

GAGOSIAN

Prospect
Think again. Think Prospect

A ceramicist of nowhere: Edmund de Waal's art of empathy
The potter reflects on how art can change the world

Andrew Dickson



*Edmund de Waal's works are on display at the Frick Collection in New York, and will be show at the British Museum next year.
Illustration: Tim McDonagh*

In the colonnaded central courtyard at the Frick Collection in New York, Edmund de Waal seems a little agitated. It is morning on an early summer Thursday; gauzy light filters through the glass roof on to the glossy marble floors beneath. Perched on a metal chair next to a decorative fountain, De Waal—all gangly enthusiasm and English manners—is attempting to explain how intimidating it was for him to create a new installation for this place, perhaps the most perfectly formed Old Master museum in the world.

“Dammit, I just don’t want to fuck it up!” he exclaims. A pair of elegantly clad women pause to gawp. One guesses the Frick isn’t used to F-bombs, especially at 10.13am.

His new work, *Elective Affinities*, is the first American museum installation of De Waal’s career, and the first time a contemporary artist has been invited to create work for the Frick. When we met he had just got off the plane from the Venice Biennale, where another major piece was unveiled in May: an epic two-part installation, half of which has been erected inside a 16th-century synagogue in the Venetian Ghetto. As well as being, again, the first time a living artist has been exhibited in that space, it is one of the largest projects he has ever done. He calls it “the most significant sculpture of my life”—significant not just because of its scale, but because it is more directly engaged with politics than anything he has so far created.

On the face of it, De Waal doesn’t seem like anyone’s idea of a political animal. His name has become inseparable from his exquisitely crafted ceramics, usually small and white (a colour that,

as his 2015 book *The White Road* reveals, has a special intensity for him). Often these “pots”—his preferred term—are serried on shelves or arrayed in artful, almost musical, configurations: clusters, rows, loose gatherings by size or type. Minimal, beautiful, inviting rapt contemplation, they seem more of an escape from the world than part of an attempt to change it.

But perhaps things have always been more complicated than that. The project that brought De Waal to much wider attention was his bestselling memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010). A lyrical re-enactment of the journey taken by his family’s collection of Japanese netsuke (tiny carved ivory figurines, some not much larger than a thumbnail), from Paris to Austria, then back to Japan and the UK, it finds delight—and much wistful melancholy—in minimal details. Yet these small objects were implicated in world-shattering events: exile, migration and the memory of Nazi persecution.

Standing in one of the Frick’s grand galleries, De Waal recalls the first time he visited the place as a 17 year old, having left school in Canterbury early and “run away” to stay with family friends in New York. Roaming the collection, he came face-to-face with a still life by the 18th-century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin—a rustic image of plums, squashes and a carafe on a table. The painting had both “haunted” and inspired him. For the first time, he felt that art was his calling. “What I wanted to do is to make something which changed the air around you,” he says.

He has arranged groups of pots across nine rooms, sometimes in vitrines, sometimes in the open on antique tables or chests of drawers. The materials are as restrained as ever: porcelain, Perspex, alabaster, patinated steel, the occasional gleam of gold. The smallest cabinet is only 20cm or so wide. One of them—in one of the building’s most dramatic spaces, the shadowed library—is all but hidden beneath a desk, so that you have to crouch on the floor to see it. Above the piece, a sober portrait of Henry Clay Frick, the 19th-century steel magnate who spent millions building the -collection, looks studiously in another direction.



Group Of Vessels. Photo: Framed Art/Alamy Stock Photo

But to fixate on the fragile beauty of De Waal’s work is to miss what he’s trying to do—particularly here in New York. He compares exploring the permanent collection at the Frick to “walking through a Henry James novel... It’s a place of contemplation; there’s so much beauty here. But it’s also a collection built on the extraordinary idea of money and power.”

It's no accident that some of the pieces he's made use steel, he adds: it's the material that Frick—one of the robber barons of the American gilded age with Andrew Carnegie, JP Morgan, Rockefeller—transmuted into fabulous quantities of gold.

