

Edmund de Waal *The Hare with Amber Eyes*

(Picador, 2010)

In *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, Edmund de Waal (born 1964), a British ceramic artist and renowned scholar, unfolds the story of a remarkable family during a tumultuous century. Descended from the rich and respected Ephrussi and Rothschild families, De Waal might have inherited countless treasures; unfortunately, most of the family legacy was lost or confiscated during World War II. At the time of De Waal's birth, all that remained was a collection of 264 Japanese netsuke that had been smuggled to safety by a loyal maid and returned after the war. The collection includes figures of street vendors, beggars, monks, rat catchers, dogs, lovers, a woman and an octopus, an elderly lady on an elderly horse, a witch trapped in a temple bell, a persimmon about to split, and a hare with amber eyes. Entranced by the beauty and mystery of this "very big collection of very small objects," De Waal determined to trace his family's history through the story of this collection.

How to Use this Discussion Guide

Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique, as all art arises from the context of its time and place. The MFAH Book Club uses works of art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and from collections around the world as points of departure for discussions of a specific book. This guide discusses major themes in **Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes***, including family and place; persecution and extermination; and collections, inheritances, and legacies.

MFAH Book Club Tours

Bring your book for a docent-led MFAH Book Club tour that links themes and excerpts from the book with select works of art, generates lively discussion, and reveals new ways of looking at visual art.

For individual readers, a small circle of friends, or small book clubs: Tours are held on specific dates and times throughout the season. Visit www.mfah.org/bookclub to see the schedule. RSVP to bookclub@mfah.org with your name, the number of participants, and the date and time of the tour you've selected from the list.

For large book clubs (12 or more participants): Read and discuss the book together, then arrange for a group tour by emailing bookclub@mfah.org with your contact information, the number of participants (12 or more), and at least two preferred dates and times.

Tours related to *The Hare with Amber Eyes* are available July 1 through September 30, 2012.

Object Lessons

Edmund de Waal has said, “Objects need biography—there aren’t many books out there that take objects themselves seriously.” What do you think he means by this, and do you agree?

Among the 264 netsuke De Waal describes are several depicting animals: a tiger, a dragon, rats, a snake, turtles, and clams. Many of these same creatures are depicted in works of art in the exhibition *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art* (on view June 10–Sept. 23, 2012); for example, see Nagasawa Rosetsu’s *Tiger and Dragon*. How do these depictions of animals compare to their real-life counterparts in coloration, detail, expression, pose, and environment?

Nagasawa Rosetsu, *Tiger and Dragon*, c. 1795, ink on silk, The Kimiko and John Powers Collection.



Family & Place

There are many women in the Ephrussi family, scattered far and wide: in Odessa, Paris, Vienna, Switzerland, and southern France. Examine these three portraits from across Europe, and consider which painting evokes which of the women in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Why?



Left to right:

Alexei von Jawlensky, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1912, oil on board, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.284.

Kees van Dongen, *The Corn Poppy*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.279. ©2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADACP, Paris

Henri Matisse, *Woman in a Purple Coat*, 1937, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 74.141.

Family & Place *(continued)*

One of De Waal's relations has an interesting connection to the art world: Elizabeth Ephrussi, a promising poet who went on to become a lawyer, corresponded with the German-born poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke briefly worked as a secretary for Auguste Rodin, and dedicated the poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (originally published in *Neue Gedichte* [New Poems], 1907–08) to "my great friend, August Rodin." The poem, which is mentioned on page 214 of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, is reproduced below in both English and German.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

(Translation by L. Stevens, 2003)

We cannot know his unheard of head,
in which his eyes like apples ripened. But
his torso glows still like a candelabrum,
in which his gaze, though turned low,

holds firm and gleams. Otherwise the bow
of the breast could not blind you, and in the gentle turn
of the loins a smile couldn't go
to that center, there where procreation endured.

Otherwise this stone would stand defaced and stumped
under the shoulder's translucent downturn
and not shimmer so like a predator's fur;

and not break out from all its edges
like a star: because there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Archaïscher Torso Apollos

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie en Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

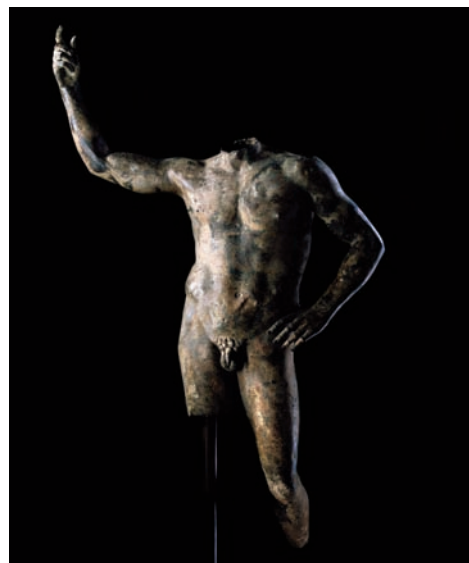
Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben ändern.

Rilke composed this poem about an ancient marble statue (pictured at left), which was at one time owned by a member of the Rothschild family. How does this work compare to the MFAH's *Portrait Figure of a Ruler* (shown at right)?



