THE HARE WITH AMBER EYES

EDMUND DE WAAL

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ABOUT THE BOOK

264 wood and ivory carvings none of them larger than a matchbox: potter Edmund de Waal was entranced when he first encountered the collection in the Tokyo apartment of his great uncle Iggie. Later, when Edmund inherited the ‘netsuke’, they unlocked a story far larger than he could ever have imagined . . .

The Ephrussis came from Odessa, and at one time were the largest grain exporters in the world; in the 1870s, Charles Ephrussi was part of a wealthy new generation settling in Paris. Marcel Proust was briefly his secretary and used Charles as the model for the aesthete Swann in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Charles’s passion was collecting, and the netsuke, bought when Japanese *objets* were all the rage in the salons, were sent as a wedding present to his banker cousin in Vienna.

Later, three children – including a young Ignace – played with the collection as history reverberated around them. The Anschluss and Second World War swept the Ephrussis to the brink of oblivion. Almost all that remained of their vast empire was the netsuke collection, smuggled out of the huge Viennese palace (then occupied by Hitler’s theorist on the ‘Jewish Question’), one piece at a time, in the pocket of a loyal maid – and hidden in a straw mattress.

In this stunningly original memoir, Edmund de Waal travels the world to stand in the great buildings his forebears once inhabited. He traces the network of a remarkable family against the backdrop of a tumultuous century. And, in prose as elegant and precise as the netsuke themselves, he tells the story of a unique collection which passed from hand to hand – and which, in a twist of fate, found its way home to Japan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edmund de Waal's porcelain is shown in many museum collections round the world and he has recently made installations for the V&A and Tate Britain. He was apprenticed as a potter, studied in Japan and read English at Cambridge. He is Professor of Ceramics at the University of Westminster and lives in London with his family.

for Ben, Matthew and Anna
and for my father

The Hare with Amber Eyes

A HIDDEN INHERITANCE

Edmund de Waal

Chatto & Windus

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‘Even when one is no longer attached to things, it’s still something to have been attached to them; because it was always for reasons which other people didn’t grasp . . . Well, now that I’m a little too weary to live with other people, these old feelings, so personal and individual, that I had in the past, seem to me – it’s the mania of all collectors – very precious. I open my heart to myself like a sort of vitrine, and examine one by one all those love affairs of which the world can know nothing. And of this collection to which I’m now much more attached than to my others, I say to myself, rather as Mazarin said of his books, but in fact without the least distress, that it will be very tiresome to have to leave it all.’

Charles Swann

Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*

EPHRUSSI FAMILY TREE

EPHRUSSI FAMILY TREE

Charles Joachim Ephrussi *m* 1 **Belle Lowensohn** — *m* 2 **Henriette Halperson** *

b 1793 Berdichew d 1864 Vienna — d 1841 — b 1822 Lemberg d 1888 Vienna

Leon Ephrussi *m* Mina Lindau

b 1826 Berdichev d 1871 Paris — b 1824 Brody d 1885 Paris

Jules *m* Fanny Pfeiffer — **Ignace** — **Charles** — **Betty** *m* Max Hirsch Kann

b 1856 Odessa d 1915 Paris — b 1858 Odessa d 1908 Paris — b 1849 Odessa d 1905 Paris — b 1851 Odessa d 1871 Paris

Fanny Kann *m* Theodore Reinach

b 1870 Anvers d 1917 Paris

four sons

Ignace von Ephrussi *m* Emilie Porges

b 1829 Berdichev d 1899 Vienna — b 1836 Vienna d 1900 Vichy

Stefan *m* Estiha — **Anna** *m* Paul Herz von Hertenreid — **Viktor** *m* Emmy Schey von Koromla

b 1856 Odessa d 1911 — b 1859 Odessa d 1938 Vienna — b 1860 Odessa d 1945 Tunbridge Wells

one son one daughter

Elisabeth *m* Hendrik de Waal — **Gisela** *m* Alfredo Bauer — **Ignace** — **Rudolf** *m* Mary Raley

b 1899 Vienna d 1992 Monmouth — b 1904 Vienna d 1985 Mexico — b 1906 Vienna d 1994 Tokyo — b 1918 Vienna d 1971 New York

