

THE HARE WITH
AMBER EYES

A HIDDEN INHERITANCE



PICADOR

EDMUND
DE WAAL

"The most enchanting history lesson imaginable."
—CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT, *The New Yorker*

< FIG. 1. Cover, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, by Edmund de Waal (New York: Picador, 2021, U.S. second paperback edition; first edition, hardback, London: Chatto & Windus, 2010)

FIG. 2. The ivory hare netsuke with amber-colored eyes featured on the cover of de Waal's book and exhibited at the Jewish Museum, New York, November 2021. Photo: Julia Meech

The ivory hare with the signature of the carver Masatoshi, and dated to around 1880, is about one inch in height. Edmund de Waal placed the Ephrussi netsuke collection on permanent loan to the Jewish Museum, Vienna. The museum catalogues the inlaid eyes of this hare as *dyed buffalo horn*, not amber.

The *Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, the book that Edmund de Waal wrote about his celebrated family, remains a beloved bestseller, translated into thirty languages (fig. 1). However, the enormous success of his book is due for the most part to the vertiginous vicissitudes of generations of the Ephrussi banking dynasty of Paris and Vienna, to whom the author belongs, and whose story he painstakingly recreated through documents, memories and his own imagination. The netsuke as such—the eponymous ivory hare and two hundred sixty-three others—are in the background of the narrative, as an oblique metaphor for the grander collections of art, books, businesses and properties that were confiscated or lost in the 1930s and 1940s (fig. 2). Thanks to an exhibition from November 2021 to May 2022 at the Jewish Museum in New York,



OPPOSITE

FIG. 3. Iwan Baan (b. 1975). The Netherlands. *Hôtel Ephrussi #2, Paris*. 2021. Archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist

Baan is a renowned photographer whose images address the human aspect of architecture, classic and modern. He has photographed buildings by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, who designed the Ephrussi exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York.

FIG. 4. Jewish Museum, New York

FIG. 5. Jean Patricot (1865–1928). France. *Charles Ephrussi*. 1905. Drypoint engraving. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC., Museum Purchase, 2016

In the lower left of the plate is the name *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, the premier art journal of turn-of-the-century Europe. Charles Ephrussi was a contributor, its editor from 1894 until his death in 1905 and its part-owner as of 1885.

One of the most famous paintings in The Phillips Collection is Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880–81. The overdressed man in a top hat at the rear of that painting is Renoir's patron Charles Ephrussi.

one hundred sixty-eight of the present collection of one hundred eighty-five netsuke were on display. In 2018, de Waal and family sold, in London, seventy-nine pieces (their photos were projected in the exhibition) to benefit the charity Refugee Council, which supports unaccompanied refugee minors. That sale, catalogued and conducted by the British dealer Max Rutherford, totaled nearly €100,000.

It is helpful to remember that the two Japanese characters for “netsuke” are 根, *ne*, meaning “root(s),” and 付, *tsuke*, meaning “fix,” “attach,” “accompany”—meanings that resonate with the history of the forcibly uprooted Ephrussi family and their netsuke—the miniature remnants of their glorious past.

“The Hare with Amber Eyes” was organized by the museum’s curators Stephen Brown and Shira Backer, in collaboration with Edmund de Waal. The multimedia interpretation and design were by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. One wonders if some of the habitués of the museum ever had been exposed to Japanese netsuke, or whether first-time visitors discovered the Jewish Museum through their interest in Japanese art.

The exhibition organizers did an excellent job of reconstructing glimpses of the vanished world of European wealth and cultural sophistication exemplified by the Ephrussis and Rothschilds, to whom they often are compared. Many attendees doubtless knew that the exhibition was in the former Gilded-Age mansion on Fifth Avenue and Ninety-second Street of Felix M. Warburg (1871–1937), a German-born American banker, art collector and philanthropist (figs. 3 and 4).

