

The Ephrussi Treasure

Literature and history

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Through the remarkable story of the journey of 264 Japanese miniatures, a world-renowned ceramicist retraces the rise and fall of his family, the Ephrussi, rich Jewish bankers with a dynasty which spread across Europe from Odessa and Paris to Vienna. His book is an example of how history can lie at the heart of literature.

Reviewed: Edmund De Waal, *La Mémoire retrouvée*, translated from English by Marina Boraso, Paris, Albin Michel, 2011, 416 p., 23 € (*The Hare With Amber Eyes. A Hidden Inheritance*, London, Random House, 2010).

The much-acclaimed *The Hare With Amber Eyes*, winner of numerous awards and praised unanimously in the British press, was recently translated into French. This original book tells the story of the Ephrussi family, grain merchants from Odessa who went on to become bankers with a dynasty spreading across all four corners of Europe. World-renowned ceramicist Edmund de Waal focuses his interest on the netsuke rather than the family members themselves, and it is with him that the figurines now rest, after having been passed down from generation to generation.

Netsuke are miniature sculptures representing Japanese artistic traditions; ranging from between 2 and 15 cm in size, they would have been attached to the belts used to fasten traditional Japanese robes. The rarest amongst them can fetch up to 275,000 euros. Made from ivory or wood, they depict a wide variety of different figures, animals and objects in varying poses. The 264 pieces in the Ephrussi collection include a spotted grey wolf, entwined lovers, an octopus, a faun on a bed of leaves, a cicada, a man sitting with a gourd at his feet, a cooper

wielding an adze, an abundance of rats and rat-catchers, fish, medlar plants, and the eponymous chef-d'œuvre, a hare with amber eyes. The figurines in this magnificent collection, similar in size to Edmond de Goncourt's collection of 140 miniatures which he amassed in the 19th century, as well as others numbering up to 200, are as valuable for the variety of figures they depict as they are for their cream-coloured and mahogany shading, their sheen and patina, and their lightness and artistic finesse. On one netsuke, the carver's signature can be found on the thorax of a hornet! Edmund de Waal carries them each in turn with him for the day, as though the pulse of his ancestors can still be felt vibrating through them:

A netsuke is so light and so small that it migrates and almost disappears amongst your keys and change. [...] I intermittently roll this thing through my fingers. I realise how much I care about how this hard-and-soft losable object has survived. (p. 24-25)

This fascination with the netsuke has more to it than simple aesthetic pleasure. De Waal may well feel a sense of responsibility for the figures, since they represent a spiritual inheritance. Having survived a century of European history, these delicate objects are all that is left of the Ephrussi family, one of the largest Jewish families of the 19th century along with the Rothschild, Camondo and Cattai families. The journey of these netsuke forms the subject of the book; first purchased in Paris in the 1870s by a distant cousin, Charles Ephrussi, and offered as a wedding present to Viktor Ephrussi, a banker in Vienna in the early 20th century and the author's great-grandfather, they were finally taken to Tokyo in 1950 by a great-uncle named Iggie.

Paris, Vienna, Tokyo

From docks, canals, and the bridges being built over the Danube to the railways crossing France and Russia, the Ephrussi family fortune had investments in it all. Named the "Kings of Grain," the family decided in the 1860s to send their sons to establish family branches in different countries across Europe. Paris, The City of Light and capital of the Arts, fell to Charles (1849-1905). The young man became a member of the most fashionable *salons*, kept company with the highest echelons of society and spent his free time hunting for

antiques with his mistress, Louise Cahen d'Anvers. It was around this time that *Japonisme* was all the rage; Monet painted *La Japonaise* and began to collect engravings, Proust's Odette, dressed in a kimono, receives Swann in a room decorated with screens and lanterns, and Charles and his mistress became obsessed with lacquer and ivory, ceramics, bronze statues, fans, trinkets and Japanese robes. Charles kept his new netsuke laid out on a length of green velvet in a dark wooden display cabinet with a mirror at the back so that the collection appeared even larger. Around the same period, he acquired over sixty new Impressionist masterpieces, including ones by Monet, Cassatt, Morisot, Sisley, and Pissarro, as well as Manet's *Une botte d'asperges* (A Bunch of Asparagus) (1880). As time went by, Charles, nicknamed "the Benedictine dandy of the rue de Monceau" by his secretary, poet Jules Laforgue, gradually lost interest in high-society and became an avid art historian, collector and patron of the arts.