three sons — *two sons four daughters*

Victor *m* Esther Moir — **Constant Hendrik** *m* Julia Jessel — **Jiro Sugiyama**

b 1929 Amsterdam — b 1931 Vienna — b 1926 Shizuoka

two sons

John — **Alexander** — **Edmund** *m* Susan Chandler — **Thomas**

b 1962 Cambridge — b 1963 Cambridge — b 1964 Nottingham — b 1966 Nottingham

one son one daughter — *two sons one daughter* — *one daughter*

Benjamin — **Matthew** — **Anna**

b 1998 London — b 1999 London — b 2002 London

* *m* 2 **Henriette Halperson**

b 1822 Lemberg d 1888 Vienna

Michel *m* Liliane Beer

b 1845 Odessa d 1914 Paris

three daughters

Therese 'Bacha' *m* Leon Fould

b 1851 Odessa d 1911 Paris

one son one daughter

Maurice *m* Charlotte Beatrice de Rothschild

b 1849 Odessa d 1916 Paris

Marie 'Mascha' *m* Guy de Percin

b 1853 Odessa d 1924 Paris

one daughter

PREFACE

In 1991 I was given a two-year scholarship by a Japanese foundation. The idea was to give seven young English people with diverse professional interests – engineering, journalism, industry, ceramics – a grounding in the Japanese language at an English university, followed by a year in Tokyo. Our fluency would help build a new era of contacts with Japan. We were the first intake on the programme and expectations were high.

Mornings during our second year were spent at a language school in Shibuya, up the hill from the welter of fast-food outlets and discount electrical stores. Tokyo was going through its biggest boom since the war. Commuters stood at the pedestrian crossing, the busiest in the world, to catch sight of the screens showing the Nikkei Stock Index climbing higher and higher. To avoid the worst of the rush hour on the underground, I'd leave an hour early and meet another, older scholar – an archaeologist – and we'd have cinnamon buns and coffee on the way in to classes. I had homework, proper homework, for the first time since I was a schoolboy: 150 kanji, Japanese characters, to learn each week; a column of a tabloid newspaper to parse; dozens of conversational phrases to repeat every day. I'd never dreaded anything so much. The other, younger scholars would joke in Japanese with the teachers about television they had seen or political scandals. The school was behind green metal gates, and I remember kicking them one morning and thinking what it was to be twenty-eight and kicking a school gate.

Afternoons were my own. Two afternoons a week I was in a ceramics studio, shared with everyone from retired businessmen making tea-bowls to students making avant-garde statements in rough red clay and mesh. You paid your subs and grabbed a bench or wheel and were left to get on with it. It wasn't noisy, but there was a cheerful hum of chat. I started making work in porcelain for the first time, gently pushing the sides of my jars and teapots after I'd taken them off the wheel.

I had been making pots since I was a child and had badgered my father to take me to an evening class. My first pot was a thrown bowl that I glazed in opalescent white with a splash of cobalt blue. Most of my schoolboy afternoons were spent in a pottery workshop, and I left school early at seventeen to become apprenticed to an austere man, a devotee of the English potter Bernard Leach. He taught me about respect for the material and about fitness for purpose: I threw hundreds of soup-bowls and honey-pots in grey stoneware clay and swept the floor. I would help make the glazes, careful recalibrations of oriental colours. He had never been to Japan, but had shelves of books on Japanese pots: we would discuss the merits of particular tea-bowls over our mugs of milky mid-morning coffee. Be careful, he would say, of the unwarranted gesture: less is more. We would work in silence or to classical music.

I spent a long summer in the middle of my teenage apprentice ship in Japan visiting equally severe masters in pottery villages across the country: Mashiko, Bizen, Tamba. Each sound of a paper screen closing or of water across stones in the garden of a tea-house was an epiphany, just as each neon Dunkin' Donuts store gave me a moue of disquiet. I have documentary evidence of the depth of my devotion in an article I wrote for a magazine when I returned: 'Japan and the Potter's Ethic: Cultivating a reverence for your materials and the marks of age'.

After finishing my apprenticeship, and then studying English literature at university, I spent seven years working by myself in silent, ordered studios on the borders of Wales and then in a grim inner city. I was very focused, and so were my pots. And now here I was in Japan again, in a messy studio next to a man chatting away about baseball, making a porcelain jar with pushed-in, gestural sides. I was

enjoying myself: something was going right.

