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book review of

*The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Art and Loss* by  
Edmund de Waal

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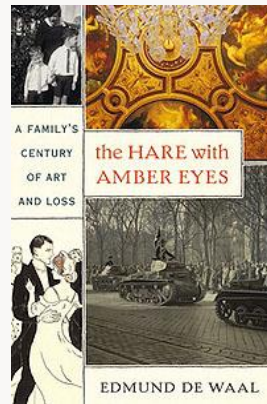
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Edmund de Waal,  
*The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Art and Loss*.  
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.  
368 pp. 30 b/w ill.  
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*The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal is a magical book. A well-known British potter, Waal inherited a collection of 264 Japanese netsukes—small elaborate carvings made of ivory or wood and used as toggles on the cords holding containers (*inros*) to the sash of a man's traditional Japanese kimono. Possession of these remarkable objects led Waal to several years of travel and research in an effort to understand them and the family they came from, the once fabulously rich Ephrussi. For historians of nineteenth-century art, the most important figure is Charles Ephrussi (1849–1905), who bought the netsukes as a group from the Paris dealer Philippe Sichel in about 1880, when *japonisme* was no longer new, but still fashionable (48-9, 62-4). In 1899, Charles gave them to his cousin Viktor Ephrussi (1860–1945) as a wedding present, and the sculptures moved in their special black vitrine to the Palais Ephrussi in Vienna. Placed in his wife's dressing room, they became playthings for children, miniature carvings of extraordinary virtuosity and charm but without any special aesthetic associations (172, 177). In a dramatic story of loyalty and chance, the netsukes were still in the Palais Ephrussi, hidden by the family's non-Jewish maid Anna, when Viktor's oldest child came from England after World War II in search of the family's possessions. But with almost everything gone, the sculptures represented loss, not possession, to the siblings (289). They took on a new life in Japan, however, where they were taken by Ignace Ephrussi (1906–1994). There, they again were treasured by adults (305-7) and appreciated as truly exceptional historical objects (327-8). Now, in a new vitrine in the author's house in London, they represent not loss but memory—a tangible, albeit imaginatively reconstructed, connection to a mostly unfamiliar part of the author's family. They are also small, fascinating carvings that once again are played with by children (350-1).<sup>[1]</sup>

The netsukes themselves are important presences in the book. Waal wonderfully conveys the vital physical presence of the carvings:

Some of the netsukes 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 clamshells. 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. As with my favourite Japanese tea-bowls, you cannot understand the whole from a part (12).

He understands touch as a historical phenomenon:

I want to find how these nonchalant Parisians . . . handled Japanese things. What was it like to have something so alien in your hands for the first time, to pick up a box or a cup - or a netsuke - in a material that you had never encountered before and shift it around, finding its weight and balance, running a fingertip along the raised decoration of a stork in flight through clouds? (46)

Back in Japan, the netsukes change again:

They lose their strangeness. They are surprisingly accurate renditions of the food you eat . . . [and] the man at the noodle-stand at the train station has the same permanent scowl as the disappointed rat-catcher. They have always been objects to be picked up and handled - now they become part of another world of handled objects. Not only are they familiar in material (ivory and boxwood are gripped every day as chopsticks), but their shapes are deeply embedded [in the culture](305-6).

Their first owner, Charles Ephrussi, is a figure who appears often in histories of nineteenth-century art—the man in a top hat standing with his back to us in Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.); the collector whose generous payment for Edouard Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus* (Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne) caused Manet to send him an additional painting of a single stalk (Musée d'Orsay, Paris); the reviewer of two of the Impressionist exhibitions; the purchaser of some 40 paintings by artists associated with the group (with another 20 bought on his advice by his Berlin cousin Felicie Bernstein and her husband Carl); one of the two people who inspired Marcel Proust's character Swann (81, 74-5, 105). Jules Laforgue's letter from 1881 describing Ephrussi's study suggests what Impressionist paintings looked like hanging in a private space (67). And Ephrussi's name appears in many documents from the period—mentioned as a critic, a historian, an editor and part owner of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and a connection, someone able to use his position and family influence to help. One interesting example not mentioned by Waal is that apparently it was Ephrussi who, in 1882, obtained a pass to the Opéra's *coulisses* for Edgar Degas.<sup>[2]</sup>

All of those things are true, but our interest in the Impressionists has distracted us from a more complete view of him.<sup>[3]</sup> Although Ephrussi certainly was involved with many of the