However, the Ephrussi wealth inspired both envy and hatred. When Renoir found out that Charles, a patron of his, also liked the works of Gustave Moreau, he gave vent to his bitterness: "It was clever of him [Moreau] to take in the Jews, to have thought of painting with gold colours...even Ephrussi fell for it!" (p.106) Against the backdrop of various scandals all involving Jewish businessmen, the Goncourt brothers proclaimed the *salons* to be "infested with Jews and Jewesses." In 1894, the Dreyfus affair erupted.

As the Ephrussi heyday waned and all things Japanese passed out of style, the netsuke began a new life in Vienna, where they were sent in 1899 as a wedding gift for cousin Viktor's wedding with the beautiful Emmy. With a fortune worth millions, Viktor Ephrussi (1860-1945), son of a *Gründer* (a pioneer in new Austria), divided his time between the family palace on Vienna's Ringstrasse and their country house, Kövesces, located in the former Czechoslovakia two hours by train from Vienna. Jews in Austria had had full civic rights, including the right to education and property ownership, since 1867. Much like in the Monceau district of Paris, they flourished under Emperor Franz Josef's reign, with the bankers and industrialists amongst them buying up huge swathes of land, engaging in financial speculation and extravagantly high bidding, and holding impossibly magnificent

parties in their *étage noble* ballrooms. All these stucco and marble palaces, referred to as ‘architectural fireworks’ by De Waal (p.144) were in stark contrast to the rather more modest netsuke. However, the humble miniatures were in no way outshone by their grander surroundings, and the Ephrussi children would often play with the little boxwood mouse, the half naked wrestler preparing to jump, the hunted stag and that hare with the amber eyes, much like others would line their lead soldiers up on the carpet.

When Austria declared war in 1914, the family’s French servants had to pack their bags and leave the Ringstrasse to return to France. The family were already divided; Viktor and the Ephrussi bank in Vienna were on hostile terms with the other branches of the family, namely Ephrussi et Cie at the Rue de l’Arcade in Paris, Ephrussi and Co of King Street in London and the Efrussi branch in Petrograd. Ruined by inflation, the effects of the war and his catastrophic refusal to have his wealth transferred from Austria, Viktor was left with nothing but his palace on the Ringstrasse and the netsuke lying in their cabinet, no doubt forgotten.

One by one, the family’s children left Vienna. Elisabeth, fascinated in philosophy and economics and in correspondence with Rilke, as well as being the first woman to receive a doctorate of law from the University of Vienna, moved to the United States where she went on to marry a Dutchman named De Waal. Her sister Gisela emigrated to Madrid with her husband in 1925, while Iggie moved to Paris to become a dress designer. Soon after the Anschluss, the Nazi policy of plundering began. This was the final blow for the Ephrussi family: “The house wasn’t theirs anymore. It was full of people, some in uniform and some in suits. People counting rooms, making lists of objects and pictures, taking things away.” (p. 295) Jews would sometimes sell their possessions in order to pay the *Reichsfluchtsteuer* so that they could escape the country. On 12 August 1938, the Ephrussi company name was crossed off the Commercial Register.

And what happened to the little Japanese figurines? After the war, Elisabeth returned to the house in Vienna and heard from Anna, the family maid, how everything had been

ransacked and pillaged by the Nazis: “And they didn’t notice. They were so busy. They were busy with all the grand things [...] And I put them in my mattress and I slept on them.” (p. 323) A brave and deeply moving gesture from a servant who would otherwise have been invisible to the Ephrussi family. Anna returned the 264 netsuke to Elisabeth, whose brother Iggie (1906-1994), fluent in German, English and French, went on to become an Intelligence Officer in the American Army and moved to Tokyo as a grain exporter. This descendent of the “Kings of Grain” took the netsuke with him, bringing the family story of grain and netsuke full circle. The figures found themselves once more on show in a glass cabinet, this time in a post-war Tokyo salon with a view looking out onto a camellia garden. This was their final resting place before being inherited by Edmund De Waal and travelling with him to London.