The poignant nerve of the show was the story of several generations of a Jewish family that grew from the rags of Berdichev shtetl (the area is now in Ukraine) to riches in the flamboyant, yet provincial, Russian port town of Odessa, where they became the world’s largest distributors of grain by the 1860s. From there, they branched out to Paris and Vienna. The exhibition covers Jewish emancipation, patronage of the arts, and entrée into higher society—as well as the prejudice and pejoratives often murmured. (Viewers were reminded that Edmund de Goncourt wrote in his diary, “Salons had become infested with Jews and Jewesses.”) Renoir remarked that the gold tone of a Moreau painting purchased by his friend and patron Charles Ephrussi was “Jew art”; Moreau’s large *Jason* hung on the gallery wall panel shown in figure 6a. One might say that the netsuke collection—Tokyo to Paris to Vienna to Tokyo to London to Vienna—mirrors the “vagabonding,” as Charles Ephrussi expressed it, of his family: Odessa, Paris, Vienna and later, the United States, Tokyo, London.¹

In Paris, where secularizing Jews were quickly shedding their Orthodox Judaism, “Japonisme became ‘a sort of religion,’” as attested by George August Sala in 1878. He mentioned as examples the “very artistic amateurs, the Ephrussi, the Camondos” (de Waal, p. 49; de Waal’s *Letters to Comondo* of 2021 are imaginary letters to Moïse Camondo, contemporary of Charles Ephrussi, whose collection forms the Musée Camondo in Paris). Charles



Ephrussi, a cousin of de Waal’s great-grandfather, was a collector, art critic and connoisseur who knew everyone in the art circles of fin-de-siècle Paris (fig. 5). He is said to have been one of the models for Charles Swann in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. He purchased as bibelots the netsuke collection in one lot from the Parisian dealer Philippe Sichel in the 1880s, although he had a more serious interest in Japanese lacquer. (Sichel himself titled his book *Notes d’un bibeloteur au Japon* [1885]). And when the collection migrated from Paris to Vienna to Charles’s cousin Viktor, the latter’s children were allowed to play with the exotic figurines as if they were tiny dolls, which relegated netsuke to a sort of amusing bric-a-brac. Those netsuke, and all other Japanese art in Europe at the time, witnessed within a few decades the change of tastes, hands and locations. They also witnessed a certain level of openness for otherness and, later, the backlashes in the spirit of nationalistic Blut und Boden (body and soil), highlighted by, but not limited to, the Dreyfus affair or Nazism.

At the beginning of his book, de Waal expresses that he did not want to write up “some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss” (p. 15) and continues, “Melancholy, I think, is a sort of default vagueness, a get-out clause, a smothering lack of focus. And this netsuke [the hare] is a small, tough explosion of exactitude. It deserves this kind of exactitude in return” (p. 16). The Jewish Museum exhibition approached this exactitude for the life and demise of the Ephrussi, but lamentably, lacked it for the netsuke themselves.

The netsuke were arranged on three huge, square tables with acrylic display covers, and in one glass cabinet in the last room (figs. 6a, b and 7). The low

FIG. 6a. Evgeny Steiner studying netsuke displayed in a table case at the Jewish Museum, New York, opposite a wall panel of former Ephrussi possessions, November 2021. Photo: Isabella Shuhman

The wall panel is hung with Monet's *View of Vetheuil*, center right, and Berthe Morisot's *Young Girl in Ball Gown*, center left, along with reproductions and other paintings formerly in the Ephrussi collections.

OPPOSITE

FIG. 6b. Closer view of one of the table cases with Ephrussi netsuke collection. Photo: Julia Meech

FIG. 7. A visitor with a netsuke checklist in hand studies Ephrussi Collection netsuke displayed in the final case in the Jewish Museum exhibition, New York. Photo: Julia Meech

The hare with “amber” eyes is at the center of the shelf in the middle of the case. The netsuke were purchased on a whim from a Parisian dealer by Charles Ephrussi (1849–1905) in the late 19th century, after which he apparently lost interest in Japanese art or because he had separated from the paramour who had fancied the netsuke. Ephrussi displayed the miniatures in a glass vitrine in his Paris home. He gave the netsuke and the vitrine to his cousin Viktor von Ephrussi (1860–1945) of Vienna as a wedding present, in 1899. Viktor's wife, Emilie (Emmy), kept the netsuke and vitrine in her dressing room at the Palais Ephrussi.



