



# EDMUND DE WAAL

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What we choose to keep, and how we choose to place it, shapes what we understand. In this conversation, curator Yuko Hasegawa and British artist Edmund de Waal discuss porcelain as a carrier of memory, loss, and movement, reflecting on how objects structure our thoughts. His work as an artist and writer forms a continuous field in de Waal's practice, through which he reflects on the fragment, the politics of display, and the necessity of slow looking. Beauty, in his work, is inseparable from ethics, and form becomes a way of thinking through history.





**YUKO HASEGAWA:** You're not only a remarkable artist, but also a writer, and I've been rereading your beautiful reflections on porcelain. There's such a deep sensitivity for craftsmanship in your writing. I also know you've had a long relationship with Japan, which connects to both of our backgrounds. Could you tell me about your first experience encountering Japan — what it meant for you, what you remember?

**EDMUND DE WAAL:** I first traveled to Japan when I was 17. At the time, I was already training in ceramics in Britain — I'd been working with clay from a very young age. That first trip was incredibly significant. I went to study both ceramics and the tea ceremony, and it really confirmed many of the interests I already had.

My relationship with Japan deepened further in my 20s, when I returned to study the language and began making porcelain. I traveled extensively through

embrace of imperfection, transience, and restraint.

But interestingly, my own porcelain practice developed outside of Japan. It wasn't influenced by Japanese porcelain per se, but rather by years of work elsewhere, forming my own language through decades of making.

**YH:** You've also traveled to China and other countries in Asia, and I'm curious: what did those experiences bring to your understanding or influence in your work?

**EdW:** As a writer and as an artist, I'm deeply interested in how ideas move across the world. Porcelain, for me, is not just a material — it's an idea. It represents purity, whiteness, the seemingly impossible transformation of earth into something that can hold light. It's both culturally and materially powerful. When I work in China, or write about porcelain — as I did in my book *The White Road* — I'm think-

It's not just about facts or timelines, it's about people. For over 1000 years, anonymous hands have touched this material, shaped it, and changed it. And we often don't know who they were. But there's a powerful connection between their hands and our minds when we encounter these fragments.

That connection, between movement, memory, and material, is what I return to again and again. For me, porcelain is a diasporic material. It has crossed borders, carried stories, and taken on new forms in each place. It embodies migration, displacement, and transformation. That's the heart of my work.

**YH:** That idea of shifting meaning reminds me of Soetsu Yanagi. He valued the anonymous craftsman, quietness, and beauty in simplicity — qualities I see in your work as well. How do you relate to his philosophy?

**EdW:** Yes, Yanagi and the Mingei move-

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out the country and eventually wrote a book about Bernard Leach and his time in Japan. So yes, it's been a long-standing connection — going back and forth, learning, and thinking deeply about Japanese aesthetics and architecture.

**YH:** You mentioned architecture, which is fascinating — especially the idea of Japanese architecture as a kind of modernism, even dating back to the 11th century with tea houses and *sukiya* style.

**EdW:** Yes, my earliest experiences were shaped by the aesthetics of the tea ceremony and early Japanese architecture. Those forms of beauty — the quietude, the precision, the intentionality — had a profound influence on my sensibility.

There's this idea of “slow looking,” of contemplating objects carefully, handling them with attention. That's something I carry with me still. I was also deeply drawn to concepts like *wabi-sabi* — the

ing about how it was reinvented in Europe, how it migrated, how it became something different depending on where it traveled. In my studio here in London, I'm often making porcelain pieces, but the space is also filled with fragments: shards from China, Japan, South Asia. They tell a story of how porcelain has moved, broken, and re-formed across cultures and centuries. They are my archive, my language.

**YH:** That's fascinating, because I see in your work a kind of transformation — taking something so deeply rooted in tradition and remaking it in a contemporary artistic language. Each fragment you use has its own story, but you bring them together into something abstract, poetic.

**EdW:** Thank you, that means a lot. What compels me, and what continues to challenge me even after 45 years, is that porcelain is far too important to be left only to art historians or academics.

ment are deeply meaningful to me. Over 30 years ago, I wrote a book about Yanagi, Bernard Leach, and Shoji Hamada. I studied their writings, spent time at the Mingeikan in Tokyo, and developed a deep respect for the aesthetics they championed — this idea of finding beauty in everyday craftsmanship, often without names or signatures.