Two afternoons a week I was in the archive room of the Nihon Mingei-kan, the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum, working on a book about Leach. The museum is a reconstructed farmhouse in a suburb, which houses the collection of Japanese and Korean folk crafts of Yanagi Soetsu. Yanagi, a philosopher, art historian and poet, had evolved a theory of why some objects – pots, baskets, cloth made by unknown craftsmen – were so beautiful. In his view, they expressed unconscious beauty because they had been made in such numbers that the craftsman had been liberated from his ego. He and Leach had been inseparable friends as young men in the early part of the twentieth century in Tokyo, writing animated letters to each other about their passionate reading of Blake and Whitman and Ruskin. They had even started an artists' colony in a hamlet a convenient distance outside Tokyo, where Leach made his pots with the help of local boys and Yanagi discoursed on Rodin and beauty to his bohemian friends.

Through a door the stone floors would give way to office linoleum, and down off a back corridor was Yanagi's archive: a small room, twelve feet by eight, with shelves to the ceiling full of his books and stacked with Manila boxes containing his notebooks and correspondence. There was a desk and a single bulb. I like archives. This one was very, very quiet and it was extremely gloomy. Here I read and noted and planned a revisionist history of Leach. It was to be a covert book on *Japonisme*, the way in which the West has passionately and creatively misunderstood Japan for more than a hundred years. I wanted to know what it was about Japan that produced such intensity and zeal in artists, and such crossness in academics as they pointed out one misinterpretation after another. I hoped that writing this book would help me out of my own deep, congested infatuation with the country.

And one afternoon a week I spent with my great-uncle Iggie.

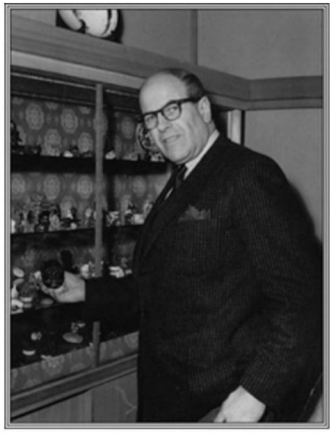
I'd walk up the hill from the subway station, past the glowing beer-dispensing machines, past Senkaku-ji temple where the forty-seven samurai are buried, past the strange baroque meeting hall for a Shinto sect, past the sushi bar run by the bluff Mr X, turning right at the high wall of Prince Takamatsu's garden with the pines. I'd let myself in and take the lift up to the sixth floor. Iggie would be reading in his armchair by the window. Mostly Elmore Leonard or John Le Carré. Or memoirs in French. It is odd, he said, how some languages are warmer than others. I would bend down and he'd give me a kiss.

His desk held an empty blotter, a sheaf of his headed paper, and pens ready, though he no longer wrote. The view from the window behind him was of cranes. Tokyo Bay was disappearing behind forty-storey condominiums.

We'd have lunch together, prepared by his housekeeper Mrs Nakano or left by his friend Jiro, who lived in the interconnecting apartment. An omelette and salad, and toasted bread from one of the excellent French bakeries in the department stores in the Ginza. A glass of cold white wine, Sancerre or Pouilly Fumé. A peach. Some cheese and then very good coffee. Black coffee.

Iggie was eighty-four and slightly stooped. He was always impeccably dressed; handsome in his herringbone jackets with a handkerchief in the pocket, his pale shirts and a cravat. He had a small white moustache.

After our lunch he'd open the sliding doors of the long vitrine that took up most of one wall of the sitting-room and would get out the netsuke one by one. The hare with amber eyes. The young boy with the samurai sword and helmet. A tiger, all shoulder and feet, turning round to snarl. He would pass me one and we'd look at it together, and then I'd put it carefully back amongst the dozens of animals and figures on the glass shelves.



Iggie with the netsuke collection in Tokyo, 1960

I'd fill the little cups of water kept in the case to make sure the ivories didn't split in the dry air.

Did I tell you, he would say, how much we loved these as children? How they were given to my mother and father by a cousin in Paris? And did I tell you the story of Anna's pocket?

