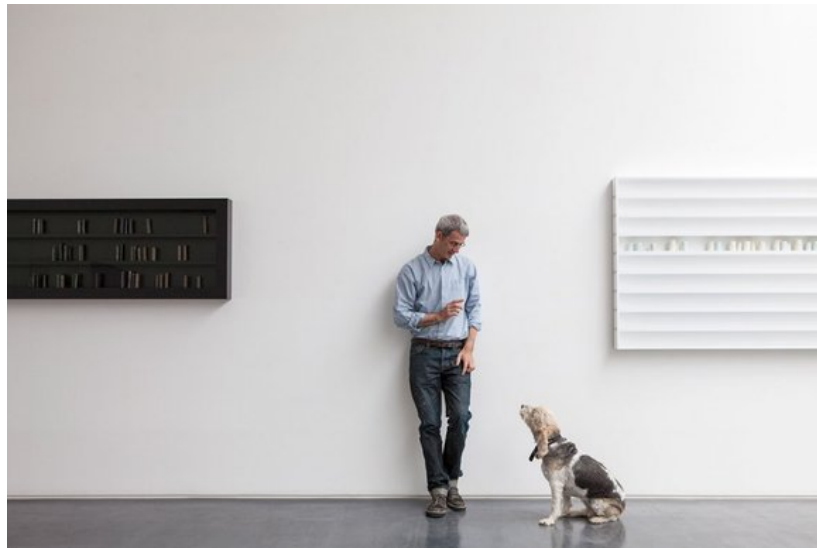


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The great Waal of china

Christina Patterson



All portraits by Alex Lake

At the heart of ceramics,” says the potter Edmund de Waal, “is this thing about things going wrong.” You’re telling me, I want to say, as I sip coffee from a cup I’m terrified I’ll drop. The cup isn’t just a cup, it’s an Edmund de Waal cup, and it’s made of something that feels more like eggshell than any kind of clay. I fear it might shatter.

I have been in a state of terror since I walked through the door of this old factory in south London; a state of terror, wonder and — well, OK, let’s call a spade a spade in the way de Waal calls a tiny cylinder of breathtaking beauty and delicacy “a pot”. I have been in a state of envy. I have walked into this old gun factory in West Norwood and entered a temple to art, beauty and grace. It’s huge. It’s airy. It’s white. It’s bright, and inside it are thousands of exquisitely crafted, highly breakable pots. If I even breathe on it, I think it might shatter, and goodness only knows who will pick up the bill. De Waal’s dog, Isla, a grand basset hound, pads about gently. She has clearly learnt to feel the fear of walking through this hallowed space. So have de Waal’s assistants, all ceramicists or artists in their own right. One of them, a beautiful young woman called Nerissa who is also his researcher, has shown me round. There are shelves of tiny pots and, in the glaze room, the pots are each labelled with a number, the list of glazes, which range from things like “ice trap” to “Ella”, the name of Isla’s predecessor, who died. Some of the pots are black, or speckled variations on black. Some are variations of pale blue. But most are white. Edmund de Waal has made his name with white pots. Oh, and with an internationally bestselling memoir called *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.

Most potters would be happy to scrape a living from their work. Edmund de Waal can get £500,000 for a collection of his pots, which he now sells in carefully curated huddles behind Perspex or glass. His work has been shown at the V&A, Tate Britain and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and in a high-profile solo exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. He's the most famous potter in the country after Grayson Perry, but he is chalk to Perry's (much more colourful) cheese. De Waal's pots are so stunning in their simplicity, they can almost make you catch your breath.

When de Waal first had the idea of tracing his family's history through a set of miniature sculptures he inherited, his publishers probably stuck the book in the category of "minority interest/eccentric charm". The tiny sculptures, called netsuke, carved in wood and ivory and designed to be hung from the cord of a kimono, belonged to de Waal's Uncle Iggie, who, in 1947, took them "home" to Japan. But they were first bought by a cousin of de Waal's great-grandfather, Charles Ephrussi, who in 1857 moved from Odessa to Vienna and then, in 1871, to a huge "palais" in Paris. Jewish grain traders turned bankers, the Ephrussi were, he says in the preface to *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, "staggeringly rich".

