for potters. But I am thinking on a grander scale. Did he never want to transform the British kitchen, stage a counter-revolution against Sir Terence Conran?

"I tried quite hard," he says. "Throughout my twenties I tried very, very hard to earn a living from making functional earthenware pots and in making kitchen porcelain. I really put the hours in, as well." It was no good? "It wasn't good enough and it wasn't, ultimately, satisfying." It was a long apprenticeship and, as eventually became clear, an erroneous one.



De Waal was 5 when he announced to his parents, Victor, an Anglican cleric whose father was Dutch, and Esther, a history lecturer, that he wanted to make pots. The family had moved to Lincoln, where they lived, coldly, in the chancery of the cathedral. He joined an evening craft class. When his father was promoted to dean of Canterbury Cathedral, De Waal was sent to the King's School, which happened to have a potter-in-residence, Geoffrey Whiting. Whiting's bible was *A Potter's Book* by Bernard Leach, the so-called father of British studio pottery ➤

who later settled in Japan. A good disciple, De Waal made endless stoneware pots.

After graduating from Cambridge (he received a first in English), he spent some years in Herefordshire supported by the Enterprise Allowance scheme, and then moved to Sheffield where he bought a house by a steel works for £13,000. There, at last, he rejected the honest brown pot and began working with porcelain, but only as kitchenware. He says he looks back on those years of poverty and rejection with little affection.

Everything changed in 1991, the year De Waal spent in Japan on a scholarship. In Tokyo, he set about writing a book on Leach. It was no hagiography. Instead, with his scholarship based on his fluent Japanese, De Waal took apart Leach's "misreading" of Japanese culture. When he wasn't in the Leach archive, De Waal was in the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum "mucking around with porcelain and discovering it was just gorgeous".

When he returned to Britain, he shared a studio in Peckham, South London, still marginalised but on a mission. His first solo exhibition at Egg, a clothes shop in Belgravia, in 1995 was an immediate success. His old mentor Whiting had died seven years before and the hegemony of the ethical potters was fading. "They would absolutely hate what I'm doing now," says De Waal.

His scholarship year allowed him to "recalibrate" his life, and he met again Ignace Ephrussi, the great-uncle whom he had first encountered in Japan in the summer of 1982, and saw again the family *netsuke*. A book about Ephrussi began to form in his imagination. Iggy makes a wonderful star of chapter one: a connoisseur, US Army intelligence officer during the Normandy campaign, a Swiss banker and a homosexual with a long-term Japanese lover, Jiro Sugiyama.

When he died in 1994, Iggy bequeathed De Waal the *netsuke*. They had been bought, he discovered, in Paris in the 1870s by Charles Ephrussi, one of Proust's patrons. Charles gave them as a wedding present to his cousin Viktor, Iggy's father and a prosperous banker in Vienna. Remarkably, the collection wasn't destroyed in the Second World War, although the Nazis stole or destroyed everything else in the Palais Ephrussi. A housekeeper hid them under her mattress.

How much of this did De Waal know before he wrote the book?

"I knew exactly what I say at the beginning of the book, which is that I knew they were ridiculously rich, I knew they were Jewish and I knew they had houses in Paris and Vienna, but I also discovered that almost no refugee family knows very much about where they come from. People of that generation just closed down, without talking about it.



'You've made your life here. Why would you talk about lost cousins and the Holocaust?'

Either that or you talked about it all the time, endlessly making strudel.

"My dad is so English. He turned into the perfect Englishman. He became a clergyman, dean of Canterbury for Christ's sake! His mum became Christian in Paris in the Twenties. But that whole emotional access thing is really complicated. There wasn't a deliberate decision not to talk about it. It was just: why would you talk about it? You've made your life here, in Tunbridge Wells. Your kids go to the school there. Then they go to Cambridge, which is great. One becomes a lawyer. The other becomes a clergyman, even better. Why would you talk about the Holocaust? Why would you talk about restitution? Why would you talk about lost cousins?"

Did De Waal worry about telling this suppressed history? Did he feel he was using the experiences of people with whom he shared DNA as clay to mould?

"No. And then yes. No, at the beginning because I thought I would be able to write about it in a slightly disengaged way. I then realised that I was writing about real people and that their experiences were significant enough for me to have to take them very seriously. When you're writing about the Holocaust and the Anschluss, there comes a real responsibility not to f*** up. You don't want to make it another homogenised bit of history writing." Or a misery memoir? "It's not a miserable book."

Yet De Waal's great-grandmother Emmy, Viktor's wife, killed herself with an overdose of heart pills in Kóvesces in Czechoslovakia 12 days after Britain signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938. He could

easily claim her as a victim of the Holocaust and, he admits, he did feel more Jewish as his research went on, although never so much as to want to convert. (He describes himself as a "non-observing member of the Quaker-Jewish wing of the Anglican church"). "The weird thing is that I didn't see her death coming," he says. "I'm living this and researching it and then writing it – not always chronologically – but I just didn't know lots of this."

The amount De Waal discovered about Emmy's last years is extraordinary, down to which opera she saw when. It is, I say, unbearably intimate. "It wasn't too intimate, but I think, somewhere, I talk about trespass. At the end I just say, 'Let it go. That's enough.'"

I ask De Waal if he felt he had got in too deep. Unexpectedly, he replies that the "whole thing" was "unhealthy". Can he mean that?

"I wouldn't have planned to write the book if I'd known what was involved. I wouldn't have planned it in terms of the amount of time and I certainly wouldn't have planned it if I'd known the afterlife of it, the exposure, the noise. I've managed to tune that down now, but for a while it was a lot. The actual writing of it I loved, if I'm really honest."

Demanding a comparison between writing a book and putting on an exhibition would be an easy enough ask of a man as clever as De Waal. Moulding clay and moulding sentences must have something in common. But I bet the only real similarity for De Waal is that both processes, whether in a Bauhaus studio or an Edwardian terrace, are intense, time-consuming and nothing at all to do with gallery openings and book launches.

"It's all very well having exhibitions in the V&A or in an amazing palace in Vienna or wherever," he says. "That's glorious. It's great and exciting and dramatic. But the real work just has to happen when you're sitting at a wheel, putting on an apron, getting some clay out of a bag and making pots." ■

Edmund de Waal, featuring contributions from Edmund de Waal, AS Byatt, Peter Carey and Colm Tóibín, is published by Phaidon Press on Monday (£59.95)