Impressionists, he was not one of the great early collectors of their pictures.<sup>[4]</sup> With a few exceptions, Ephrussi bought what he owned during a relatively brief period in the beginning of the 1880s. This also was when he advised the Bernsteins to buy their Impressionist paintings.<sup>[5]</sup> And he encouraged friends and relatives to commission works, the best-known example (albeit one that ended unhappily) resulting in Renoir's portraits of the Cahen d'Anvers family (83). But Ephrussi's involvement had slowed by the mid-1880s, and he began to dispose of some of the pictures. In 1886, for example, he sold Degas's *Dancer in Green* (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), 1877–79, which he presumably had acquired about 1880, to Walter Sickert. In 1892, Ephrussi returned Renoir's *Two Sisters* (Art Institute, Chicago), which he had bought from Durand-Ruel in 1883, to the dealer, and in 1895, he returned Degas's *At the Milliner's* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which he had purchased from Durand-Ruel in 1882.<sup>[6]</sup> With the last two, it seems possible that the paintings no longer suited the Empire style of the new and grander hôtel on avenue d'Iéna to which he and his brother moved in 1891 (97).

But Ephrussi's Impressionist paintings represent only one part of his activities in the art world. Shortly after he arrived in Paris in 1871, he bought paintings from the dealer Goupil, among them works by Narcisse Diaz, Jean-Baptiste Isabey, and Ernest Meissonier.<sup>[7]</sup> They represent the same conventional taste as the works after famous Renaissance and Baroque artists he acquired while in Italy in 1872 (34-5). A decade later, when he was buying Impressionist pictures, he also bought at least two works by Gustave Moreau one of them inscribed "à mon ami Charles Ephrussi."<sup>[8]</sup> Renoir, for one, was outraged: "It was clever of him [Moreau] to take in the Jews, to have thought of painting with gold colours . . . Even Ephrussi fell for it, who I really thought had some sense!" (85). His most important writing on a contemporary artist was about Paul Baudry, who was a close friend and named Ephrussi an executor of his estate (86). He also was very friendly with Léon Bonnat and with Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (45, 89). Finally, most of Ephrussi's publications concern the Old Masters, with Albrecht Dürer the important subject of extensive original research, and he helped with purchases and exhibitions of Old Masters at the Louvre (87). In fact, Ephrussi seemed to be everywhere, the very quality that made Edmond de Goncourt (among others) most angry (39-40).

Waal suggests that Ephrussi was buying art from friends rather than forming a collection based on aesthetic principles (86-7). Certainly he had many contacts with the artists he was buying, something that only increased as his position at the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* became more important. Nonetheless it also is true that Ephrussi's interests changed—most dramatically from *japonisme* to Empire—in a way that follows shifts in contemporary taste (98-9). Thus Impressionist painting seems to have been an intense but passing fancy, perhaps similar to Ephrussi buying the 264 netsukes as a single group at about the same time. Furthermore, he only bought certain types of Impressionist pictures. Unlike his cousin Marcel Bernstein, for example, Ephrussi never owned any of Cézanne's work and—more surprisingly—he did not contribute to the subscription fund for the purchase of Manet's *Olympia* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) in 1890.<sup>[9]</sup> On the other hand, he bought a new painting by Claude Monet as late as 1898.<sup>[10]</sup>

Waal's book is about the Ephrussi family, however, which means that their Jewishness is central to his story. This provides an entirely new perspective on Charles Ephrussi and, through him, on the Paris art world during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Waal makes it clear that anti-Semitism was constantly present (90-6, 151-3). In both Vienna and Paris, the family

built grand houses in areas known for their rich Jews: the Ringstrasse in Vienna and first rue de Monceau and then avenue d'Iéna in Paris (23, 27-8). Waal's account of these neighborhoods and their reputations, as well as the sorts of social events that took place in them, is important for placing the Ephrussis in their context. Using the evidence of society columns in the newspapers as well as contemporary accounts by the Goncourts, Proust, and others, Waal creates a sense of their immense social success but also the number of doors closed to them because they were Jewish (42-3, 100-1, 90-6, 102-4).