Charles Ephrussi fell in love with the Paris art scene. He knew Manet, Renoir and Degas, and bought work from all three. He's the man in the top hat in Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, and one of the inspirations for Charles Swann in his friend Marcel Proust's seven-volume novel, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Charles gave the netsuke as a wedding gift to de Waal's great-grandfather, Viktor, who lived in Vienna. What follows is a gripping history, as anti-semitism rises and then the Nazis strike. *The New Yorker* described *The Hare with Amber Eyes* as "the most enchanting history lesson imaginable" and the reviewer in this paper called it "a masterpiece". The book sold more than 1m copies.

So what, exactly, I'm tempted to ask, when we're sitting down for that coffee in those very precious cups, has gone wrong for you? We are in another beautiful corner of his studio, with his desk, computer and books, and across from us is the mezzanine with his potter's wheel. It's a sanctuary of peace and light. But I don't ask the question, because de Waal seems anxious. "Phew!" he says, when I tell him that I really like his new book.

The book in question, *The White Road*, is a cultural history of porcelain, but it's also, as its subtitle says, "a pilgrimage of sorts" to "three white hills in China and Germany and England", the three places where porcelain was invented, or reinvented. The book, he says, is "a paying of dues to those who have gone before".

De Waal has previously talked about how he begged his father to let him go to a pottery class when he was five. As soon as he made his first pot, he knew this was what he wanted to do. The teacher offered him a range of colours, but he, unlike most five-year-olds, chose white, and the significance of the colour is referenced in his book title. Does he remember why he chose the colour?

De Waal places his hands on his forehead as if I had just asked him to explain the theory of relativity. He looks a tiny bit like a hare: long-limbed, rangy, slightly twitchy. Unlike the hare in the netsuke collection, his eyes aren't amber, but when he's talking about something he cares about, they blaze. "It was just an impossible colour," he says. "White is an invitation. You're always told: here's a sheet of paper, now do a big, colourful picture. There's always that thing about white not being available to you. It's something to get rid of, because creativity starts the

moment white disappears.” Then he bangs the table. He actually bangs the table. “Sorry!” he says. “I just remember thinking: that’s so ridiculously odd.”

As a teenager, he explains, and an apprentice to the pottery teacher at his school, white was “unavailable”, because his teacher thought white “was crockery, it was Stoke-on-Trent, it was standardisation, it was all these things that were to be rejected and reviled”. His pottery teacher was called Geoffrey Whiting, so God only knows what was going on there. It was much later, after de Waal had spent two years as a full-time apprentice, and three years reading English at Cambridge, and seven years working by himself “in silent, ordered studios on the borders of Wales”, that he plucked up the courage to go against the teaching of his master and ditch the grey stoneware for shiny white porcelain. As youthful rebellions go, it seems on the tame side.

There was,” says de Waal, “a real feeling of covert, shady goings-on in the studio. And it was really difficult. This new material, porcelain, was very sticky. But the newness was really exciting — wonderful, in fact!”

The love of this “sticky” white material is one that often seems to have bordered on obsession. The White Road traces the history of that obsession. De Waal starts in China, in Jingdezhen, the place where porcelain was invented 1,000 years ago, then goes with his son to Venice, to see the porcelain jar Marco Polo brought back from China, after his visit to the court of Kublai Khan. After Dublin, he goes to Dresden, and to the castle in Meissen where, in 1707, a mathematician called Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and an apothecary’s boy called Johann Friedrich Böttger fired a mix of clay and alabaster and produced a “milk-white jar”.

He then returns to England and follows in the footsteps of a Quaker apothecary called William Cookworthy, who read a book about China that changed his life. The cider tankard he eventually produced was the “first piece of true porcelain ever made in England”, a good few years before Josiah Wedgwood practically swapped porcelain for his name. The book was meant to end in England, but de Waal finds himself dragged back to Germany, to a porcelain factory at Allach, which was taken over by the SS and moved to the concentration camp at Dachau.