Across the Diaspora

The netsuke’s native Japan to which they returned represented but an illusory oasis of peace after the monstrous events, anti-Semitism, Anschluss, war and mass murder which had destroyed Europe; many of the atrocities committed before and after the Second World War were to a significant degree committed in the name of Japanese imperialism.

Before the apocalyptic events of the war, the netsuke had represented a closed microcosm for the Ephrussi children. “They h[e]ld themselves inwards” (p. 324), they were self-sustaining, and their longevity and hardness inspired a type of trust. These hares, ropes, medlars and nut shells represented a stability that existed despite the upheaval the world had experienced. Viktor, a Viennese Russian for half a century, went on to become stateless; his daughter Elisabeth, born in Vienna, acquired Dutch nationality; Iggie went from being Austrian to American and finally back to Austrian residing in Japan. The Ephrussi glory had been erased, and their paintings, automobiles, robes and properties plundered. The netsuke, however, remained as they were, unchanged. In their perfection, they seem immune to age and decay. Their beauty is almost scandalous—“why should they have got through this war in a hiding-place when so many hidden people did not?”

However, once again, their immutability is merely illusory. These infinitely fragile beings, the height of refinement, need our protection; locked away behind glass, hidden under a mattress or carried in pockets, it is man's protection which affords them their unassailable solidity and which allows them to survive journeys, exile, pillaging and war. Despite their substantial density, their permanence and their polish, the netsuke are not detached from history. On the contrary, history invades their glass cabinet. As De Waal writes, quoting Virgil's "*sunt lacrimae rerum*," "there are tears in things" (Daniel Mendelsohn uses the same phrase in *The Lost*¹).

The netsuke are, however, accessible to mortals, despite their immortality. Each individual owns them in their own way; Charles the dandy shows them off to his friends; the children in the Ephrussi palace roll them across carpets; in a temple in the suburbs of Tokyo, the author says a kaddish in memory of his relative Iggie, exiled from Vienna. Emotional investment, familiarity, inheritance, preservation and displacement all leave their mark on the netsuke; that of the disintegration of a family. There is a connection between the fragile yet stable netsuke that preserve their integrity despite the change and uncertainty around them, and life in a diaspora, with its exiles, dispersion, distance, and faithful continuity in spite of the oblivion which threatens to overwhelm.

A Discourse on History

There is, however, something more important, which is why *The Hare With Amber Eyes* touched me as it did. The book, with its psychological subtlety, its journey into time and space, its narrative overlapping, nostalgia, and exploration of the world of childhood, is also a history book (although the word "history" here is not to be taken in its common sense, where the slightest mention of Haussmannian architecture or the Second World War warrants the status of a historical piece). I also attempted the combination of history and literature in a family biography entitled *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus* [A history of the grandparents I never had] (Seuil, 2012). The following lines are as much an account as they

¹ Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, Harper, First Edition edition, 2006; reviewed in French in *La Vie des Idées*, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Comment-raconter-la-Shoah.html>.

are a justification for a particular perception of history, and also of literature.

De Waal narrates as a writer and reasons as a historian. The questions he asks himself and the reader go far beyond the particular details of his family and the colourful characters of which it is composed. The different branches of the family and its fortunes spread throughout Europe in the 19th century, the superficial assimilation of the western Jews caught between emancipation and the Holocaust, the migration of entire families, the movement of possessions,² and the uniqueness of art at a time of mass industrialisation are all discussed. Of course, De Waal only tackles these questions by examining a few particular characters and their fates, each linked one with the other through their filiation and inheritance of the netsuke. However, it is precisely through this focus on certain paradoxes of modernity that this book of interwoven histories is able to show how little rupture there is between our personal family histories and what we imagine to be universal “History,” how little heterogeneity between the anonymous masses and the most renowned, between the intimacy of memories, the progression of individual lives and that vast public space that we call the past.

In order to question, obliquely and in a fragmentary way, this past, De Waal uses rich and varied sources, including family memories and stories, archives unearthed in France and Austria, newspapers, masterpieces and other art objects.

² For similar themes, see Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat. The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2008.