Conversations could take strange turns. One moment he would be describing how their cook in Vienna would make their father *Kaiserschmarrm* for his birthday breakfast, layers of pancakes and icing sugar bathed in a syrupy liqueur; how it would be brought in with a great flourish by the butler Josef into the dining-room and cut with a long knife, and how Papa would always say that the Emperor couldn't hope for a better start to his own birthday. And the next moment he would be talking about Lilli's second marriage. Who was Lilli?

Thank God, I'd think, that even if I didn't know about Lilli I knew enough to know where some of the stories were set: Bad Ischl, Kövesces, Vienna. I'd think, as the construction lights on the cranes came on at dusk, stretching deeper and deeper into Tokyo Bay, that I was becoming a sort of amanuensis and that I should probably record what he said about Vienna before the First World War, sit at his elbow with a notebook. I never did. It seemed formal and inappropriate. It also seemed greedy: that's a good rich story, I'll have that. Anyway, I liked the way that repetition wears things smooth, and there was something of the river stone to Iggie's stories.

Over the year of afternoons I'd hear about their father's pride in the cleverness of his older sister Elisabeth, and of Mama's dislike of her elaborate language. Do talk sensibly! He often mentioned, with some anxiety, a game with his sister Gisela, where they had to take something small from the drawing-room, get it down the stairs and across the courtyard, dodge the grooms, go down the cellar steps and hide it in the arched vaults under the house. And dare each other to get it back, and how he lost something in the dark. It seemed an unfinished, fraying memory.

Lots of stories about Kövesces, their country house in Czechoslavakia. His mother Emmy waking him before dawn to go out with a gamekeeper with a gun for

the first time by himself to shoot hares in the stubble, and how he couldn't pull the trigger when he saw their ears tremble slightly in the cool air.

Gisela and Iggie coming across gypsies with a dancing bear on a chain, camping on the edge of the estate by the river, and running all the way back terrified. How the *Orient-Express* stopped at the halt and how their grandmother, in her white dress, was helped down by the stationmaster, and how they ran to greet her and take the parcel of cakes wrapped in green paper that she'd bought for them at Demel's in Vienna.

And Emmy pulling him to the window at breakfast to show him an autumnal tree outside the dining-room window covered in goldfinches. And how when he knocked on the window and they flew, the tree was still blazing golden.

I washed up after lunch while Iggie had his nap, and I would try to do my kanji homework, filling one chequered paper after another with my jerky efforts. I'd stay until Jiro came back from work with the Japanese and English evening newspapers and the croissants for tomorrow's breakfast. Jiro would put on Schubert or jazz and we would have a drink and then I'd leave them be.

I was renting a very pleasant single room in Mejiro, looking out over a small garden filled with azaleas. I had an electric ring and a kettle and was doing my best, but my life in the evenings was very noodle-focused and rather lonely. Twice a month Jiro and Iggie would take me out to dinner or a concert. They would give me drinks at the Imperial and then wonderful sushi or steak tartare or, in homage to banking antecedents, *boeuf à la financière*. I refused the foie gras that was Iggie's staple.

That summer there was a reception for the scholars in the British Embassy. I had to make a speech in Japanese about what I had learnt during my year and how culture was the bridge between our two island nations. I had rehearsed it until I could bear it no longer. Iggie and Jiro came and I could see them encouraging me across their glasses of champagne. Afterwards Jiro squeezed my shoulder and I got a kiss from Iggie and, smiling, complicit, they told me that my Japanese was *jozu desu ne* – expert, skilled, unparalleled.

They had sorted it well, these two. There was a Japanese room in Jiro's apartment with tatami mats and the little shrine bearing photographs of his mother and Iggie's mother, Emmy, where prayers were said and the bell rung. And through the door in Iggie's apartment on his desk there was a photograph of them together in a boat on the Inland Sea, a mountain of pines behind them, dappled sunshine on the water. It is January 1960. Jiro, so good-looking with his hair slicked back, has an arm over Iggie's shoulder. And another picture, from the 1980s, on a cruise ship somewhere off Hawaii, in evening dress, arm in arm.

Living the longest is hard, says Iggie, under his breath.

Growing old in Japan is wonderful, he says more loudly. I have lived here for more than half my life.