tables required viewers to bend over in order to look closely at the tiny figurines. Netsuke in the middle of the tables were too far away to see well. There were no labels except for numbers that corresponded to cardboard lists that could be found in pockets on the sides of the tables (fig. 8). The descriptions on those lists were basic, uninformative or sometimes wrong. “Okame. 1880. Wood.” How many visitors knew of Okame? Or “40. Kan’u. 1880. Wood.” Who would know that he represents Guan Yu, a Chinese military leader of the Han dynasty (fig. 9)? Sometimes the legends are not exact: “Old man with a cane and a dragon. Ivory” is a figure of the arhat



Pantaka, called Hantaka-sonja in Japanese. Or, in the case of “Roshi (Zen buddhist) on his ox. 1880,” Roshi is the Japanese pronunciation for Laozi, the founder of Daoism, who is often depicted riding an ox. “Daikoku (god of fortune) with a fish. 1860. Wood and ivory” is of Ebisu (a different one of the seven gods of good fortune). Nor was Shojo a “sea spirit,” or Ama a “sea woman;” Shōjō is a relatively benign demon with a predilection for drinking and also a dance and title character of a Noh play; an *ama* is a female mollusk-diver who often appears in ukiyo-e and other Edo-period art forms in sexually charged scenes. And they were probably not chiseled in 1880, as written on the list; netsuke are often signed, but never inscribed with a date. Incidentally, there were at last three hare netsuke in the exhibition.



The dates attributed to many netsuke are often questionable. Sometimes, the name of the master helps to approximate the time of execution, but other times, we can make only dubious assumptions based on style. And given that (with the exception of a few big names) most netsuke are the work of anonymous carvers who did not change their idiosyncratic style every decade makes dating quite a nebulous endeavor.

There was one didactic panel in the room with the first of the netsuke cases that briefly explained how netsuke functioned as decorative counterweights to secure inro, tobacco pouches and such accoutrements suspended from the sashes worn by Japanese men. It also touched on a theme of the exhibition, “diaspora and

25	Monkey, 1870, Ivory
26	Rats with ginkgo nuts, c. 1820, Ivory and buffalo horn
27	Manju with fan and insects, 1880, Ivory and metal
28	Claydo on a walnut, c. 1880, Wood
29	Bearded man with a pig, Ivory
30	Artisan splitting a gourd, c. 1880, Wood and Ivory, signed Hara Shugetsu III
31	Hornet on a nest, 1850, Wood, signed Goraku
32	Okame, 1880, Wood
33	Skull, c. 1890, Ivory, signed Komin
34	Hare, Ivory
35	Koshi (Zen buddhist) on his ox, 1880, Ivory, signed Anrakasai
36	Shishi (guardian lion) seal, 1870, Ivory, signed Shigemasa
37	Monkey with rope, 1800, Bronze
38	Seated scholar, 1790, Ivory
39	Cooper, c. 1920, Ivory, signed Gyoakasai
40	Kan'u, 1880, Wood, signed Shunkasai
41	Doll, c. 1890, Wood
42	Disappointed male ratcatcher, c. 1890, Ivory, signed Ono Ryonin
43	Standing Oni (spirit), before 1800, Wood and Ivory
44	Heroes of Han, c. 1880, Ivory, signed Rakucisai
45	Monkey trapping an octopus, 1880, Wood
46	Hare, 1780, Ivory, by the Yoshinaga school
47	Globose crane, 1880, Ceramic
48	Mermanid and an octopus, 1890, Wood, signed Suketada



FIG. 8. A checklist of netsuke for exhibition visitors. Photo: Evgeny Steiner

FIG. 9. Installation view of No. 40, a wood netsuke of Guan Yu. Photo: Evgeny Steiner

continuity” and how the “transmission of the netsuke from one owner to the next” was “traced in the family tree.”