At the same time, my own work has developed in a very different direction. I'm drawn to ideas of consumption and display, especially around European porcelain: court wares, porcelain rooms, and the grand collections of the 18th century. That world couldn't be more different from Yanagi's philosophy.

But I still share a passion for the handmade, for the object that carries memory. I want to make works that honor that lineage — from Korean, Chinese, and Japanese potters — while also engaging with my own European heritage. I'm interested in





how we display and interpret objects, and for me, that involves music, poetry, architecture — all these ways of shaping experience. So while my approach may diverge from Yanagi's, I still carry his ideas with me.

years ago now — learning how to sit in a space, allowing things to slowly emerge from shadow, both visually and conceptually. So it's never just a single story. It's not about prescribing what someone must feel. I try to be a writer, a musician, a historian, a curator, a potter — all at once.

**YH:** That's very interesting, especially your mention of beauty. Your installations create a quiet intensity, a refined relationship between porcelain and architecture. Even in photos, your interventions feel subtle and rhythmic — almost like music. There's always a story unfolding, told through a minimal yet deeply expressive language that integrates rather than dominates.

**EdW:** That really resonates. My work isn't about placing something under a bright spotlight in a white cube. It's about responding with sensitivity to atmosphere and history.

Recently, I had an exhibition in Paris at

a new installation, how do you begin? Do you first look at the architecture and composition of the space? Or does it start with a particular object or fragment you've already made — something that speaks to the space and tells you where to begin?

**EdW:** That's a beautiful question. I feel very fortunate to receive invitations like these — it's a privilege to take the time and not rush the process. You can always tell when an exhibition has been thoughtfully made — when the artist has been there, walked the space, lived with it. It's so different from relying on PDFs, Zoom calls, or architectural plans. For me, understanding a museum, or any space, means physically being there. Spending time. Being surprised by the light, by an object in storage, by an overlooked story in the archive.

Often, when I start working in a space, I begin by writing. That's how I find my way in. I write to clear the ground in my mind,

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**YH:** For example, when you place even a single object in a space — something subtle, almost like a gesture — it can completely transform the atmosphere. It introduces a kind of mysterious energy. What do you think about that relationship between materiality and space?

**EdW:** My practice has brought me into dialogue with some of the most extraordinary museums in the world — from the Frick to the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna, the British Museum, and now the Huntington Museum in L.A. Each time, I begin by asking two questions: one of myself and one of the materials. How can I create something that is both deeply thoughtful — something that probes — and also something of real beauty? That might sound unfashionable, but I care about beauty.

I try to make exhibitions that invite people to spend time. To return. To look quietly. That impulse comes from my early training in the tea ceremony, nearly 45

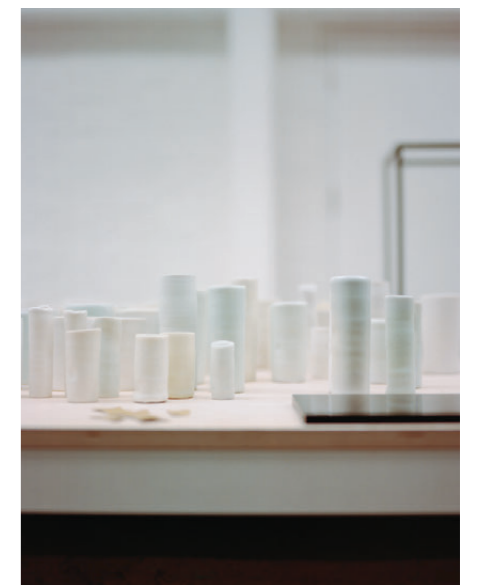
the Musée Camondo. It was once a family home — a place filled with memory and loss. Many of my cousins were murdered in the Holocaust. I didn't want to add noise to that space. I placed works you could barely see — things that were simply present. You had to sense them rather than immediately notice them.

At the Huntington, which is a vast project, there are moments where you'll be aware of my work, but may not see it fully. You might only glimpse part of it. And I think that's beautiful — the idea that you can be near something and understand it by taking your time. It's not about a perfect image for Instagram. It's about slow looking, slow reading, slow handling. Everything in the work is asking for a kind of deceleration.