De Waal has said he hates the term “intervention” (“it sounds like something medical”). So how would he describe what he's trying to do, I ask. Is it a form of critique? Is he trying to expose the Frick's exploitative past?

“Not critique,” he replies slowly. “I'm not covering myself with oil and lying on the floor like a protestor against BP.” He pauses to formulate an answer that distills what he really means. “It's possible to make things that are beautiful that also have guts to them.”

*

Born in 1964, De Waal grew up in circumstances that can only be described as rarefied. The second-youngest of four sons of the influential Anglican priest and public intellectual Victor de Waal and the historian and spiritual writer Esther de Waal, he spent his childhood knocking around various cathedrals—first Lincoln, then Canterbury, where his father was dean from 1976 to the mid-80s. (De Waal remembers it as “cold, medieval, draughty.”)

The family history is tangled, and in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* he spends a significant amount of energy attempting to unravel it. On his father's side, De Waal is descended from the powerful Jewish banking clan the Ephrussi, who made their wealth in Odessa in the 19th century, became firmly established across Europe, and then were scattered by the Nazis. De Waal's own branch of the family fled from Amsterdam to England before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Like many immigrants, they became remarkably adept at balancing different identities. His grandmother Elisabeth converted to Christianity when she came to the UK, and settled in Tunbridge Wells; his father has spent a lifetime in the Anglican church, but recited the Jewish kaddish at Elisabeth's funeral.

One of the heroines of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is the family maid Anna (De Waal could not track down her surname), who smuggled the netsuke out under the eyes of the Gestapo and hid them safely in her mattress. Elisabeth is the other: a hard-headed lawyer who somehow managed to extricate her elderly parents from Vienna, while also finding time to correspond with Rilke and write poetry and novels (one of which has been subsequently published). De Waal praises her “indefatigable” energy and intellectual curiosity. He seems to have inherited those traits from her.

De Waal discovered the urge to make pots as a child after being taken to a ceramics class by his father. In his teens he apprenticed himself to a ceramicist in Canterbury—making the tea and sweeping the floor, laboriously learning the rudiments of his craft (“the first 30,000 pots are the worst,” he was once told). Though he studied English at Cambridge, he knew even then that he wanted to spend his life at a potter's wheel. After graduating, he moved to the Welsh borders, then inner-city Sheffield and built a kiln. He describes the circumstances as “distinctly monkish.” Despite the deep seriousness of his work, ceramics were not taken seriously by the art world; one of the few places he could exhibit was the Chelsea Craft Fair.

All three of his brothers have gone on to have distinguished careers: Alex de Waal has written on Sudan and is now the director of the World Peace Foundation, Thomas de Waal is an expert on the Caucasus and John de Waal is a successful barrister. When I ask whether they were competitive growing up, he laughs. “Actually, no, never. We’ve all made our lives elsewhere.”

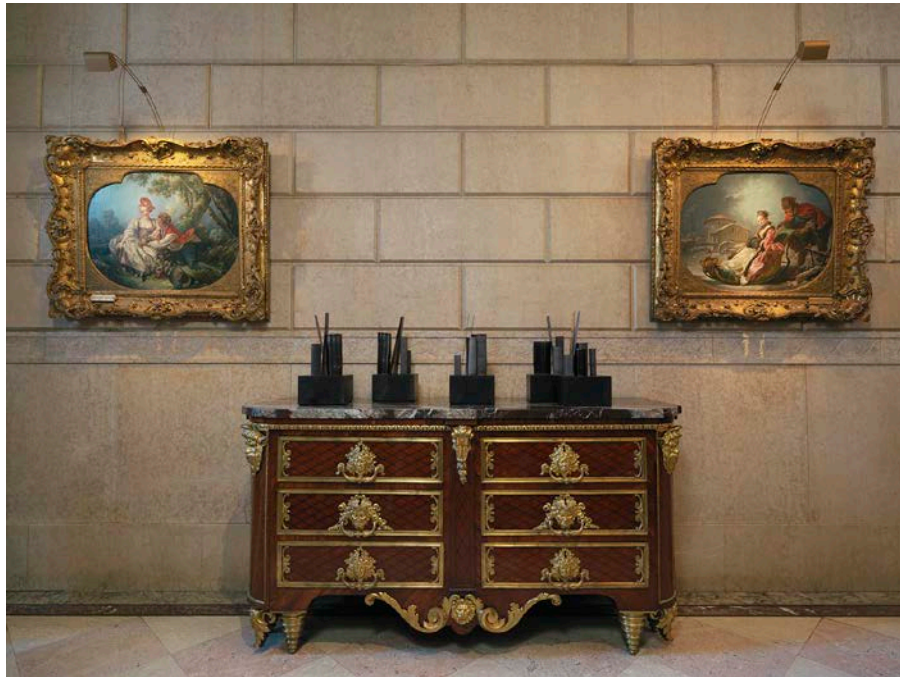
Nonetheless, there’s more than a hint of over-achievement in the De Waal and Ephrussi backgrounds. Was pottery a retreat from all that? “Oh, for a long time I was profoundly, profoundly unsuccessful. A lot of my working life, I made pots that no one wanted to buy. It’s not necessarily great, retreat. There’s a lot of waiting by the phone.”