Typology of the sources (oral, manuscript, printed and material) used in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund De Waal:

- family memories (taken from the author’s grandmother Elisabeth and his great-uncle Iggy);
- family archives (letters, account books, balance sheets, opera and theatre ticket books, photo albums, one of which showed Emmy and the archduke in 1907);
- public archives (archives from the Louvre, registers from the Rabbinate of Vienna, Adler company archives, Deutsche Bank files relating to the transfer of Ephrussi assets after the Second World War) ;
- periodicals, primarily on art and fashion (the “Society” columns of the *Gaulois*, specialist reviews such as *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *Allgemeine Bauzeitung* and *Women’s Wear Daily*) ;
- prints (Charles Ephrussi’s *Albert Dürer et ses dessins*, collection catalogues, the *La France juive* [Jewish France] pamphlet by Drumont, the *Journal* of the Goncourt brothers) ;
- relevant works of fiction (*Du côté de chez Swann*, in which Proust takes inspiration for Swann’s character from two sources, Charles Ephrussi and Charles Haas, both art lovers, men of the world and Jewish; also, Karl Kraus, Musil, Schnitzler and *La Marche de Radetzky* [Radetzky March] in which Trotta deposits his wealth at the Ephrussi bank in 1900 Vienna);
- paintings (*Le Pont de l’Europe* [The Europe Bridge] by Caillebotte, *Le Déjeuner des canotiers* [Luncheon of the Boating Party] by Renoir in which Charles Ephrussi features, out of place in his black suit and his top-hat, and *Pips au piano* by Joseph Olbrich, one of the pillars of the Secession Style);
- art objets (Japanese lacquer ware, furniture and of course, netsuke);
- buildings and monuments (maps of capital cities, private mansions in Paris and the Ephrussi palace on Vienna’s Ringstrasse built by Hansen).

In using such diverse sources, the author is not merely being open-minded but also wishes to provide the reader with evidence for his story. There are certainly no sacred footnotes in *The Hare With Amber Eyes*, and analysis of the archives is far from systematic, while the bibliography is unfortunately rather sparse, a shame since recent works might have offered some interesting perspectives on Paris and Vienna at the turn of the last century.³ This is not hugely important, however, as De Waal is not a professional historian. On the other hand, he does use the methods of a historian, whether unconsciously or intuitively. While this may seem obvious, it is still a good idea to remind ourselves that history is not only created by historians. What we see with De Waal is an artist potter who is also an author and a mapper of

³ See for example Christophe Charle, *Paris fin de siècle. Culture et politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1998 ; Carl Schorske, *Vienne fin de siècle. Politique et culture*, Paris, Seuil, 1983 ; et Steven Beller, *Vienne et les Juifs, 1837-1938*, Paris, Nathan, 1991.

the past, who returns to the basic principles of the discipline of history which, according to Herodotus, include inquiry, travel, discovery, passage, wandering, encounters, collecting accounts and documents, the desire to give it your all and to learn to see⁴.

The Triple “I”

It is probably due to his not being a professional historian that De Waal has no scruples in using “I” to enrich his reasoning. The “I” of the investigator-narrator-author pervades the text: “I see,” “I imagine,” “I ask myself,” “I try to get my bearings,” “In libraries I stumble across things,” “I booked a ticket,” “I started a journey,” “I am not sure what I will understand,” “I cannot fight this anguish,” “I simply do not understand,” etc. It is in actual fact a triple “I,” that of the family line and of artistic heritage, that of the investigator with his original approach and haunted by questions, and that of the emotion which he inevitably feels. “I am in Vienna,” writes De Waal, “a stone’s throw from the family home, and my vision blurs.” (p. 139) The author exhibits no false modesty; he doubts, mumbles, hesitates, rummages around, grows enthusiastic, gives up, and sometimes gets lucky. He feels no shame in acknowledging all these emotions, prejudices, tremors and stumblings, because they are an integral part of the research process and are grounded in honesty. His quest is transparent and his confession tinged with modesty.

