



April 10, 111 Sunday 14 Nisan 3871 9:29 IST  Print  Back to original article

THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: Courtesy

A Passion for Bibelot

By YAELE AZAGURY
07/04/2011

A finely etched narrative about the past greatness of a cosmopolitan European Jewish family.

“OF ALL THE PASSIONS, of all without exception, the passion for the bibelot is perhaps the most terrible and invincible. The man smitten by an antique is a lost man. The bibelot is not only a passion, it is a mania,” claimed French writer Guy de Maupassant in 1883.

Yet, collectors as committed as the one described by Maupassant also believe that objects are meant to be passed on, their value stemming less from their inherent market valuation than from their circulation, the mysterious ways in which they have touched, in turn, multiple lives. They are silent witnesses, sentinels of our lives. They have stories to tell.

This is one of the themes of Edmund de Waal’s gem-like family memoir “The Hare with Amber Eyes: a Family’s Century of Art and Loss,” the story of a collection of 264 19th-century *netsuke*, or Japanese toggles made of boxwood or ivory that had been originally assembled by Charles Ephrussi, a cousin of de Waal’s great-grandfather Viktor Ephrussi .

The Ephrussis, a wealthy Jewish family of bankers, made their fortune in Odessa as grain exporters in the 19th century. As business thrived, Ignace, the eldest son of Charles Joachim Ephrussi, the patriarch of the clan, was sent out from Odessa to Vienna, the capital of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire, to establish the family business there; Leon, Charles Joachim’s second son, was entrusted with the same task in Paris. There, the Ephrussis came to be called *les rois du blé*, the kings of grain, much as James de Rothschild was called *le roi des Juifs*, the king of Jews.

The *netsuke* entered the picture when they were acquired in the 1880s in Paris by Leon’s son Charles, an aesthete who served as a model for Proust’s Swann in “In Search of Lost Time.” The story of the *netsuke* reverberates in mysterious ways with the rise and fall of the Ephrussis.

A NARRATIVE ABOUT THE PAST greatness of a cosmopolitan European Jewish family, “The Hare with Amber Eyes” forays into other genres as well: it starts with a welcome reflection on literature in our memoir-writing age. De Waal warns us, albeit a bit too earnestly: “I really don’t want to get into the sepia saga

business, writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss... with some clippings from Google on ballrooms in the Belle Epoque." For he explains beautifully: "Melancholy is a sort of default vagueness, a get-out clause, a smothering lack of focus."

Thanks to the sharpness and preciseness of his prose, the easy seductions of sentimentality, or "emotional inexactitude" as he calls it, are defeated. His narrative is shaped stroke by minuscule stroke, intent on removing excess.

Yet he couples this restraint with the ability to evoke people he has never met, and to conjure up times and places forever lost. There is a powerful sensuousness to his writing. And the sense of touch is key to his art. For de Waal is a well-respected potter in addition to being professor of ceramics at the University of Westminster. As a published art critic and art historian, he has a few ideas about art, and how to write about it. This includes the ability to produce a detailed and expert narrative without overwhelming the less well-informed reader.

In fact, the first part of his narrative provides an illuminating context to the acquisition of the *netsuke*, while also discoursing on taste and how to acquire it. De Waal follows his great-grand-uncle Charles in Paris as he starts his education as an aesthete, an art lover and collector. Charles is an Ephrussi, so he is not lacking in means. But how does he know what to buy? Is taste innate or acquired? How does it evolve?

De Waal delves into a wide range of archival sources: newspaper clippings, art history books, and Charles's own writings about art, to recreate the world of the collector. He also brings his expertise and experience into play in order to understand how a collection was patiently assembled in those days. Charles started his collector's career in the 1870s with Renaissance art and was an early supporter of the Impressionists: he owned paintings by Pissarro, Monet, Sisley, Manet, and Moreau, among others.

