

The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family History of and through Objects

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After knowing about the book for a couple of years, I finally found the time to read [The Hare with Amber Eyes](#) (2010), Edmund de Waal's evocative exploration of his material *patrimoine*. The book traces its author's geographical, archival, and emotional wanderings through the past century and a half and across the globe as he pieces together the story of his family, largely through its accumulated—and then mostly alienated—collections. Where objects are no longer extant, de Waal reconstructs their once-presence from lists, ledgers, account books, registries, catalogues, photographs, letters, memoirs, and novels.

The title refers to one of a set of 264 Japanese netsuke that the author/narrator inherits, and that provide the launching point for his forays into cultural history, especially the history of erudite, assimilated Jews of the socially ascendant merchant and banking class in *fin de siècle* Paris, pre-WWII Vienna, and post-war Tokyo. His ancestors and their collections rub shoulders with Proust and Freud and Renoir and Rilke, and are participants in and witness to some of the high (culture) points and the horrors of modern European life. A renowned English ceramicist, [de Waal](#) brings his own intimacy with objects, his close awareness of material specificity, to everything he describes. Here are the key passages from the book's Prologue that set forth his artistic and narrative sensibility:

I'm not entitled to nostalgia about all that wealth and glamour from a century ago. And I am not interested in thin [as opposed to "thick"]. I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers—hard and tricky and Japanese—and where it has been. I want to be able to reach to the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the wall, 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.

Melancholy, I think, is a sort of default vagueness, a get-out clause, a smothering lack of focus. And this netsuke is a small, tough explosion of exactitude. It deserves this kind of exactitude in return.

All this matters because my job is to make things. How objects get handled, used and handed on is not just a mildly interesting question for me. It is my question.... I can

remember the weight and the balance of a pot, and how its surface works with its volume.... I can see how it works with the objects that sit nearby. How it displaces a small part of the world around it.

I can also remember if something invited touch with the whole hand or just the fingers, or was an object that asked you to stay away.... How objects are handed on is all about storytelling. I am giving you this because I love you. Or because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. What is remembered and what is forgotten? There can be a chain of forgetting, the rubbing away of previous ownership as much as the slow accretion of stories. What is being passed on to me with all these small Japanese objects?

While such insights are not news to anthropologists of material culture, it is refreshing to see them articulated so personally and lucidly for a general public. For his research, de Waal assembled the family trove of photographs and documents and surviving objects and then contextualized it—tried to contain it—through searching city archives in Paris and Vienna, visiting museums and libraries and cafes, reading voraciously, studying variations on *Japonisme*, and walking the streets surrounding his family's previous abodes. Though we do not learn much about the netsuke themselves (my American edition did not even illustrate them except for a few on the cover, too small to examine closely—ironic, perhaps, given de Waal's proclivities), they are meant to open a narrative vitrine onto other treasures they came into proximity with.

Rather than simply cataloguing his family's prior collections of paintings and sculptures, decorative arts and bibelots, furniture and fashions, and architectural environs—which he does with inquisitive and insightful consideration—de Waal approaches these things as ciphers, clues in a kind of material rebus, for helping him understand the people who bought and sold and gave away and, above all, *lived with* them. A notable and perhaps telling absence among his lists of property is Judaica; we get a sense of the family's Jewish identity mostly via stories of their having being subject to anti-Semitism. The resulting history is at times superficial, familiar, and speculative—and far from scholarly (there are no footnotes unpacking his sources, no suggestions for further reading, no clearly given repositories for the few artworks that are illustrated)—but it provides a wonderfully tactile and personal (and even in its own reconstructed way, ethnographic) approach to writing cultural history through keen attention to its material embodiments and lived realities.