

## GAGOSIAN

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**Edmund de Waal on breaking pots, a precious netsuke and his latest exhibition**  
*The potter's Venice Biennale installation, library of exile, opens at the British Museum this month*

Janice Turner



*Edmund de Waal. JACK JOHNSTONE*

When Edmund de Waal was a struggling young potter he lived for five years in Sheffield, the cheapest city he could find, making and selling ceramic honey jars. Any misshapes unworthy of the kiln he would throw away whole, until he found a binman fishing them out of his rubbish. “Oh, I love these things,” the man said. “I take them home and paint them.”

These days De Waal smashes his malformed pots to stop them being sold. But it amuses him to think of his juvenilia, decorated in cheerful shades, perhaps used to store jam or pencils by South Yorkshire owners with no idea of their provenance. Or their worth: a set of three De Waal teapots fetches £11,000 at auction; a tall lidded vessel goes for £4,000. Neither colour nor utility feature in his celebrated work, which is exhibited in places such as the Frick in New York and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. This month his Venice Biennale installation, *library of exile*, opens at the British Museum, accompanied by another piece, *psalm I-IV*.



*De Waal working with porcelain. JACK JOHNSTONE*

White is the hue by which De Waal, 55, is known: small, white, delicate porcelain pots, not absolutely symmetrical, but with tiny dents or imperfections, bearing the imprint of his long, elegant fingers. White pots – a word he prefers to the grander “ceramics” – no longer displayed alone, but in formations, like musical notes or words on a page, in huge vitrines. Such as the piece *A place made fast* (2014), a collection of pots in a 3m-wide glass case on the wall of his south London studio. Although he is coy about prices, it would sell for up to £500,000.

This vast space, a former munitions factory in unglamorous Norwood, is white too; a high-ceilinged, echoing externalisation of De Waal’s cultured mind. A tall, quietly spoken, elaborately courteous man, he immediately takes me on a tour. Downstairs is an open area where he and his seven staff cook and eat a communal lunch every day. There are state-of-the-art kilns and a workshop where new glazes, subtly different shades of white, are created and named, some after his children or friends. When I ask if he ever tires of white, he points to some darker pots. “See, I do black now!”



*Library of exile during its installation at the Venice Biennale. JACK JOHNSTONE*

On a work bench is a china tablet inscribed in gold. I remark how wonderful to work in precious metals and De Waal cries: “But porcelain is white gold!” He poured out his passion for this

material in his 2015 book, *The White Road*. “It’s clay, but it’s translucent when it’s fired,” he says. “It’s the most precious material in the world, in the sense of it being used by princes and emperors. It has the best history: porcelain is a mesmeric thing.”

Up one set of stairs, to the mezzanine, is his writing room and library, up another set is a space infused with wintry light that contains little but a basket for Isla, his dog, and his potter’s wheel. For De Waal the act of throwing a pot is almost sacred. “It makes me feel completely human,” he says. “My breathing slows down a bit and I’m using my hands and I have this great concentration. That’s one thing that makes me feel good, and it’s part of a whole lifetime of bringing the world down into something which is quite small and immediate.”

The longest he has gone without making pots is six months, while he was finishing a book, and he ached to return to the wheel. I suggest he could always employ assistants to make the pots and he recoils. “Why would I let them do the thing that makes me happy?” he says. “Absolutely not. No, no, no, no, no! There are other things, like packing the kiln, or wrapping the pots in bubble wrap to send to LA. Yes, I’m thrilled that I’ve got nice people to do those things. But actually sitting and throwing pots? That’s the best bit.”

In an afternoon he can make up to 50 vessels. “Then the next part, which is wonderful, is arranging them, playing with them, finding rhythm and thinking about the building or the museum or wherever they’re going to go.”



*De Waal can make 50 vessels in an afternoon. JACK JOHNSTONE*

De Waal was five when he told his parents he wanted to make pots and they signed him up for a craft class. The son of Victor, an Anglican clergyman and later dean, and Esther, a history lecturer, he grew up in cathedrals: Lincoln and later Canterbury where he was sent to the King’s School, which had a potter-in-residence from whom Edmund learnt much of his craft. This rarefied English childhood belied his complex family history. His Dutch father, who arrived in England aged ten, is descended from the Jewish Ephrussi banking dynasty, who built the Palais Ephrussi in Vienna, the city that Victor’s grandfather fled before the war, dying stateless.