Male Torso, called "Torso of Miletos,"
c. 480–470 B.C., marble, 52 in. (132 cm) high,
Louvre, Paris, France, MA2792. Photo Credit:
Hervé Lewandowski/Réunion des Musées
Nationaux/Art Resource, NY



Portrait Figure of a Ruler, c. 200–225, bronze,
the MFAH, gift of D. and J. de Menil in memory
of Conrad Schlumberger.

Persecution & War

Do you believe that the trials and tribulations experienced by the Ephrussi and Rothschild families—like so many other Jewish families during that period—including the Dreyfus Affair (see pp. 101–07), widespread anti-Semitism (pp. 129–30), and the events surrounding World War II (pp. 237–76), contributed to their decision after the war to abandon Judaism and to convert to other religions? Why or why not? What other factors should be considered?

In *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, De Waal describes the invasion and occupation of his family's home in Vienna, and the cataloging and confiscation of many art treasures, rare books, and more (pp. 248–59). A broader historical study of this phenomenon is *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* by Lynn H. Nicholas (1994), which was adapted as a documentary film in 2006. The title of the book/film refers to an ancient Greek myth, one depicted by Laurent de La Hyre in a 1644 painting on display at the MFAH. Consider the ancient Greek myth and the modern history. Does this parallel seem fitting? Why or why not?



Laurent de La Hyre, *The Rape of Europa*, 1644, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Law, 70.12.



David Smith, *War Spectre*, 1944, painted steel, the MFAH, museum purchase, 78.58. Art © Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

War has been depicted as a nameless, faceless machine that obliterates all in its path. But war has also been depicted through its victims, those haunted by pain endured at the hands of others as well as those who perpetrated violence when commanded to do so.

American sculptor David Smith made *War Spectre* during World War II. The sculpture, which Smith described simply as “Modern and Medieval mechanical forms,” was originally exhibited in 1946, very soon after World War II ended. *War Spectre* can be seen in the exhibition *American Made: 200 Years of American Art at the MFAH* (on view July 7–Sept 16, 2012). How does its “anatomy” correspond to the nameless, faceless nature of war? How does this relate to *The Hare with Amber Eyes*?

Collections, Inheritances, and Legacies

The Rothschild and Ephrussi families became fabulously wealthy, the former by establishing banking and finance houses beginning during the late eighteenth century and the latter by trading and transporting grain beginning during the early nineteenth century. Maurice Ephrussi, a cousin of Charles born in the same year (1849), married Charlotte Beatrice de Rothschild in 1883 (p. 10), merging the two wealthiest Jewish houses of Europe. At its apex, the Rothschild family likely possessed the largest private fortune in the world, and patronized the arts to both complement their lavish lifestyle and contribute to the common good. At one time, a member of the Rothschild family owned the *Male Torso* about which Rilke wrote a poem (see above); it was later donated to the Louvre, where it remains today. Baron de Rothschild acquired Chaïm Soutine's *The Chicken*, and sold it before it was gifted to the MFAH by Mr. and Mrs. George R. Brown in honor of John A. and Audrey Jones Beck. Do you feel that with great wealth comes great responsibility to support the arts and/or other philanthropic causes? Why or why not?

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has been fortunate to receive notable collections as gifts, especially the Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., Collection of gold from Africa, Indonesia, and South and Central America and the John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection of French Impressionist, Fauvist, and early modern paintings. The museum also works collaboratively with the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation to exhibit some of its collection. Often, the museum borrows from private collections for short-term exhibitions, such as *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art* (on view June 10–Sept. 23, 2012). Keeping this in mind, consider the following questions:

- What is the nature of collecting?
- What can you tell about the collector by looking at a collection?
- Do you collect anything? If yes, what do you collect and why?

De Waal wrote this book by following the netsuke collection he inherited—from Odessa to Paris, Vienna, America, and Japan—over a two-year period of travel and research, aided by scraps of documentation from family members. Think about your life and possessions. Have you inherited objects? If so, what documentation did you receive with the objects? Will you hand down objects to your children or grandchildren? If so, what documentation will you provide?



Chaïm Soutine, *The Chicken*, c. 1926, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Mr. and Mrs. George R. Brown in honor of John A. and Audrey Jones Beck, 74.248. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Entitled to an Opinion

Why do you feel De Waal chose to title the book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*? Can you imagine a different name?

Online Resources

Edmund de Waal's personal website

www.edmunddewaal.com

Videos of Edmund de Waal on YouTube

<http://youtu.be/UMci7etxN8U> (requires sound)

<http://youtu.be/DIUgZ2j-704> (requires sound)

Photos of netsuke from De Waal's collection

<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/books/harewithambereyes/>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2010/jun/25/edmund-de-waal-netsuke-hare?intcmp=239>

Interviews

<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/authors/vintage-podcasts/Podcast6/> (requires sound)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/audio/2010/jun/24/israel-maggie-gee?intcmp=239> (requires sound)

Website of the Ephrussi-Rothschild Villa & Gardens in southern France

www.villa-ephrussi.com



Photo © Hannah Jones

About the Author

Edmund de Waal was apprenticed as a potter in Canterbury, studied ceramics in Japan, and then studied English at the University of Cambridge. His porcelain can be found in many international museum collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. De Waal has created major installations for the Victoria and Albert Museum and Tate Britain, and continues to work on exhibitions for museums as well as on commissions for private clients. In addition to *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, De Waal has written widely on art and ceramics, and co-edited (with Blanche Craig) *The Pot Book* (Phaidon Press, 2011).