Waal concludes the book with Odessa, which he visited at the end of his study (336, 343-4). This is the weakest part of his historical understanding of the family. In fact, both Berdichev, where Chaim Joachim Efrussi was born in 1793 and his son (and Charles's father) Léon in 1826, and Odessa, where Charles and his siblings were born between 1846 and 1851, are important places in Jewish history. Berdichev was Polish until 1795, when it became part of the Pale of Settlement, the area of the Russian Empire where Jews could reside legally.<sup>[11]</sup> A census from 1789 records almost 2000 Jews in Berdichev, accounting for more than 75% of the population. This number increased to almost 50,000 by 1861, making it not only the city with the second largest Jewish population in the Empire (Warsaw was the first), but the only one where Jews made up a majority of the population. The extraordinary growth occurred because the city had been granted the right to hold ten trade fairs a year, which drew merchants from all over central and Eastern Europe. However, the development of the railroad undermined its importance and made the port city of Odessa, founded in 1794, the more important commercial center. Dramatically situated on the Black Sea, it was used by Russia for the large-scale export of Ukrainian grain. Like many others, Jews as well as non-Jews, the Ephrussis moved to Odessa to take advantage of the new economic possibilities. It was through control of the grain trade that they, along with a few other Jewish families, made fortunes that they used to create major financial companies in Europe (24-5).<sup>[12]</sup>

All of this history is important for understanding the Ephrussis's cultural background and Jewish heritage. First, Odessa had the most modern, secular Jewish community in all of Eastern Europe. Ideas of the *haskalah* or Jewish Enlightenment flourished, and religious practice did not define Jewish identity for many members of the community. For example, Jews in Odessa began to wear western clothes in 1835, as soon as it was permitted by law. As a result, the Ephrussis would not have been the only Jews from Odessa who never went to a synagogue (151). Furthermore, trading placed a premium on the ability to make business deals throughout the Russian Empire and Europe. In 1826, after obtaining permission from the Russian Emperor, the Jewish community in Odessa opened a public school for boys that reflected the needs of businessmen like the Ephrussis. Unlike any other school for Jews in the Pale, the boys had a six-year program that included mastery of Russian, German, and French, along with their grammars and classic authors, and fluent translation from one language to another, as well as some religious studies, math, physics, rhetoric, the history of Russia, world history, geography, bookkeeping, handwriting, and civil law. Nearly all the teachers came from German-speaking countries. This was in sharp contrast to the typical Jewish school, with its emphasis on traditional Jewish education and little if anything taught about secular subjects. As the result of such education, Odessa produced "young [Jewish] men possessing an exemplary knowledge of languages, excellent social skills, confidence in dealing with the world, having had a thorough education that meets the demands of modern society."<sup>[13]</sup>

Although it seems unlikely that any of the Ephrussi attended the Jewish public school in Odessa—surely Charles and his brothers had private tutors—the family clearly had similar ideas about education. Waal reports that in Vienna, where Charles moved when he was ten, the Ephrussi had private tutors in the morning to learn Latin, Greek, German, and English. The children spoke French at home and Russian among themselves, but were not allowed to use the Yiddish they knew from Odessa. They also learned to ride, fence, and dance, with Charles called *le Polonais* because of his mastery of the waltz (31). James McNeill Whistler's description of Ephrussi in the spring of 1881 makes him sound remarkably like his compatriots in Odessa: "a distinguished Russian—who dances—perhaps—but who certainly speaks every possible language—and will be most interested and delightful as a companion."<sup>[14]</sup>

At one point, Waal compares Ephrussi to Gustave Caillebotte, remarking that either of them could have been the young man seen from the back in Caillebotte's *Young Man at a Window* (Private collection), looking out on the same neighborhood in Paris at the same time, the future ahead of him, everything possible (30). But the truth is that he couldn't have been. Although there are many interesting points of comparison, the difference is fundamental: Ephrussi was Jewish. And part of what expressed that Jewishness was precisely his command of languages and the ease with which he moved throughout Europe. Needless to say, Caillebotte's education at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand would have been very different. Furthermore, as Waal remarks, the Ephrussi family was a specific target of anti-Semitism, being public in its support of Jewish causes and visibly part of the world of the Jewish rich (92-3). An article published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1886 makes their prominence clear:

[As in London] the Jews are carrying all before them by their wealth and social perseverance. First and foremost are the Rothschild brothers . . . [who] form a noble dynasty by themselves . . . The next grade of Jews includes the Foulds and Sterns, whose settlement in Paris dates back to Louis Philippe's time; the Cahen d'Anvers family, whose fortunes helped those of Napoleon III at a critical moment; the Koenigewarters, the Bischoffsheims, the Goldschmidts. Then follows a mass of Israelites hailing from Frankfort (sic), Munich, Constantinople, Odessa, and the Levant, . . . who have arrived for the most part since the Franco-Prussian war, and whose names are Stern, Kann, Léon Fould, Hirsch, Camondo, Erlanger, Gunzbourg, Ephrussi. These new dynasties have established themselves in Paris in fine dwellings, and within the past six or seven years they have undertaken to win social prestige, and above all to conquer the Faubourg Saint-Germain. . . Then, through the loophole of art, one of these energetic Israelites penetrated the salon of an ex-imperial highness; he made room for his uncles and aunts and cousins, who gradually introduced their friends and their friends' friends, until at last the Wednesday receptions of the amiable hostess in question have come to be in a large degree receptions of the descendants of the tribes.<sup>[15]</sup>

Even if this author did not intend Charles Ephrussi to be the Jew taking advantage of the "loophole" of art, others, like Edmond de Goncourt, did. Unfortunately the family did not need the Dreyfus Affair to remind them that their Jewishness was like a thread that, when pulled, could unravel a lifetime of achievement in a moment.