How did he feel about being thrown back into painful history he thought he’d left behind? “It is,” he says, “a bit like the Cornish landscape, where things give way all the time. You’re walking in territory you think is very safe, and suddenly there’s a hidden mineshaft or fault line, and that was my feeling of being taken somewhere you didn’t really want to go. I thought, ‘F*** it. I hadn’t expected that.’ ”

Porcelain, de Waal discovered, wasn’t just big among the Nazis. It was also popular in the Cultural Revolution. In order to destroy “old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking”, schoolmasters and university lecturers were forced to work seven days a week, producing porcelain pandas, porcelain “dunces” (the Chinese intellectuals who were forced to wear dunce caps during the revolution) and porcelain Maos. Did this have any effect on De Waal’s relationship with porcelain? Or on his use of the colour white? De Waal looks away and there’s a very, very long pause. “After the Allach experience, I went back to interview someone who was a collector and dealer, who sat in his little suburban house near Dachau with a whole vitrine of Allach porcelain he was selling to neo-Nazis. You come back and you think, ‘What am I doing, putting white things out into the world?’ ”

De Waal's relatives were among the lucky ones. When Hitler marched into Vienna, they were not bundled off to Dachau. They were beaten and locked up, but after signing away their homes, business empire and art collections, they managed to get out of Vienna. De Waal's grandmother, Elisabeth, a poet and lawyer who had married a Dutch businessman, helped her father get a one-way visa to Britain. Her sister and brothers were already safe in Mexico and America. But for her mother, it was too late. She died in Czechoslovakia, en route. The word "suicide", says de Waal in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, was not mentioned, but it was understood that she "could not go on".

De Waal's great-grandfather, Viktor, went, with Elisabeth and her two sons, including de Waal's father, Hendrik, to start a new life in Tunbridge Wells. From a palace in Vienna to a rented house in Kent, Wells must have been quite a shift. De Waal was surprised to find out how rich his family had been. "It was an extraordinary discovery. I was shocked by the scale of their wealth."

It isn't hard to see why de Waal might not approve. He can seem like a parody of a self-effacing Englishman: modest, shy, hating a fuss. But then he's the son of an Anglican vicar. Elisabeth, converted to Christianity, and his father was dean of Canterbury Cathedral. His childhood, he says in *The White Road*, was "choppy with priests, Gestalt therapists, actors, potters, abbesses, writers, the lost, the homeless and family-hungry, God-damaged pilgrims".

What wasn't mentioned, in this rather eccentric childhood, was the fact that his father was a Jew. This, says de Waal, was "never part of the equation". He himself is not Jewish (his mother is a Gentile), but "what's quite strange and amazing" is that he has "been adopted by the Jewish community as a sort of lost Jew. I feel kinship," he adds, "but my kids are being brought up in a classic mishmash way."

De Waal doesn't share his parents' faith. Does he share his parents' politics, which, presumably, are vaguely liberal left? De Waal nods. "That's exactly where I'd put myself." Corbyn? "No, not Corbyn. Passionate, but pragmatic." Who, then? "I don't know. I'm slightly in despair. I can't believe there's not a serious, realigned alternative out there."

He is seriously well off after the success of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Did he, I ask, expect to make money through his work? He laughs. "No, but you should ask Sue about that." Sue is his wife. They met at Cambridge and she has, from the way he talks, been the centre of his universe ever since. "We got together when Sue was working for Save the Children Fund and I was making nothing, so, no, there's never been any expectation about this. Of course, it's extraordinary." Well, yes. When a few pots sell for the price of a house, you can probably say it is.

The money, it soon becomes clear, all gets reinvested in the work. "What it allows me to do," he says, "is museum shows. Last year, for example, I had a big exhibition at Turner Contemporary, with these vitrines hanging up, which was there for a year. That's not paid for by anyone." So he subsidises his own shows? "Yes."

He is currently working on a big installation for an exhibition in January at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. He has said in other interviews that he sometimes writes through the night. Does he ever relax?

De Waal looks a bit hurt. “Yes, with the family.” De Waal, Sue and his children, who are 13, 15 and 17, live in a 1960s house in Dulwich. They watch Netflix, go for walks, and go on holiday to a croft that he and his wife own in Ardnamurchan, near Mull.

Midway through the conversation there’s an almighty crash from downstairs. I’m so relieved I haven’t caused it. De Waal, too, looks relaxed. “Things break,” he says matter-of-factly. “That,” he adds, “is part of the book. Which reminds me. I broke a pot recently. In Japan they gild the fragments, so I asked one of my assistants to do the same. The other bits have gone right round the world. These,” he says, holding out two jagged fragments, “are the last two.” He offers me a choice of one to keep.

Greedy, I pick the bigger piece. It is luminous, white and strangely beautiful. One sharp edge has been dipped in something that looks like gold. As I slip it into my bag, I feel as if I have been given a talisman. And I can’t help thinking, as I leave that palace of white and light, that if this is what happens when things go wrong, it seems pretty damn good to me.