The *netsuke*, which Charles purchased at the height of a Parisian craze for japonisme in the 1880s with his lover Louise Cahen d'Anvers, a grand Jewish dame of the time, are miniature wood and ivory carvings used as toggles: drunken monks, almost-ripe plums, snarling tigers, rats with unfurling tails, and the eponymous hare with amber eyes. They are precise and spare, the apotheosis of good taste in late 19th century Parisian society. By acquiring them Charles Ephrussi the Jew, the outsider, became the ultimate insider.

The reflection about art is, then, a covert contemplation of the lives of rich Jews and their Jewishness at the turn of the 19th century. De Waal examines two major figures of French society during this period: The parvenu (often equated with the Jew), and the dandy – a figure that often went hand in hand with the connoisseur and amateur d'art – and Charles Ephrussi's shift from the former to the latter.

De Waal is wonderful at documenting the minutest details of Jewish life in 19th-century Paris, and the push-and-pull attraction of assimilation for Jews of the upper bourgeoisie. He is both minutely detailed and comprehensive. He describes for instance the Rue de Monceau, a predominantly Jewish street in Paris where the Hôtel Ephrussi – the family house that hosted the French branch of the Ephrussis – was built in 1871. It sat next to other opulent Jewish homes belonging to the Pereires, the Camondos, the Cernuschis, the Cattaus and the Rothschilds. The Hôtel Ephrussi had the imprint of new money, somehow pretentious and ostentatious. The Ephrussis' move 20 years later to a more chic location on the Avenue d'Iéna, symbolized their shift from "Jewish" taste – called then "le goût Rothschild" – to a French patrician sensibility.

But the Dreyfus Affair, a polarizing event that divided French society into two camps, set limits to this social mobility. The Ephrussis were Dreyfusards, defenders of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew who had been

unfairly accused of selling classified secrets to Germany. The anti-Dreyfusards – often identified with aristocratic France – never forgave them. The Ephrussi were still outsiders. Charles himself, notes de Waal, is like Proust's Swann at the end of his life: deeply riven by his Jewishness. Assimilation could never be fully achieved.

In 1899, as the Dreyfus affair was raging, the *netsuke* changed hands. Charles gave them as wedding presents to his cousin Viktor Ephrussi and his young bride, the baroness Emmy Schey von Koromla, who married in a Viennese synagogue and settled in the Austrian capital at the Palais Ephrussi, a more pompous version of the Hôtel Ephrussi in Paris.

With de Waal's guidance, we follow the glamorous lives of these upper crust Jews: Emmy's society outings, her love for fashion, her affairs, Viktor's passion for history and his major setbacks as a banker. We get a glimpse of their children, too. There was Elisabeth, Edmund de Waal's grandmother, a poet who struck up a correspondence with Rilke, and who rebelled against the predictable path of an advantageous marriage to become a lawyer; Gisela, the pretty little girl admired by everyone; Ignace (Iggie), who fled to America to become a fashion designer; and Rudolf, the youngest, born at the end of World War I, after the Austro-Hungarian Empire had collapsed.

BUT THE REAL FOCUS OF THIS second part is a study of Austrian Anti-Semitism. De Waal reports about its rise in the years following World War I with the same intimate eye he observed the private lives of his family members. He has the uncanny ability to take on the discourse of Austrian anti-Semites to better denounce it. Take this passage for instance: "Go into the slums of Vienna, Leopoldstadt, and you can see Jews living as Jews should live, twelve in a room, no water, loud on the streets, wearing the right robes, speaking the right argot."

He pinpoints the predicament of the wealthy Ephrussi who contributed much to the Gründerzeit, the founding age of Austrian modernity. That same modernity also eroded their identity. Theodor Herzl's theories of a Jewish state were dismissed by them as absurd, and conversions and marriages of members of the family with Christians became more common.