Do you miss anything about Vienna? (Why not come straight out and ask him: So what do you miss, when you are old and not living in the country you were born in?)

No. I didn't go back until 1973. It was stifling. Smothering. Everyone knew your name. You'd buy a novel in the Kärntner Strasse and they'd ask you if your mother's cold was better yet. You couldn't move. All that gilding and marble in the house. It was so dark. Have you seen our old house on the Ringstrasse?

Do you know, he says suddenly, that Japanese plum dumplings are better than Viennese plum dumplings?

Actually, he resumes, after a pause, Papa always said that he'd put me up for his club when I was old enough. It met on Thursdays somewhere near the Opera, with all his friends, his Jewish friends. He came back so cheerful on Thursdays. The Wiener Club. I always wanted to go there with him, but he never took me. I left for Paris and then New York, you see, and then there was the war.

I miss that. I missed that.

Iggie died in 1994 soon after I returned to England. Jiro rang me: there had been only three days in hospital. It was a relief. I came back to Tokyo for his funeral. There were two dozen of us, their old friends, Jiro's family, Mrs Nakano and her daughter, clouded in tears.

There is the cremation, and we gather together and the ashes are brought out, and in turns a pair of us pick up long black chopsticks and put the fragments of unburnt bone into an urn.

We go to the temple where Iggie and Jiro have their interment plot. They had planned this tomb twenty years before. The cemetery is on a hill behind the temple, each plot marked with small stone walls. There is the grey gravestone with both their names already inscribed on it, and a place for flowers. Buckets of water and brushes and long wooden signs with painted inscriptions on them. You clap three times and greet your family and apologise for the delay since you were last there, and clean up, remove old chrysanthemums and put new ones in water.

At the temple the urn is placed on a small dais and a photograph of Iggie – the photograph of him on the cruise ship in his dinner jacket – is placed in front of it. The abbot chants a sutra and we offer incense, and Iggie is given his new Buddhist name, his *kaimyo*, to help him in his next life.

Then we speak of him. I try to say, in Japanese, how much my great-uncle means to me and cannot because I am in tears and because, despite my expensive two-year scholarship, my Japanese isn't good enough when I need it. So instead, in this room in this Buddhist temple, in this Tokyo suburb, I say the Kaddish for Ignace von Ephrussi who is so far from Vienna, for his father and his mother, and for his brother and sisters in their diaspora.

After the funeral Jiro asks me to help sort out Iggie's clothes. I open the cupboards in his dressing-room and see the shirts ordered by colour. As I pack the ties away, I notice that they map his holidays with Jiro in London and Paris, Honolulu and New York.

When this job is done, over a glass of wine, Jiro takes out his brush and ink and writes a document and seals it. It says, he tells me, that once he has gone I should look after the netsuke.

So I'm next.

There are 264 netsuke in this collection. It is a very big collection of very small objects.

I pick one up and turn it round in my fingers, weigh it in the palm of my hand. If it is wood, chestnut or elm, it is even lighter than the ivory. You see the patina more easily on these wooden ones: there is a faint shine on the spine of the brindled wolf and on the tumbling acrobats locked in their embrace. The ivory ones come in shades of cream, every colour, in fact, but white. A few have inlaid eyes of amber or horn. Some of the older ones are slightly worn away: the haunch of the faun resting on leaves has lost its markings. There is a slight split, an almost imperceptible fault line on the cicada. Who dropped it? Where and when?

Most of them are signed – that moment of ownership when it was finished and let go. There is a wooden netsuke of a seated man holding a gourd between his feet. He's bending over it, both hands on a knife that is half into the gourd. It is hard work, his arms and shoulder and neck show the effort: every muscle concentrates on the blade. There is another of a cooper working on a half-finished barrel with an adze. He sits leaning into it, framed by it, brows puckered with concentration. It is an ivory carving about what it is like to carve into wood. Both are about finishing something on the subject of the half-finished. Look, they say, I got there first and he's hardly started.

When you tumble them in your hands there is a pleasure in finding where these signatures have been placed – on the sole of a sandal, the end of a branch, the thorax of a hornet – as well as the play between the strokes. I think of the moves when you sign your name in Japan with ink, the sweep of the brush into the ink, the first plosive moment of contact, the return to the ink stone, and wonder at how you could develop such a distinctive signature using the fine metal tools of the netsuke-maker.