This story will be familiar to readers of De Waal's book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which has sold 1.5 million copies. It focuses on a set of 264 exquisite Japanese ornaments, carved from ivory or wood, called netsuke, that were collected by the Ephrussi in the 1870s. These were passed down the family and saved from theft by the Nazis during the Anschluss by a housekeeper who hid them under her mattress. De Waal encountered the netsuke when studying in Japan in 1991, when they were owned by his great-uncle Ignace, a gay former intelligence officer who lived in Tokyo. When Uncle Iggie died, he bequeathed the netsuke to Edmund.

Writing *The Hare with Amber Eyes* changed De Waal's life. Not the pots he made – he had already moved into his minimalist Japanese-inspired porcelain – but “it gave me a much bigger, broader number of people in the world who actually knew about my stuff.” It also made you rich, I tease. De Waal blanches. “Rich! I mean . . . that's a good one, Janice!” He adds that he struggled long enough in his Sheffield honey-pot years. “That was tough and it went on a very long time.” Now he can take longer on an exhibition, do bigger projects “and not have to worry about selling a single jug ever again”.



*De Waal's work Sukkah (2019). JACK JOHNSTONE*

Yet following the book's success, he started to feel the netsuke collection – which had made him famous, and all that was salvaged of his family's treasure, which once included Old Masters, jewels and exquisite houses – had started to own him. In 2018, at the instigation of his children – now aged 22, 20 and 17, and all passionate about the fate of Syrian migrants – he auctioned 79 of the netsuke to raise £79,590 for the Refugee Council. The rest are on a ten-year loan to the Jewish Museum in Vienna.

How did he decide which to sell? “The kids and I just had them all out on the table and we kind of chose ones we particularly loved. They are brilliantly maverick things. Some are kind of obscene or funny or quite tough: elderly people, beggars, drunken monks, people in bathtubs.” But the netsuke were objects always in transit around the world, “so I felt wonderful about letting them go”.

Researching his family history for the book began his exploration of migration and belonging. *Library of exile* was inspired by the sacking of his great-grandfather's library by the Nazis. It is his largest work, a building constructed from porcelain and engraved with poems in gold. The thousands of books it contains are all by exiled authors, from classics by Ovid, Dante and

Voltaire to works by those who fled Nazism, such as Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht, to contemporary writers such as Ma Jian, Elif Shafak and Hisham Matar, and many from Syria and Lebanon, who have been exiled in recent times.

Visitors are encouraged to take volumes from shelves and read them or to sign the *ex libris* plates inside their favourites. The most popular book is Judith Kerr's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*. De Waal has inscribed Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and his grandmother Elizabeth de Waal's memoir, *The Exiles Return*, about growing up in Palais Ephrussi.

Lately he has interrogated his identity: the "complicated European-ness" beneath a "very settled, very measured Christian upbringing". Travelling the world, exhuming his family story, was at times disturbing. What did his father, who had shut off his early life to become so English, think? "My dad said, 'Don't tell me about it.'"

Victor has decided to reclaim his exiled grandfather's Austrian citizenship. Edmund and his children will be able to do the same, useful in a post-Brexit Britain. Yet the family retains an ambivalence about Austria. "The country has been shatteringly late in responding to the war. I mean, it purported to be the first victim of Nazism, which is obviously obscene." Only now is a significant 19th-century painting, hidden for decades in a Vienna museum, finally being restituted to his family. "In the archives there's a letter written in about 1948, which goes, 'We know this belongs to the Ephrussis, but I don't think they'll ever find it.'"

Although De Waal feels at home in Berlin or Paris, "I'm anxious in Vienna. The vigour and life of that city was built around it being in an empire, of every single nationality being there, and it being the biggest Jewish community in the world. Artists, journalists, Freud. All gone. All gone." His work is so controlled and minimalist that I wonder about his home life in Dulwich, with his wife, Sue Chandler, whom he met at Cambridge. Is he tidy? "No, not really. I've just got lots of space to be untidy in – lots of rooms where I can make piles of books or papers or clay or pots. Cupboards full of bits of steel and lead." Anyway, his work is not about minimalism, he says. "It's just about making beautiful things." Does his family eat from pots he has made? "A few, but mainly crockery we've just bought."

I wonder if he ever feels like producing more playful, humorous pieces like Britain's other famous potter, Grayson Perry. "He's an incomparable, unique person," De Waal says. "To be that beloved and that self-aware and generate so many debates around the things that matter, he's absolutely terrific." The only thing he envies Perry, though, is the spin-off lines he produces for museum gift shops. "Grayson does terrific things. Scarves. A brilliant tea towel for the London Museum. Wonderful. I go around and buy lots of Grayson's things. But no one's bloody asked me. I sit here waiting to be asked to make some merch. I'll do it!"

What would he make? "Anything. Tea towels. Key rings!" I'm not sure if he's joking. Although there would be huge demand, no doubt, for Edmund de Waal-designed netsuke.