**YH:** I see that. Walking, writing, seeing — they can all be part of the same continuum. So, when you're invited to create

and then the images begin to form. Sometimes a poem comes, or a piece of music.

**YH:** It's fascinating to hear about your process. I'd love to know how your ideas take





shape and how writing and literature became part of your practice. You mentioned meeting someone influential as a teen — did your writing start even earlier? When did it all begin?

**EdW:** It really began in childhood. I was always writing. I grew up in a family where poetry was very present. My grandmother was a poet, and there were many writers around me. So from early on, I was immersed in both pottery and poetry. I apprenticed for years as a potter, and later studied English literature at Cambridge. So I've always had these two lives: an academic life and a life in ceramics, and they've always been interwoven. One of the turning points was when I wrote *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, a book about my family's history. That book gave me an international literary presence. It was deeply personal and written in the first person, which changed how I approached writing. Since then, my books have become

**EdW:** Yes, and I often use porcelain as a material for writing. In several installations, including one I exhibited in Venice during the Biennale called *library of exile*, I used wet porcelain on the walls of a building and physically wrote into it. That project started in Venice and then traveled to Germany and to the British Museum. I've returned to this idea many times, creating spaces where I write directly into wet porcelain. It brings together all aspects of my practice. The text becomes an object, and the object becomes the text — they're inseparable. The building itself becomes a page.

**YH:** I was also thinking about how you use handwriting — something printed, something kept, like a note you'd store away. That sense of something written by hand.

**EdW:** Exactly. It's all about handwriting, the underdrawing, the gesture. I've made artist books that are entirely handwritten. It always comes back to the hand

Ivorypress, called *an Archive*. It's about my lifelong engagement with archives, from my own family's to those of artists and writers I've worked with, like Walter Benjamin and Robert Walser. It explores how the archive can be a generative space — a place not just of storage, but of creativity. For me, an archive can take many forms: a museum, a gallery, even a garden. When I make an exhibition, I'm often trying to locate the archive — whether it's within an institution or a person — and from that trace, create something entirely new, and I hope, meaningful.

**YH:** That's beautiful. So when you're invited to create an installation in a museum, you begin by researching the institution's history, its context. That generative process, as you describe it, seems to shape your relationship with the museum's archive or its accumulated content?

**EdW:** Yes, though my relationship

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increasingly personal, moving away from purely art historical writing.

**YH:** I really feel the personal stories in your writing have a poetic, intimate quality. When you say the work is personal, do you mean it in an autobiographical sense? Is that how you understand it?

**EdW:** Absolutely. I don't think I can separate myself from the work — it is autobiographical. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* tells my family's story through Japanese objects — *netsukes* — and that felt very natural to me. My way of working is quite unconventional: I believe objects carry stories — fragmented, painful, human stories.

**YH:** That relationship with objects and narrative is so compelling. There's a sensitivity in how you reflect yourself in the work — how you translate that reflection through objects, and even through language, as if the installation becomes a kind of writing.

for me. That's really the measure of who we are as human beings: touch. When you read handwriting — even if you can't fully understand the words — you can still feel the mark-making. And that takes you back to the origins of human expression, to the beginnings of language. Marking clay, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, drawing on walls — it's this deep connection between the mark, the word, and sound.

**YH:** That reminds me of the three elements in semiology: icon, index, and symbol. Your writing feels like an index, a trace, while your ceramics act as icons, embodying form and presence. Together, they form a personal language, a kind of code for translating the world. To me, your use of symbols even suggests a way of reading the future.

**EdW:** Absolutely. That's deeply connected to my practice. Interestingly, I have recently published a new book with

to the archive isn't conventional. I don't simply go in and work through everything in order. I'm more aligned with the image Walter Benjamin gave of the poet or writer as a ragpicker — someone who gathers discarded things. That's how I approach archives. In fact, the first chapter of *an Archive*, published online in *The Yale Review*, is about that — about ragpicking. It connects back to my own journey: 40 years ago, walking through markets in China, picking up broken shards of porcelain. That act of collecting fragments, finding meaning in what's been left behind — it's at the heart of everything I do.