Some of these netsuke carry no name. Some have bits of paper glued to them, bearing tiny numbers carefully written in red pen.

There are a great number of rats. Perhaps because they give the maker the chance to wrap those sinuous tails round each other, over the pails of water, the dead fish, the beggars' robes, and then fold those paws underneath the carvings. There are also quite a lot of rat-catchers, I realise.

Some of the netsuke are studies in running movement, so that your fingers move along a surface of uncoiling rope, or spilt water. Others have small congested movements that knot your touch: a girl in a wooden bath, a vortex of clam shells. Some do both, surprising you: an intricately ruffled dragon leans against a simple rock. You work your fingers round the smoothness and stoniness of the ivory to meet this sudden density of dragon.

They are always asymmetric, I think with pleasure. Like my favourite Japanese tea-bowls, you cannot understand the whole from a part.

When I am back in London I put one of these netsuke in my pocket for a day and carry it round. Carry is not quite the right word for having a netsuke in a pocket. It sounds too purposeful. A netsuke is so light and so small that it migrates and almost disappears amongst your keys and change. You simply forget that it is there. This was a netsuke of a very ripe medlar fruit, made out of chestnut wood in the late eighteenth century in Edo, the old Tokyo. In autumn in Japan you sometimes see medlars; a branch hanging over a wall of a temple or from a private garden into a street of vending machines is impossibly pleasing. My medlar is just about to go from ripeness to deliquescence. The three leaves at the top feel as if they would fall if you rubbed them between your fingers. The fruit is slightly unbalanced: it is riper on one side than the other. Underneath, you can feel the two holes – one larger than the other – where the silk cord would run, so that the netsuke could act as a toggle on a small bag. I try and imagine who owned the medlar. It was made long before the opening up of Japan to foreign trade in the 1850s, and thus created for the Japanese taste: it might have been carved for a merchant or a scholar. It is a quiet one, undemonstrative, but it makes me smile. Making something to hold out of a very hard material that feels so soft is a slow and rather good tactile pun.

I keep my medlar in my jacket pocket and go to a meeting at a museum about a piece of research I am supposed to be doing, and then to my studio and then to the London Library. I intermittently roll this thing through my fingers.

I realise how much I care about how this hard-and-soft, losable object has survived. I need to find a way of unravelling its story. Owning this netsuke – inheriting them all – means I have been handed a responsibility to them and to the people who have owned them. I am unclear and discomfited about where the parameters of this responsibility might lie.

I know the bones of this journey from Iggie. I know that these netsuke were bought in Paris in the 1870s by a cousin of my great-grandfather called Charles Ephrussi. I know that he gave them as a wedding-present to my great-grandfather Viktor von Ephrussi in Vienna at the turn of the century. I know the story of Anna, my great-grandmother's maid, very well. And I know that they came with Iggie to Tokyo, of course, and were part of his life with Jiro.

Paris, Vienna, Tokyo, London.

The medlar's story starts where it is made. Edo, the old Tokyo before the Black Ships of the American Commodore Perry opened Japan up to trade with the rest of the world in 1854. But its first resting-place was in Charles's study in Paris. It was

in a room looking over the rue de Monceau in the Hôtel Ephrussi.

I start well. I'm pleased because I have one direct, spoken link to Charles. As a child of five, my grandmother Elisabeth met Charles at the Chalet Ephrussi in Meggen, on the edge of Lake Lucerne. The 'chalet' was six storeys of rusticated stone surmounted by small baronial turrets, a house of stupendous ugliness. It had been built in the early 1880s by Charles's oldest brother Jules and wife Fanny, as a place to escape the 'horrid oppression of Paris'. It was huge, grand enough to house all the 'clan Ephrussi' from Paris and Vienna, and assorted cousins from Berlin.

