

GAGOSIAN



The Hare with Amber Eyes at the Jewish Museum — ghosts of a lost world *Edmund de Waal's carved netsuke bring the words of his memoir hauntingly to life*

Ariella Budick



© Marcus Harvey

In his 2010 memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, Edmund de Waal tracks the wanderings of his family's collection of 264 netsuke from their birthplace in Japan to the mansions of Paris and Vienna, back to Tokyo and finally to his south London home. Along the way, these delicate, sometimes grotesque sculptures evolved into literary figures. Deracinated and dematerialised, they became the animating spirits of his tale rather than just physical objects. Now, here they are in the flesh — or rather in ivory, boxwood, buffalo horn and boar's tusk — at the Jewish Museum in New York, but it's de Waal's spare, poetic writing that hovers in the air.

De Waal collaborated with the architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro to create an exhibition that interweaves nostalgia and matter-of-factness. The result is a vivid, three-dimensional version of the book, in which the miniature chorus comments on the tragedy of the Ephrussi clan.

We meet the carved characters arranged on tables like football players waiting for the whistle. Bend closer, though, and you see that the action has already started. Here are two figures playing a board game in a tiny boat, so fine you can make out the pinprick-sized checkers. There's a rat, pensively gnawing on its tail, and a quintet of scholars with beards, scrolls and embroidered robes, the whole grouping no larger than a wine cork.



The hare with amber eyes (c1880), signed Masatoshi, in the foreground

And yet, despite their number and their intricate craftsmanship, the netsuke — which survived events that millions of people did not — almost vanish in the show, leaving the stage to the ghosts of people who once slid them into their pockets, caressed them and carried them across oceans. In this show, we encounter those ghosts, a Jewish family relentlessly trying to blend into a world that eventually consumed them.

The museum's Fifth Avenue mansion, which once belonged to the Warburg banking dynasty, plays an important role in this re-enactment. Interiors have been tweaked to evoke the Ephrussi palaces in Paris and Vienna, the lush rooms crammed with expensive tchotchkes. French Impressionist paintings hang salon-style from the panelled wall. Each of the six galleries represents a different port of call in the odyssey, as the family went from Odesa merchants to pan-European patricians to a scattering of survivors on three continents.



De Waal's netsuke survived events that millions of people did not

The *netsuke* are spread out too, huddled in groups and watching over rooms full of reincarnated memories. Amid all this opulence, you have to pause and readjust your pace to reconnect with the little figures cackling, straining, labouring and yawning in their busy, frozen world. The whole installation reads like a meditation on evanescence and the unlikely endurance of beauty.

If you're wearing the audioguide headset — and you should — de Waal follows you through this compressed world, reading from the book. There's no punching numbers or scanning QR codes: enter a gallery and his voice automatically orients you, just as he once oriented himself: "Number 81, rue de Monceau, the Hôtel Ephrussi, where my *netsuke* start their journey, is near the top of the hill . . . It is now, rather crushingly, an office for medical insurance."



'Charles Ephrussi' (1905) by Jean Patricot: he was an aesthete, art historian and collector . . . © The Phillips Collection. . . . who sent his family's netsuke to a cousin in Vienna

The prosaic present keeps intruding on the sumptuously summoned past, and the installation alternately beats it back and welcomes it in. The architect Elizabeth Diller configured one room to conjure the glittering home of Charles Ephrussi (1849-1905), one of many palaces sprouting in this *quartier* of newly wealthy Jewish people. A prototype for Charles Swann in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Charles was an aesthete, art historian and collector who spent his writing days in a Chinese dressing gown and his nights in party finery. His position at the apex of the arts scene gave him spectacular purchase on the zeitgeist, and the French fashion for *Japonisme* spurred him to collect netsuke.

The museum displays his Japanese treasures alongside the European artworks he accumulated, including paintings by Berthe Morisot, Monet, Renoir and Gustave Moreau (plus some reproductions). However, Renoir secretly despised Charles and his penchant for "Jew art" — which did not necessarily mean art made by Jewish people. The painter felt particularly befouled by the way Moreau's work hung so close to his own in the *hôtel*. "Ah that Gustave Moreau," Renoir snarled in a letter to the art dealer Ambrose Vollard. "It was clever of him to take in the Jews, to have thought of painting with gold colours . . . Even Ephrussi fell for it, who I really thought had some sense!"



'Young Girl in a Ball Gown' (1879) by Berthe Morisot is one of the pictures which evokes the Ephrussi's Parisian milieu © Stephane Marechalle/MN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York

Such hostility, growing louder and more ubiquitous, became impossible to ignore. In 1899, Charles packed up the *netsuke* in a mirrored display case with green velvet shelves and sent them as a wedding gift to his Viennese cousin Viktor.

The exhibition, following the book, turns eastward and traces the Vienna branch of the Ephrussi from the pinnacle of their wealth at the turn of the century through its diminution by the first world war. The period room in the museum is whisperingly past its prime, jingling with regret for the days before the archduke's assassination. Things got much, much worse, and on March 12 1938, a contingent of Austrian enforcers arrived at the palais on the Ringstrasse. "There are fists on the door," de Waal narrates in a menacing tone.

The Nazis took everything: furniture, artwork, family members. Only the *netsuke* survived the war, secreted in a mattress and rescued by de Waal's uncle Iggie, who brought them back to Japan. Later, he bequeathed them to the author, but even that resting place has turned out not to be final. Most are on permanent loan to the Jewish Museum Vienna, where this exhibition originated, but 79 are missing: in 2018, de Waal auctioned them off to benefit a charity for refugees, and their ghosts appear as a projection on a wall of the final gallery.



The show at the Jewish Museum in New York summons the wealth and the loss of the Ephrussi © Iwan Baan

In the end, this show isn't about possessions but about absence and loss. The architectural photographer Iwan Baan recently returned to the former Ephrussi headquarters and shot their current state. In Paris, an aesthete's Eden is now a den of generic white offices; the aristocracy of taste and money has given way to the democratising forces of bureaucracy.

In Vienna, Baan finds a more intact relic, a maze of empty marble chambers wreathed in gilt. For 40 years, the *palais* housed the offices of Casinos Austria. In Baan's photos, it lies vacant, a stone sarcophagus with a Starbucks on the ground floor.