Despite this, they did not fare much better than their poor coreligionists as Nazism flourished in Vienna. Then came the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria to Germany in March 1938. When the Gestapo broke into the Palais Ephrussi, the horror was palpable: "the first night they swarm through the apartment. There are shouts from across the courtyard, as a couple of them have found the salon with its French ensembles of furniture and porcelain. There is laughter from someone as Emmy's closet is ransacked. Someone bangs out a tune on the piano keys. Some men are in the study pulling out drawers, roughing up desks, pushing the folios off the stand in the corner. They come into the library and tip the globes from their stands."

Meanwhile, what happened to the *netsuke*? When they arrived in Vienna from Paris in 1899, they were out of place in this grand Palais. From being on public display, they were relegated to a vitrine in Emmy's dressing room. The children played with them and made up stories.

The Nazis "cleansed" the Ephrussi family from the city (Emmy committed discreet suicide, Viktor managed to escape to England to join his daughter, Elisabeth, while the children all left before the war). The Nazis stole Viktor's library of precious books and his collection of Old Masters. But the *netsuke* were rescued by Emmy's maid Anna, who put them one by one in her pockets, and hid them under her mattress for the entire duration of the war. After the war, Anna returned the *netsuke* to Viktor and Elisabeth. Elisabeth then passed them on to her brother Iggie, who took them back to Japan where he settled with his companion. After his death in Tokyo, in 1994, they are inherited by the author and taken once more to England where

he put them in an open vitrine for his children to play with.

The story of the Ephrussi is one of disappearance. Their home, their art, their fortune, their identity, their faith, all disappeared in the turmoil of history. But as we close the book, we realize that the *netsuke* have been all along more than a symbol for the patina of time. “What is being passed on with all these small Japanese objects?” asks de Waal.

This critic sees them as a metaphor for a lost Jewishness, and the last remaining thread that connects the author, who is no longer Jewish (his father Viktor is a clergyman in the Church of England) to his religious heritage. As the subtitle of the English edition indicates, this is the story of a “hidden inheritance” (the American edition chose the more impersonal phrase: “a family’s century of art and loss”).

For the book is far from being just a sympathetic but distant look at the author’s exotic ancestry: It is also an examination of the light these people shed on his own character. In many ways, this Proustian kaleidoscope of stories is a personal quest. Charles Ephrussi, the dandy and connoisseur d’art, is a facet of Edmund de Waal the art historian; and so is Viktor Ephrussi the failed historian (“the Hare with Amber Eyes” is also a historical narrative); and his great-grand-uncle Iggie fascinated by Japan (de Waal apprenticed in Japan as a potter).

Furthermore, as de Waal is exploring his own personality, he is also trying to recapture a lost Jewishness, to find the missing link to a past where somewhere along the way his family lost its faith. In fact, the religious issue is dormant throughout the book: There is, for instance, no explanation for his grandmother’s conversion to Christianity other than the fact she married a Christian (we can only surmise she felt disdain for the culture of upper-class Jews and her conversion was her way of escaping it), yet de Waal grows intent on finding traces of his own Jewishness. As he looks at a photograph of his father, another Viktor, he wonders how long he has before he, too, gets, as he ages, the “resplendent” Ephrussi (i.e. Jewish) nose. Significantly, his narrative ends with a meditation on origins (first the *netsuke*’s, then the Ephrussi family’s). There is no easy story of legacy, notes de Waal. “What is remembered and what is forgotten?”

We are all confronted with the responsibilities linking us to our past, whatever it is: what is our obligation to guard as our tradition, where is it that we can start anew? How can we preserve something that we thought was irretrievably lost? One example comes to mind: In Spain, descendents of Marranos (Jews who had undergone forced conversions to Christianity during the Spanish Inquisition) kept to this day lighting candles on Friday night without knowing why. It was their link to their tradition.

The *netsuke* and his narrative are de Waal’s answer to restore meaning to an accretion of voids. Something, gracefully, has survived.

Dr. Yaëlle Azagury writes primarily about French and Sephardi culture.



Print



[Back to original article](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2009 The Jerusalem Post.