

Following the fortunes of a collection of miniature figurines, Edmund de Waal's family memoir is a work of rare and sustained brilliance

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THE HARE WITH AMBER EYES

A Hidden Inheritance
by EDMUND DE WAAL
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Fifteen years ago, the potter Edmund de Waal inherited 264 "netsuke" – miniature Japanese wood and ivory carvings, originally intended as toggles for purses and bags. They included a snarling tiger, a curled snake, a sleeping servant, a bundle of kindling, a naked woman with an octopus, and a hare with amber eyes. None bigger than a matchbox, they are, in de Waal's perfect phrase, "small, tough explosions of exactitude".

The netsuke were left to him by his great-uncle Iggie Ephrussi, who kept them in his apartment in Tokyo. Here, during his visits to Japan as a student of ceramics, de Waal would open the glass-fronted case, take them out one by one and roll them in his hands. Simple, weightless and strange, the netsuke are also, de Waal says, "witty and ribald and slyly comic", and now that they take up a wall of his living room in south London, he has decided to uncover their story. What other rooms have these strange objects lived in? Who else's hands have held them? What did they mean to their previous owners? Most of all, de Waal wants to know, what have they witnessed? So, with a netsuke nestling quietly in his pocket, he sets out on a journey to Paris, Vienna and Tokyo.

There is nothing in western art quite like netsuke. Nor is there anything in Waterstone's quite like this remarkable book. De Waal's story begins in Paris in the 1870s, where the collection is bought from a dealer in Japanese art by Charles Ephrussi, a staggeringly wealthy cousin of de Waal's great-grandfather. The Ephrussi family are Russian Jews made rich by exporting Ukrainian wheat, and their newly acquired coat of arms displays an ear of corn. When they expand into banking, they move from Odessa to palatial homes in Paris and Vienna. Charles, now in his twenties, lives with his mother and brother in a newly built Florentine-style mansion on the Rue de Monceau, where he has established a reputation as an art critic and a man about town. In three years he has bought 60 impressionist works by Morisot, Cassatt, Degas, Manet, Monet, Pissarro and Renoir, most of whom are his friends. The "socially ravenous" Marcel Proust, who will model his own Jewish aesthete, Charles Swann, on Charles Ephrussi,



De Waal: his memoir overflows with riches yet remains light, fragile, compact

A masterpiece to treasure

is one of many who seek out his company.

Charles buys the netsuke, probably for a vast sum, because they amuse him. They are witty curiosities, and the only things in his collection of artworks that relate to everyday life. He puts them not in the stately drawing room but in a mirrored vitrine in his private study. The appeal of Japanese *objets*, de Waal suggests, is that they introduce "new ways of feeling things", and the netsuke are tumbled around in the palms of Renoir and Degas.

By the 1890s the vogue for Japonisme is dying and Charles needs to make room for more acquisitions. So at the turn of the century he sends the netsuke to Vienna as a wedding present for his favourite cousin, Viktor, who lives in the gargantuan Palais Ephrussi on the Ringstrasse. The hare with the amber eyes and its 263 companions find themselves around the corner from Freud, housed in the dressing room of Viktor's 18-year-old bride, Emmy Ephrussi. Emmy, who loves clothes, spends hours every day in this room, and this is where her three children spend time with her. While the maid, Anna, stitches her mother into her evening gowns and meticulously curls her hair, the children take out the netsuke and play with them. They are no longer carvings to be admired and praised by a refined elite; they no longer have anything to do with Japan. The netsuke have become toys, and "small, quick, ivory stories".

The children grow up and leave home, the Gestapo arrive in the city and the Palais

Ephrussi is stormed. The princely furniture is broken, the magnificent library is ransacked and 100 old pictures are boxed up and taken away. "How can I write about this time?" asks de Waal, and his account of the undoing of his family and their world is almost too painful to read. The great treasure house is no longer theirs – it is handed over to one of Hitler's chief ideologues – and the Ephrussis flee, leaving behind Anna. Emmy commits suicide in Czechoslovakia; Viktor, aged 75, ends his days in Tunbridge Wells in the home of his eldest daughter, Elisabeth (de

Waal's grandmother) and her Dutch husband. The netsuke are forgotten, they belong to a previous existence. When Elisabeth returns to Vienna in 1945 to see what and who remains, she discovers that the maid Anna is still alive and living in the palais. The netsuke, saved from the Nazis, have spent the war hidden in her mattress: Anna had slipped them, a few at a time, into the pocket of her apron. Their role has now become to remember the past and to believe in a future.

Elisabeth brings the collection to Tunbridge Wells, and when her brother Iggie

accepts a job in Japan he takes them with him. In Tokyo they are kept "in the centre of his life", displayed in a vitrine with hidden lights so that at night they glow "with all the gradations of cream, bone and ivory". The netsuke are once more Japanese.

De Waal, the son of a Church of England priest, could have written a nostalgic tale about the loss of the Ephrussi family wealth and glamour, but what he does instead is far more subtle, interesting and high-risk. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is a meditation on touch, exile, space and the responsibility of inheritance. At the same time as exploring how each of these "soft-hard" objects has "displaced a small part of the world around it", de Waal uncovers his own hidden place in an "assimilated, acculturated, Jewish family". Stories, he says, are to be handed on, but in the present literary climate of dumbed-down, throwaway narratives, to be handed a story as durable and exquisitely crafted as this is a rare pleasure; nobody since Lorna Sage in *Bad Blood* has shown so well how a memoir can overflow with riches and yet remain light, fragile, compact. Like the netsuke themselves, this book is impossible to put down. You have in your hands a masterpiece.



All the rage

Although they were used as toggles for bags, the best

Japanese netsuke, left, were crafted with great care. The vogue for them and other Japanese culture came after the American Commodore Perry opened Japan up to trade in 1859. Western dealers flooded the country – some called it a rape – snapping up art cheaply and selling it for hugely inflated prices back in the west.

Read an interview with Edmund de Waal and see a gallery of his netsuke at thesundaytimes.co.uk. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is available at the Bookshop price of £15.29 (inc p&p) on 0845 271 2135