For the historian of nineteenth-century French art, Waal's analysis of Ephrussi's social circle maps connections and relationships that are often unexpected, made more so by the ways in

which his being Jewish mattered. Waal confesses discomfort at discovering Ephrussi's closeness to Baudry as well as disgust at contemporary anti-Semitic publications, but these things are not marginal aspects of the art that interests us most. Instead they are integral to the period, and the particular issues Ephrussi brings to the discussion are crucial ones. An immense amount of valuable historical research has been done over the past half-century, but much remains to be done. A careful art historical study of Charles Ephrussi would be an interesting contribution.

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## Notes

- [1] For pictures of some of the netsukes as well as links to interviews with the author, see <http://www.edmunddewaal.com/theharewithambereyes.html>.
- [2] Henri Loyrette, "Degas à l'Opéra," in *Degas inédit: actes du Colloque Degas, Musée d'Orsay, 18-21 avril 1988* (Paris: Documentation française, 1989), 50.
- [3] A very full account of his activities in the French art world appears in Helène de Givry, "Ephrussi, Charles," *Dictionnaire critique des historiens de l'art*, <http://www.inha.fr/spip.php?article2310> (posted 25 Septembre 2009). It also includes an extensive bibliography of his publications as well as publications about him.
- [4] Anne Distel makes this clear in her discussion of Ephrussi in *Impressionism: the First Collectors*, tr. Barbara Perroud- Benson (New York: Abrams, 1990), 160-2.
- [5] Distel, 162.
- [6] The information comes from the provenances given by the museums that now own the pictures.
- [7] See "Ephrussi" in Goupil & Cie stockbooks, Getty Research Institute, [http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/digital\\_collections/goupil\\_cie/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/digital_collections/goupil_cie/index.html).
- [8] Although Waal identifies this picture as *Galatée* now in the Orsay, Ephrussi is not listed in the provenance for the painting, and the inscription is not mentioned in the museum's description. Perhaps it was a watercolor of the subject? It also seems that Ephrussi did not own Manet's *Races at Longchamp*, now in the Chicago Art Institute, as Waal assumes (86). See François Cachin et al., *Manet, 1832-1883*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 264.
- [9] Unless he did so anonymously. The list of subscribers is in François Cachin et al., p. 183. An autograph list of subscribers written by Monet and dated 31 October 1889 (which includes Rodin, unlike the list in Cachin) can be seen at <http://www.museedeslettres.fr/public/sous-thematique/liste-oeuvre/92?PHPSESSID=a24ee913f7e43680aa7afef1329902ee>.
- [10] *Matinée sur la Seine près Giverny* (W1483), from 1897. This is the last purchase listed in Daniel Wildenstein, *Claude Monet: biographie et catalogue raisonné* (Paris: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1975-1985). Ephrussi bought *Un Parc à Pourville* (W770), mentioned by Waal (107), in 1894.
- [11] This accounts for the fact that Charles Ephrussi, who remained a Russian citizen for his entire life, sometimes was referred to as Polish.
- [12] I have summarized a number of sources here. For an overview, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), "Berdichev" and "Odessa." See also <http://www.berdichev.org/history.html> and Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985). A fascinating 19th-century guidebook, available on Google Books, is Johann Georg Kohl, *Russia Observed* (1844; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1972), which discusses Odessa, 417-30.
- [13] Joachim Tarnopol, *Notices historiques et caractéristiques sur les Israelites d'Odessa* (Odessa, 1855), p. 9. See also pp. 81-98 about the history of the school and its curriculum.

[14] Letter from Whistler to Florence Boughton, March or May 1881, MS Whistler B135: [http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/display/?cid=358&nameid=Ephrussi\\_C&sr=0&rs=1&surname=ephrussi&firstname=charles](http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/display/?cid=358&nameid=Ephrussi_C&sr=0&rs=1&surname=ephrussi&firstname=charles).

[15] Quoted in *Littel's Living Age* 169 (April–June 1886): 365-6.