His fortunes began to change in the 1990s, after a period immersing himself in Japanese culture and a year in Tokyo. The exquisitely simple, hand-thrown porcelain vessels he had started to make—unadorned apart from slender indentations, often glazed in white or milk-green celadon—coincided with the mid-90s vogue for minimalism. De Waal began to have solo shows; fashionable people began to collect him. He is now represented by the gallerist Larry Gagosian, one of the godfathers of the contemporary art scene.

But it wasn’t until *The Hare with Amber Eyes* came out, when he was in his -mid-40s, that De Waal became something like a household name. Much to everyone’s surprise—not least the numerous publishers who turned it down—the book eventually sold over 1.5m copies and was translated into more than 25 languages. Asked by the *New York Times* in 2013 whether, before the book was published, he’d thought he’d written a bestseller, De Waal replied: “Not in a million years.”

Analysing it now, he sees being a writer and an artist as facing leaves of the same book. Indeed, describing his Frick project, he refers to the vitrines that encase his ceramics as “pages,” with those arrays of small pots almost like letters, or words.

The installation *Elective Affinities* is dense with references to Rilke, Celan and Walter Benjamin (“we just stole the title from Benjamin and Goethe,” he joked; Benjamin published an essay about Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities*).



De Waal's Steel Light I-V at the Frick Collection in New York. Courtesy of the artist and the Frick Collection. Photo: Christopher Burke

For him, poetry and pottery are both about finding an appropriate form of communication. In their subtle blend of Japanese, English and mainland European influences, his pots could be said to create a new kind of language, one that reflects De Waal's own multi-layered, kaleidoscopic background.

“Words and vessels, they have great kinship for me,” he reflected. “I’ve been reading Emily Dickinson recently, thinking a lot about those great hyphens and spaces, the way she makes you pause—dammit, she gets it totally right. What a way to put words in the world.”

*

The new installation in Venice, *Psalm*, experiments with the same theme, but gives it an intense autobiographical charge. Inside a coffered, richly decorated 16th-century building in the old Jewish Ghetto, De Waal has constructed what he refers to as a “library of exile”: a blindingly white structure containing vitrines and more than 2,000 books. The piece ambitiously distills his long obsession with migration and rootlessness. Its title references the despair and isolation of the Biblical psalms; the authors it contains, among them Ovid, Dante and Victor Hugo, all experienced exile. In *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, De Waal records that his great-grandfather, an antiquarian bibliophile who lost his priceless library to the Nazis, read Ovid's *Tristia* (“Lamentations”) after fleeing to England, “[running] his hand over his face so that the children couldn't see what the poems did to him.”

De Waal has painted the outside of his library with liquid porcelain and inscribed on it the names of lost libraries, from Alexandria to the one recently destroyed in Mosul, Iraq. His great-grandfather's private collection is among those listed. Visitors are encouraged to browse and read. The intention is to make us ruminate on the nature of migration, what is lost and what gained, in an area of Renaissance Venice that both gave a home to the city's Jewish population,

and penned them cruelly in. And much as his own family history entwines Abrahamic faiths, so the installation does likewise.