A view to a kiln

In an extract from his new book, Edmund de Waal recalls making his very first pot

My father went on Thursdays to an evening class at the local art college to make pots. You could do screen printing on to T-shirts or paint scumbly canvases. You could go up to life drawing, a lady in front of a draped red velvet curtain with a plant in a brass container, or you could go down to the basement and make pots. And I wanted to go down the stairs. There was a break after an hour and you were allowed a glass of Ribena and a chocolate biscuit. It was dusty. Dust settles around clay.

Someone was pinching a very small bowl out of white clay, cradling it in her hand and turning it round rhythmically. I sat at the electric wheel with a large ball of brown clay. I wore a red plastic apron. The wheel was very big. It had an on and off switch and a foot pedal for speed that you depressed and was hard to push. And next week my pot is there, hard and grey and dulled, smaller. You can dip it, says my teacher, into one of a dozen glaze buckets to make it sing in different colours and you can paint on to it in every colour. What are you going to decorate it with? She smiles. What does this pot need?

I push my pot into the white glaze, as thick as batter. And the following week I take home my white bowl, a scooped inside with a whorl of marks and heavy, but a bowl and white and mine: my attempt to bring something into focus. The first pot of tens of thousands, forty-plus years of sitting, slightly hunched with a moving wheel and a moving piece of clay trying to still a small part of the world, make an inside space.

I was seventeen when I touched porcelain clay for the first time. All through my schoolboy years I had made pots every afternoon with a potter whose workshop was part of the school. Geoffrey was in his sixties, had fought in the war, was damaged by his past. He smoked untipped Capstan cigarettes, quoted Auden poems. His tea was deep brown like the clay we used. He made pots for use. They had to be cheap enough to drop, he’d say, beautiful enough to keep for ever.

I’d left school early to start a two-year apprenticeship with him, and I spent a summer in Japan with different potters, trailing around the famous kilns where folk craft wares were made. These

pots were what I aspired to make – alive to texture and chance, good in the hands, robust and focussed on use.

I am a potter, I say, when asked what I do. I write books, too, but it is porcelain – white bowls – that I claim as my own when challenged by the dramatic Syrian poet sitting on my right at a lunch. Do you know, she says, that when I got married in Damascus in the early 1970s, I was given a porcelain dish this big – she sweeps her hands wide – that my mother had been given by her mother. Pink porcelain. And I was given a pair of gazelles. They tucked their legs up under them on the sofas like hunting dogs. We all love porcelain in Damascus.

I need to know more about this pinkness. I've never heard about pink porcelain, it sounds unlikely. But the marriage gift bit sounds right, ceremonial, particular, freighted. Porcelain has always been given away. Or stored and then brought out on special occasions to be handled with that slight tremble of care that hovers around anxiety. And Damascus is intriguing as it is on the way from Yemen to Istanbul, or could be on the way if you wanted it to be and I remember, somehow, that a Yemeni sheikh collected Chinese porcelain in the twelfth century. The greatest collection ever, brought together to celebrate the circumcision of his son. We are still talking porcelain as the plates are cleared.

When I come back to the studio I put down another place, Damascus, on my list of places I have to visit. I have my three white hills in China, Germany and England and when I can't sleep I run through my list trying to make patterns out of the names, shifting them into clusters of places where white earth was found, where porcelain was made or reinvented, where the great collections were made or lost.

I connect Jingdezhen with Dublin, St Petersburg with Carolina, Plymouth and the forests of Saxony. Go from the purest white in Dresden to the creamiest white in Stoke-on-Trent. Follow a line. Follow an idea. Follow a story. Follow a rhythm: there are meant to be unopened cases of imperial porcelain in a Shanghai museum, left on the quayside when Chiang Kai-shek sailed for Taiwan in 1947. And cases of Chinese porcelain still packed up after 500 years in a cellar of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. I could go there and work my way across to Iznik where they made white pots in imitation of unattainable porcelains, delicate jars with tulips, carnations and roses bending slightly in a breeze.

Or it could be a journey through singular, spectacular beauty. There is meant to be another piece of Marco Polo's porcelain in Venice, if I can face it. Or I could journey through shards. Porcelain warrants a journey, I think. An Arab traveller who was in China in the ninth century wrote that 'There is in China a very fine clay with which they make vases which are as transparent as glass; water is seen through them. These vases are made of clay.' It 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?

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