The author’s constant toing and froing between the family’s past and the present in which he, as a researcher, ceramicist, descendant and father now finds himself is a fundamental part of the book. Himself an artist, clients and patrons also visit De Waal in his South London studio, stuck between a Caribbean fast-food restaurant and a car repair shop. His empathy and profession allows him to better understand his grandfather: “It is very strange for me to be reading so much about Charles as a patron and his friendship with Renoir and Degas. It is not just the vertiginous descent from doing the commissioning to being commissioned.” (p. 103) Historians should not be afraid of their “I,” of their intimacy, not even of their doubts; investigators always conjugate their research in the present. Such

⁴ François Hartog, *L’Histoire d’Homère à Augustin*, Seuil, coll. “Points,” 1999, p. 53 ; and, more generally, *The Mirror of Herodotus: the Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, Berkeley, University of

apparent audacity on their part would lead only to an increased reflexivity in their approach.

In *The Hare With Amber Eyes*, the variety of sources used, their cross-referencing, the preoccupation with proving what is said, the obsession not only with reality but also with materiality such as statues, objects and clothes, shows that historical and sociological reasoning can be found at the heart of what is literary. It is not a question here of defining what the word “literature” means, even if that were possible. I will content myself by saying that literature creates emotion through the medium of writing and form. This somewhat rough definition nevertheless possesses two main advantages: simplicity, which allows for the inclusion of all texts, and plasticity, which renders literature entirely compatible with research and the social sciences. It is actually possible to create texts which are inextricably both history and literature at once, the understanding being of course that the latter is not automatically reduced to fiction. I was thus able to define my *Histoire des grands-parents que je n’ai pas eus* [A history of the grandparents I never had] as non-fiction literature which satisfies certain methodological requirements. In this respect, De Waal is much more of a historian than Mendelsohn, although this statement is in no way an indictment of the quality of their respective works. The narrative and cognitive experiments so brilliantly accomplished by them have very little in common with those fictionalised history books which, in attempting to be both history and novel simultaneously, end up as nothing at all.

Hybrid texts such as *The Hare with Amber Eyes* shed new light on the rich debate, ongoing for several years, surrounding the relationship between historians and literature.⁵ It is crucial not to define the debate along professional lines, as this would lead to two separate genres, with Balzac the writer on one side and Braudel or Bourdieu the scholar on the other. It is equally important not to make of literature a vaguely fascinating timeless entity that

California Press, 1988.

⁵ For the most noteworthy publications, see Judith Lyon-Caen, Dinah Ribard, *L’Historien et la Littérature*, [The historian and literature], Paris, La Découverte, coll. “Repères,” 2010, reviewed on the Fabula website (<http://www.fabula.org/revue/document6403.php>); see also the special edition of the *Annales*, “Savoirs de la littérature,” [Knowledge of literature], 65th year, n° 2, March-April 2010. *La Vie des Idées* organised a talk with Patrick Boucheron, Florent Brayard, Judith-Lyon-Caen and Dinah Ribard (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-litterature-une-science-sociale.html>) to mark its publication.

historians should contemplate dreamily or manipulate carefully at their little desks. Much like a ceramicist can be a historian, a historian can be a writer, by combining a sensitivity for human beings, the world and objects, a reflexive “I,” a narrative construction and scientific procedures with the emotion created precisely by the unresolved tension between all these different elements. It is therefore possible for historians to create literature without sacrificing their role as historians, and whilst remaining loyal to methodology and mindful of producing truthful discourse.

Further resources:

– Reviews of the book
in *The Telegraph* :

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7832582/The-Hare-With-Amber-Eyes-A-Hidden-Inheritance-by-Edmund-de-Waal-review.html>

in *The Guardian* :

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/26/hare-amber-eyes-de-waal>

– Edmund De Waal’s personal site: <http://www.edmunddewaal.com/>

– A filmed interview with Edmund De Waal :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnCjLXQAnmo>

– Websites on netsuke:

<http://www.netsuke.fr/>

http://www.samourais-et-ikebana.com/art_japon/netsuke.html

– The exhibition « La splendeur des Camondo » [The Splendour of the House of Camondo] at the Museum of Art and History of Judaism: (2009-2010) : http://www.mahj.org/fr/3_expositions/expo-Splendeur-Camondo.php

– The Camondo museum website:

<http://www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr/francais/nissim-de-camondo/>

– Ephrussi de Rothschild villa: <http://www.villa-ephrussi.com/>

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