The chalet had endless small paths that crunched underfoot, with neat box edging in the English manner, small flowerbeds filled with bedding plants, and a fierce gardener to tell the children off for playing; gravel did not stray in this severe Swiss garden. The garden went down to the lake, where there was a small jetty and boathouse, and more opportunities for reprimand. Jules, Charles and their middle brother Ignace were Russian citizens and the Russian imperial flag flew from the boathouse roof. There were endless slow summers at the chalet. My grandmother was the expected heir of the fabulously wealthy and childless Jules and Fanny. She remembered a large painting in the dining-room of willows by a stream. She also remembered that there were only manservants in the house, and that even the cook was a man, which was wildly more exciting than her own family's household in Vienna with only old Josef the butler, the porter who would wink at her as he opened the gates to the Ring and the grooms amidst all the maids and cooks. Apparently manservants were less likely to break the porcelain. And, she remembered, there was porcelain on every surface in this childless chalet.

Charles was middle-aged, but seemed old by comparison with his infinitely more glamorous brothers. Elisabeth remembered only his beautiful beard and that he had an extremely delicate watch that he produced from a waistcoat pocket. And that, in the manner of elderly relatives, he had given her a golden coin.

But she also remembered with great clarity, and more animation, that Charles had bent down and ruffled her sister's hair. Her sister Gisela – younger and far, far prettier – always got this kind of attention. Charles had called her his little gypsy, his *bohémienne*.

And that is my oral link to Charles. It is history and yet, when I write it down, it doesn't feel like much.

And what there is to go on – the number of manservants and the slightly stock story of the gift of a coin – seems held in a sort of melancholic penumbra, though I quite like the detail of the Russian flag. I know that my family were Jewish, of course, and I know they were staggeringly rich, but I really don't want to get into the sepia saga business, writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss. And I certainly don't want to turn Iggie into an old great-uncle in his study, a figure like Bruce Chatwin's Utz, handing over the family story, telling me: Go, be careful.

It could write itself, I think, this kind of story. A few stitched-together wistful anecdotes, more about the *Orient-Express*, of course, a bit of wandering round Prague or somewhere equally photogenic, some clippings from Google on ballrooms in the Belle Epoque. It would come out as nostalgic. And *thin*.

And I'm not entitled to nostalgia about all that lost wealth and glamour from a century ago. And I am not interested in *thin*. 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 has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, 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 have made many, many thousands of pots. I am very bad at names, I mumble and fudge, but I am good on pots. I can remember the weight and the balance of a pot, and how its surface works with its volume. I can read how an edge creates tension or loses it. I can feel if it has been made at speed or with diligence. If it has warmth.

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. It is not that handling something is *better* than not handling it. Some things in the world are meant to be looked at from a distance and not fumbled around with. And, as a potter, I find it a bit strange when people who have my pots talk of them as if they are alive: I am not sure if I can cope with the afterlife of what I have made. But some objects do seem to retain the pulse of their making.

This pulse intrigues me. There is a breath of hesitancy before touching or not touching, a strange moment. If I choose to pick up this small white cup with its single chip near the handle, will it figure in my life? A simple object, this cup that is more ivory than white, too small for morning coffee, not quite balanced, could become part of my life of handled things. It could fall away into the territory of personal story-telling; the sensuous, sinuous intertwining of things with memories. A favoured, favourite thing. Or I could put it away. Or I could pass it on.

How objects are handed on is all about story-telling. 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?

I realise that I've been living with this netsuke business for too long. I can either anecdotalise it for the rest of my life – my odd inheritance from a beloved elderly relative – or go and find out what it means. One evening I find myself at a dinner telling some academics what I know of the story, and feel slightly sickened by how poised it sounds. I hear myself entertaining them, and the story echoes back in their reactions. It isn't just getting smoother, it is getting thinner. I must sort it out now or it will disappear.

Being busy is no excuse. I have just finished an exhibition of my porcelain in a museum and can postpone a commission for a collector, if I play my cards right. I have negotiated with my wife and cleared my diary. Three or four months should see me right. That gives me enough time to go back to see Jiro in Tokyo and to visit Paris and Vienna.