“It’s hugely moving,” the art critic Gina Thomas, who wrote about *Psalm* for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, tells me. “Partly because of the personal connection. He seems to be touching on his own history, and it’s not so difficult to connect that with the fate of people who are fleeing Syria or wherever. Libraries have been destroyed, but books have survived and, as they’re carried from one culture to another, they gain different meanings. It’s a major step forward in his work.”

After its stint in Venice, the library will itself migrate, appropriately enough—first to a former library in Dresden badly bombed during the Second World War, then on to the British Museum next year. De Waal’s hope is that it will end up in Mosul as the kernel of a new collection being built to replace the university library, gutted by Islamic State in 2015.

De Waal said that, for him, *Psalm* was as much about “contemplation” as anything else, but admitted that he was mindful of the political situation in Europe—especially the millions who have fled violence in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (“a moment of total crisis”) and resurgent anti-semitism.

“These days I’m much happier about occupying a more public space for things I care about,” he said. “I’ve done stuff in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, examining contemporary meanings of restitution. And, bluntly, I wanted people to go to the Ghetto. The fact that no contemporary art has been displayed there during the Biennale is bloody amazing. That was a need I had to address.”

Certainly, it seems to be a watershed of sorts. Having struggled so long to find his voice as an artist, and to work out what he really wanted to say, in his middle 50s he no longer wants to hold back.

“What concerns me is that the space for empathetic connection is getting diminished,” he says. “This is nothing that other people haven’t already said, but it’s so polarised right now. That idea there may be no common ground between you and people you profoundly disagree with: I find that very distressing.”

Barriers and borders worry him immensely, as does the growth of insurgent nationalism across Europe. When I ask if he’s worried that history might repeat itself, he points out that his father arrived in the UK as a refugee in April 1939—“which is not very long ago.”

Another worry is Brexit: De Waal’s three children with his wife Sue Chandler, who works in international development, face the prospect of “being stripped of their Europeaness.” In some ways, he tells me, he feels more rootless than ever. “Maybe it’s a middle-aged thing, but I’m wondering again where I really belong. For the last 20 years I’ve been on the road, trying to work out where I was through *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, or why I was fascinated by the materials I work with, with *The White Road*. Am I French, am I Austrian, am I still Russian? Where do I belong, really? I don’t know.”

Instead of surrendering to anxiety about the future, he's funnelling his energy into his work. "I'm a maker. And I hope that the library I've made is a place of connection, where people can share and discuss. We shouldn't just give in. Despair is a very seductive emotion."



Visualisations of De Waal's installation in the old Venetian Ghetto. Photo: Atneo Veneto – Internal visual

Certainly, there seems to be a new urgency to De Waal's art: a sense that time, as well as events, are pressing. His father is now 90, and his kids are in their late teens and early twenties. "I'm conscious that I need to get a move on," he said, adding: "The stage I am in life; the fact that it's a pretty scary time in terms of the political imperative. I'm really conscious of that."

*

Even though the New York and Venice shows are now open, De Waal is in the midst of a new project. Not yet formally announced, it will see him collaborate with a major British sculptural collection to explore the idea of physical touch—a recurring fascination, perhaps naturally so for a ceramicist. Busy though he is, he knows better than to take his success over the last 15 years for granted.

"The thing I will never be is blasé," he said. "That's disgusting. Sure, I work hard, it's tiring to travel—but count yourself so fucking lucky if you're busy and there are projects."

One chapter, though, seems closed. Late last year, De Waal and his family decided to sell part of their famous netsuke collection, 79 pieces out of 264, at auction; the proceeds, nearly £80,000, went to the Refugee Council. "The displacement of refugees worldwide is a cause very close to my family's heart," he says.

Three-quarters of a century after they left, the remaining figurines will go on long-term loan to the Jewish Museum in Vienna—the city that ejected his family, and almost destroyed it. "Reverse restitution" of sorts, he reflects: the end of one story, and perhaps the beginning of another.