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Democracy Dies in Darkness

At the Jewish Museum, an exhibition as much about what's missing as what's there

The Ephrussis were among the wealthiest families in Europe. Almost everything was taken from them by the Nazis.

Sebastian Smee



A view of "The Hare With Amber Eyes" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. (Iwan Baan)

NEW YORK — I walked into New York's Jewish Museum late on a Monday afternoon, a few days before the end of 2021. It was dark outside — that cavernous Gotham gloom. The museum was virtually empty. Omicron was tightening its grip on the city, so the dearth of humans was welcome (especially after the crowds at the Metropolitan Museum earlier in the day). The surprise was that the exhibit itself was half-vacant too — not just of people, but of objects. There were plenty of things on display: photographs, letters, drawings, documents and some very prestigious artworks. But in each of the show's several galleries, they were crowded together on just one or two walls, their density serving only to emphasize the empty volume of the rest of the room.

If, already, this piece has an air of melancholy, I apologize. I could offer a reason: My subject is an exhibition called “The Hare With Amber Eyes.” Based on a 2010 best-selling book of the same title by Edmund de Waal, it is about several generations of the Ephrussi family. Originally grain merchants based in Odessa, the Ephrussis became the world’s biggest exporters of wheat. Expanding into oil and subsequently banking, they were based in Paris and Vienna. Their surviving members were left with almost nothing after the Holocaust.



Writer and ceramist Edmund de Waal. (Tom Jamieson)

But de Waal, a descendant of this family and a driving force behind the exhibition (which previously appeared at the Jewish Museum in Vienna), isn’t interested in melancholy. “Melancholy, I think, is a sort of default vagueness, a get-out clause, a smothering lack of focus,” he wrote in his book’s prologue. “I really don’t want to get into the sepia saga business,” he added, “writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss.” De Waal did, in fact, produce a narrative of aching absences, of loss. Yet it was full of life and art and a crowded, teeming multiplicity. Beyond the beautiful, perceptive prose, the genius of “The Hare With Amber Eyes” lay in its conception. The author, himself a renowned ceramist, structured his family saga around a collection of 264 netsuke he inherited from his uncle. Netsuke are Japanese wood and ivory carvings of animals, dragons, skulls, snails, women bathing, coopers making tubs, and so on — all small enough to slip into a trouser pocket or be concealed in a clenched hand.



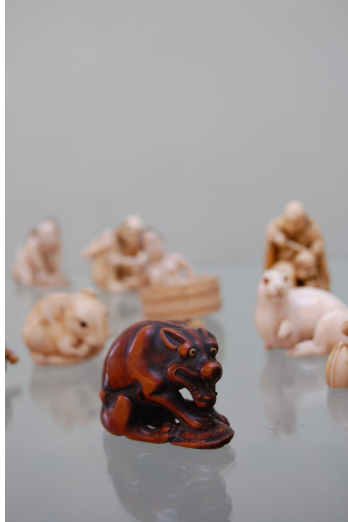
Various netsuke in the de Waal family collection; 168 of them are displayed in the Jewish Museum exhibition. (Michael Harvey)

De Waal's great-uncle, Ignace, kept the collection in his home in postwar Japan, where for a period during his student days, de Waal had been a weekly visitor. But Ignace, or "Iggie," had not acquired the netsuke in Japan. He had inherited them. They first came into the family in the 19th century, in Paris. In "The Hare With Amber Eyes," de Waal follows their movements as they are passed from generation to generation.

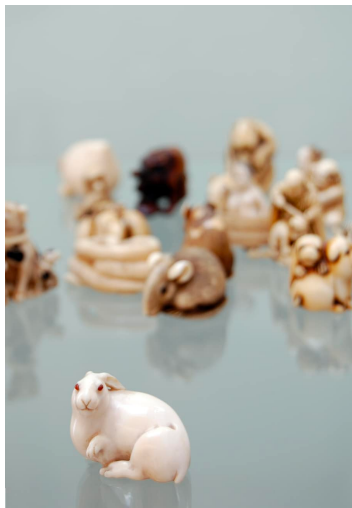
The key passage, to which I think the exhibition has tried to stay true, appears in the prologue: "It could write itself, I think, this kind of story. A few stitched-together wistful anecdotes. ... [But] it would come out as nostalgic. And *thin*."

"And I'm not entitled to nostalgia about all that lost wealth and glamour from a century ago. And I am not interested in *thin*. I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers [a netsuke] — hard and tricky and Japanese — and where it has been. ... I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in, and what they felt about it and thought about it — if they thought about it. I want to know what it has witnessed."

Everyone who first comes across netsuke loves them. It's not just because they are small and the carving virtuosic. They are also witty, devious and surprising. They appear simultaneously to tell their own stories — opening themselves up to the world — and to shut that world off, through hunched backs, protective shells and various forms of almost tautological self-involvement: Rats chew their tails; a creature gazes at its reflection; the sculptor uses a tool to carve a cooper, who is using a tool to make a wooden tub.



Netsuke from the de Waal family collection. (The Jewish Museum)



In the foreground, the eponymous “hare with amber eyes” netsuke, made of ivory, with eyes inlaid in amber-colored buffalo horn. Signed by master artist Masatoshi, the piece is from Osaka, Japan, and dates to about 1880. (The Jewish Museum)

So perhaps the main reason to see the show at the Jewish Museum is that 168 of de Waal’s netsuke are in it, including the eponymous white hare with amber eyes. They are displayed in an array of vitrines, each occupying a position of prominence in its own room. (The exhibition was designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, working with de Waal and the Jewish Museum.)

