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‘The Hare With Amber Eyes’ Comes Home

An exhibition in Vienna puts the figurine at the center of Edmund De Waal’s 2010 memoir on show, and tells the story of a family forced from their home by prejudice.

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“The Hare With Amber Eyes,” a Japanese netsuke carving, was a central figure in Edmund De Waal’s 2010 memoir of the same name. © Jewish Museum Vienna

Last Monday in the imposing Ephrussi Palace, Edmund de Waal presided over a family reunion. For the first time since World War II, 41 relatives from around Europe, the United States and Mexico toured the neo-Renaissance building that had been home to the Ephrussi family, European Jews whose wealth once rivaled that of the Rothschilds.

“It’s not just a nice family gathering — it’s a political act,” said Mr. de Waal in an interview the next day. Mr. De Waal, a British ceramic artist and best-selling author, is the great-grandson of Viktor von Ephrussi, who thrived in Vienna as a banker before fleeing the city after Hitler’s 1938 incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich. On Tuesday, the country’s president, Alexander Van der Bellen, welcomed the family to an exhibition opening nearby that tells their story.

“The Ephrussis: Travel in Time,” at the Jewish Museum Vienna through March 8, presents the family’s history through documents, photographs and souvenirs that Mr. de Waal donated to the museum last year. But the stars of the show are 157 netsuke (pronounced NET-ske), tiny Japanese carvings in wood and ivory, made famous by Mr. de Waal’s 2010 memoir, “The Hare With Amber Eyes.” The book, which takes its name from one of the figures, tells the story of the collection and the family, which survived World War II by spreading out into a worldwide diaspora.



Mr. De Waal in the Jewish Museum Vienna. “Even though I love this collection” of netsuke, he said, “the story has more resonance here.” © David Payr for The New York Times

Mr. De Waal has been a regular visitor to Vienna since the 1990s, when he received the netsuke as an inheritance from his great-uncle and started to research the collection, then numbering more than 250.

“Even though I love this collection, the story has more resonance here in Vienna,” Mr. de Waal said. The figures’ presence in the city, he added, would help tell the story “of not just anti-Semitism and racism, but polarization, and treatment of exiles, and migration.”

Austria has welcomed more than a million refugees and migrants who transited through the European Union’s unguarded borders, mostly fleeing conflict in the Middle East. Their arrival was followed by an acrimonious debate and loud protests from the far right. Austria’s government, led by conservatives, soon demanded the strengthening of Europe’s external borders.



A rate netsuke from the collection, made in Kyoto, Japan, from buffalo horn around 1800. © Jewish Museum Vienna . “Stretching Man,” from around 1800. © Jewish Museum Vienna

Mr. de Waal is an outspoken supporter of open borders. Last November, he auctioned 79 of the netsuke to raise money for the Refugee Council, a British organization that supports refugees. And his family’s story, one of exile and integration, makes him sympathetic to the plight of migrants today.

Charles Ephrussi was an art collector in 19th-century Paris and patron of artists including Renoir, who featured the connoisseur in the back of his famous painting “Luncheon of the Boating Party.” The collector bought the netsuke in the 1870s, and sent them to Vienna as a wedding present to his cousin, Mr. de Waal’s great-grandfather.

“The Hare With Amber Eyes” tells how, in 1938, when the Nazis seized the Ephrussis’ art collection, a maid managed to hide the netsuke away, handful by handful, in her apron. They survived the war and were among the first items the Ephrussis managed to recover.

At the Jewish Museum, the netsuke are shown in glass cases throughout the exhibition, linking rooms organized along the Ephrussis’ journey from Odessa, in today’s Ukraine, where their ancestors made their fortune in the grain trade, to Vienna, Paris, London and beyond. The figures were intended to be handled, and each of them bears wear and tear from generations of admirers.



The exhibition follows the Ephrussi family’s journey from Odessa, in today’s Ukraine, where ancestors made their fortune in the grain trade, to Vienna, Paris, London and beyond. © David Payr for The New York Times

Also on show are artifacts, like the Renoir painting, that show how Jews rose in 19th-century Europe. Others, like a satirical newspaper illustration from the time of the Dreyfus Affair in France, record rising anti-Semitism on the Continent. The exhibition also tells how those who survived war and persecution remade their lives in the second half of the 20th century. (The line of inheritance brought the netsuke back to their native Japan, where Mr. de Waal’s great-uncle held them until his death in 1997, when they passed to Mr. de Waal in London.)

Danielle Spera, the director of the Jewish Museum, said the exhibition was a chance to reopen a chapter of history. “It’s really important to bring back into the minds of the Viennese and Austrian people what happened to this family,” she said in an interview. The mission of the museum, she added, was to raise awareness so that no one is persecuted like this again.

The Ephrussis’ story mirrors other tales of loss from other families who lived in the grand mansions on the elegant Ringstrasse, the boulevard that circles Vienna city center. But the display carefully avoids what Mr. de Waal in his book called “the sepia saga business, writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss.”



A tiger netsuke, made from buffalo horn, from around 1820. © Jewish Museum Vienna. “Five Chinese Wise Men,” carved by the artist Masahiro around 1880. © Jewish Museum Vienna

“If you measure a story entirely through loss, what you’re doing is you’re not paying attention to the lived lives of the people in the story,” Mr. de Waal said. “It’s a much more interesting and complex story about how people remake their lives.”

Although “The Hare With Amber Eyes” reached a wider public than Mr. De Waal’s ceramic work, he is above all a visual artist. His delicate, minimalist porcelain vessels take the form everyday objects, like vases or teapots, and often include lines of poetry printed on the porcelain. An exhibition of Mr. De Waal’s vessels is on display at the Frick Collection in New York through Nov. 17.

In recent years, Mr. De Wal’s art and writing have taken on an increasingly political tone. In 2016, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Mr. De Waal selected artwork around the theme of anxiety from the museum’s collections for an exhibition called “During the Night.” The result was a pitch-dark show that reflected his anxiety about political events in the year when Britain voted to leave the European Union and the bloc clamped down on migration. During this year’s Venice Biennale, Mr. De Waal showed a “Library of Exile,” made up of 2,000 books written by refugees and displaced people. The show will travel to Dresden, Germany and London next year.

After its run in Vienna, the Ephrussi exhibition will move on to the Jewish Museum in New York, and then to San Francisco. Bringing the netsuke and his family story back to Vienna, was important, Mr. de Waal said, but did it not, and would not, bring his family closure.

“What you have to do is to give people back their story,” Mr. De Waal added. “And that’s pretty much the only thing you can do.”