As my grandmother and my great-uncle Iggie have died, I must also ask for my father's help to get started. He is eighty and kindness itself and will look out family things for me, he says, for background information. He seems delighted that one of his four sons is interested. There isn't much, he warns me. He comes down to my studio with a small cache of photographs, forty-odd. He also brings two thin blue files of letters to which he has added yellow Post-it notes, mostly legible, a family tree annotated by my grandmother sometime in the 1970s, the membership book for the Wiener Club in 1935 and, in a supermarket carrier bag, a pile of Thomas Mann novels with inscriptions. We lay them out on the long table in my office up the stairs, above the room where I fire my pots in the kilns. You are now the keeper of the family archive, he tells me, and I look at the piles and am not sure how funny I should find this.

I ask, somewhat desperately, if there is any more material. He looks again that evening in his small flat in the courtyard of retired clergymen where he lives. He

Monceau. The area was developed in the 1860s by Isaac and Emile Péreire, two Sephardic brothers who had made their fortunes as financiers, railroad-builders and property magnates, creating colossal developments of hotels and department stores. They acquired the plaine de Monceau, a large nondescript area that was originally beyond the city limits, and set to work developing houses for the burgeoning financial and commercial elite, an appropriate landscape for the newly arrived Jewish families from Russia and the Levant. These streets became a virtual colony, a complex of intermarriage, obligation and religious sympathy.

The Péreires relandscaped the existing eighteenth-century park in order to improve the views of the new houses around it. New cast-iron gates with gilded emblems of the Péreires' activities now led into it. There was an attempt to call the area around the parc Monceau *le West End*. If you are asked where the boulevard Malesherbes leads, a contemporary journalist wrote, 'answer boldly: to *Le West End* . . . One could give it a French name, but that would be vulgar; an English name was far more fashionable.' This was the park in which, according to a waspish journalist, you could watch 'the great dames of the noble Faubourg . . . the female "illustrations" of "La Haute Finance" and "La Haute Colonie Israelite" promenade'. The park had sinuous paths and flowerbeds in the new English style with displays of colourful annuals that had to be constantly renewed, far removed from the grey, clipped formalities of the Tuileries.

As I walk down the hill from the Hôtel Ephrussi at what I consider to be a good flaneurial pace, slower than usual, weaving from one side of the road to the other to check on details of the mouldings of windows, I'm conscious that many of the houses I pass have these stories of reinvention embedded in them. Almost everyone who built them started somewhere else.

Ten houses down from the Ephrussi household, at number 61, is the house of Abraham Camondo, with his brother Nissim at 63 and their sister Rebecca over the street at number 60. The Camondos, Jewish financiers like the Ephrussi, had come to Paris from Constantinople by way of Venice. The banker Henri Cernuschi, a plutocratic supporter of the Paris Commune, had come to Paris from Italy and lived in chilly magnificence with his Japanese treasures on the edge of the park. At number 55 is the Hôtel Cattaui, home to a family of Jewish bankers from Egypt. At number 43 is the palace of Adolphe de Rothschild, acquired from Eugène Péreire and rebuilt with a glass-roofed exhibition room for his Renaissance art collection.

But nothing compares to the mansion built by the chocolate magnate Émile-Justin Mernier. It was a building so splendidly excessive, so eclectic in its garnished decorations, glimpsed above its high walls, that Zola's description of it as 'an opulent bastard of every style' still seems about right. In his dark novel of 1872, *La Curée*, Saccard – a rapacious Jewish property magnate – lives here on the rue de Monceau. You feel this street as the family move in: it is a street of Jews, a street full of people on display in their lavish golden houses. *Monceau* is slang in Paris for nouveau riche, newly arrived.

This is the world in which my netsuke first settled. On this street down the hill I feel this play between discretion and opulence, a sort of breathing-in and breathing-out of invisibility and visibility.

Charles Ephrussi was twenty-one when he came to live here. Paris was being planted with trees, and wide pavements were taking the place of the cramped interstices of the old city. There had been fifteen years of constant demolition and rebuilding under the direction of Baron Haussmann, the civic planner. He had razed medieval streets and created new parks and new boulevards. Vistas were opened up with extraordinary velocity.

If you want to taste this moment, taste the dust sweeping along the newly paved avenues and across the bridges, look at two paintings of Gustave Caillebotte. Caillebotte, a few months older than Charles, lived around the corner from the Ephrussi family in another grand hotel. You see in his *Le Pont de l'Europe* a young man, well dressed in his grey overcoat and black top hat, maybe the artist, walking

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