In the book, de Waal describes tumbling the inherited netsuke in his hand and carrying them around in his pocket. Some, he writes, “are studies in running movement, so that your fingers move along a surface of uncoiling rope, or spilt water. Others have small congested movements that knot your touch; a girl in a wooden bath, a vortex of clam shells.”

These descriptions invite us to make connections with the operations of memory — the way it flows and eludes containment, like spilled water, or knots around certain moments, as after trauma.

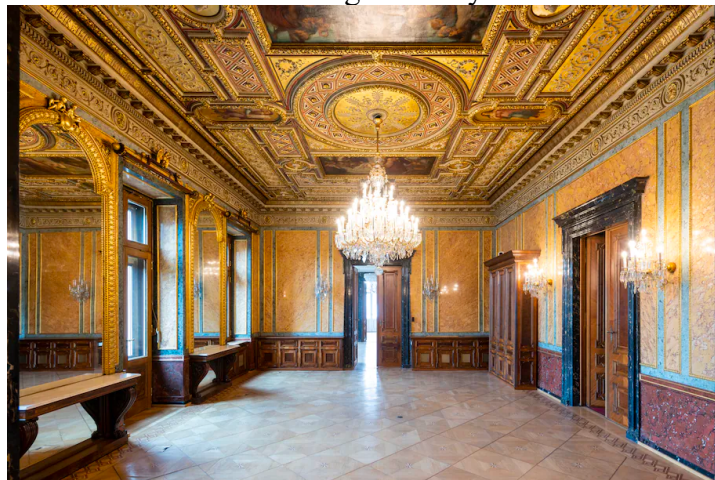
But perhaps the stronger point is that the netsuke are not metaphors. They are handmade objects: obdurate and inviolate. And they have survived.

They were originally acquired by Charles Ephrussi. Charles was a wealthy aesthete, collector and art historian who was a friend of the Impressionists, a likely model for the figure of Swann in Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" and an early champion of japonisme, the late-19th-century vogue for all things Japanese.



A 1905 drypoint portrait of Charles Ephrussi by Jean Patricot. (The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.)

Charles later gave the netsuke as a wedding present to a cousin living in Vienna. When the Nazis confiscated the Ephrussis' lavish home on Vienna's Ringstrasse, they also stole all their possessions, including their fabulous art collection. Only the netsuke were salvaged, hidden away in a straw mattress by a maid who managed to return them to the family after the war. Even as the exhibition presents a version of this story, it does its best to remain true to de Waal's desire to walk into whichever room the netsuke occupy and "to feel the volume of the space." Each gallery contains just a few framed color photographs (taken recently by the Dutch photographer Iwan Baan) of the empty interiors of former Ephrussi residences, and then a selection of artworks and archival material hung salon-style.



"Palais Ephrussi #1," Vienna, a photo by Iwan Baan. (Iwan Baan)

The artworks include superb pieces by Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Edgar Degas. Each has its own fascinating backstory. Unfortunately, the Édouard Manet painting of a bunch of asparagus, for which Charles Ephrussi famously paid too

generously (prompting Manet to send him a follow-up painting of a single asparagus spear with a note saying, “There was one missing from your bunch”), is not included. But there are photographic reproductions, appropriately bleached of color.

The clutter of the archival portions of the show creates a deliberate dynamic between absence and fullness. By training and temperament, de Waal is evidently opposed to clutter. He was taught to believe “less is more” and to be on guard against “the unwarranted gesture.” His own ceramics adhere to a strictly minimalist aesthetic. Mindful of everything that isn’t there, he can see, he writes, how a pot “works with the objects that sit nearby. How it displaces a small part of the world around it.”

Yet he seems to recognize, too, that family histories are inherently cluttered — often extravagantly so. Family trees look so neat. But they are haunted by unwieldy, apparently arbitrary information, because each life is so idiosyncratic — all the more so if the family in question is afflicted, like de Waal’s, by trauma and spread by diaspora.



“Jeune femme en toilette de bal” (“Young woman in ball gown”) by Berthe Morisot, 1879. (Musée d'Orsay, Paris Image provided by RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York; photo by Stephane Marechalle)



“Albert Cahen d'Anvers,” by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1881. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

Collections, like family trees, begin as repositories of meaning. Advertisements for sensibility, they are also attempts to impose order on chaos. But once they are forcibly dispersed, it is almost impossible to put them back together. Their extant parts will always be haunted by what is missing.

So this show offers two experiences in one. You can dive into the Ephrussi family history, which is brimming with interest, steeped in idiosyncrasy. Or you can sensitize yourself to the volume of the space around things; to the emptiness, the absence.

Or, of course, you can do both. But whether or not you can see the exhibit, you should read “The Hare With Amber Eyes.” It belongs, as my colleague Michael Dirda once wrote, “on the same shelf with Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘Speak, Memory,’ André Aciman’s ‘Out of Egypt’ and Sybille Bedford’s ‘A Legacy.’ ”

“All four,” he continued, “are wistful cantos of mutability, depictions of how even the lofty, beautiful and fabulously wealthy can crack and shatter as easily as Fabergé glass or Meissen porcelain — or, sometimes, be as tough and enduring as netsuke.”

“The Hare With Amber Eyes” is at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Ave., New York, through May 15. jewishmuseum.org