Perhaps in not supplying the netsuke with art historical, mythological or cultural commentaries, the exhibition organizers were aiming to convey the casual attitude toward them of the Ephrussi, who hardly knew anything about Japanese art and culture, with the possible exception of Ignaz (Iggie), who lived in Japan in the latter part of the twentieth century and who passed on the netsuke to Edmund de Waal in 1997 (fig. 10). (De Waal himself is a ceramicist with training and long interest in Japanese ceramics.)

The exhibition also declined to address how the netsuke collection, the symbolic ashes of the Ephrussi empire, survived. The story in most accounts is that Emmy, the wife of Viktor—who kept the netsuke in her dressing room—had a quick-thinking maid, Anna. When the Nazi authorities arrived to confiscate the possessions of the Palais Ephrussi, Anna gathered

up well over two hundred netsuke and stuffed them into her mattress; after the war, she returned them to Emmy's and Viktor's daughter Elisabeth de Waal, who gave them to her brother Iggie.²

The Jewish Museum, Vienna, has suggested that the story is apocryphal, Anna included. Were the netsuke overlooked in the looting of so many treasures, or were they simply dismissed? It remains a mystery, although I have my suspicions.

Charles sent his collection of netsuke as a wedding gift to Viktor in a black vitrine with green velvet shelves and a mirrored back (p. 108). In my opinion, in place of low tables, shelves—with or without the velvet—and mirrors were sorely needed for this exhibition. And possibly multiple mirrors for some sculptures, and maybe even holograms. Some netsuke (especially *sasbi* netsuke and other vertically oriented carvings) would have benefitted from standing positions, as in the exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Vienna two years ago.³

All in all, it was an interesting, thought-provoking exhibition that for some viewers might have whetted their interests in Japanese art; for others, it might have served as food for thought on the vagaries of fate and an irrevocably changed world. 🍷

Evgeny Steiner
New York City



FIG. 10. Ignaz (Iggie) Leo Karl Ephrussi (1906–1994) with his inherited Ephrussi netsuke collection in his apartment in Tokyo, 1960

NOTES

1. “Odessa,” wrote de Waal, “. . . its population of Jews and Greeks and Russians . . .” (p. 24). I cannot resist the temptation to mention that I have some personal sentiments for Odessa: my maternal great grandparents—she of Jewish heritage and he of Greek extraction—lived there, in the late 19th to early 20th century, on the central Deribasovskaya Street (or, as it was often called before the Bolshevik Revolution, rue de Ribas).

2. Emmy von Ephrussi committed suicide in 1938. Her husband, Viktor, went into exile in the United Kingdom, where his daughter Elisabeth lived; he died in the U.K. in 1945, revoking in his will the “release” he was forced to sign when the Nazis seized his property.

Iggie settled in the United States, serving in the U.S. Army during the European conflict. His brother Rudy also served with distinction in the European theater and remained in the States after the war. Iggie left for Tokyo in 1947 and resided there until his death in 1994, although he had renewed his Austrian citizenship in 1965.

3. I didn't see the netsuke in Vienna. When I visited the Jewish Museum in New York in late November 2021, I leafed through the Vienna catalogue that was chained to the wall and for sale in the museum shop. I looked at photographs of that exhibition, “The Ephrussis: Travel in Time,” and later on the internet, as well.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Katō Gizan is a sculptor of Buddhist images. He carves nearly life-size, realistic figures in wood. Born in Tokyo, in 1968, he now works in Saitama Prefecture. Gizan has been exhibiting his work since 2008.

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Evgeny Steiner is a professor at the School of Asian Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow), and Professorial Research Associate, Japan Research Centre, SOAS (London). A native Muscovite, he studied art history at Moscow State University and received his PhD degree from the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, in Moscow. Before emigrating from the USSR, he worked at the Pushkin Museum and taught Japanese culture at his alma mater. Since the early 1990s, he has taught and conducted research at universities in Jerusalem, Tokyo, Yokohama, New York, Manchester, Berlin and London.

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