Provenance is Many Journeys: it's Plural, it's Complicated, it's Contingent

Edmund de Waal in conversation with Tal Adler and Sharon Macdonald

Tal:
Artistic provenance research is the topic of the book that we are working on. What do you make of that term? Does it have resonance for you?

Edmund:
It's a very immediate question for me, and it's always been a question for me. I work from the principle that objecthood is – that the things in the world are – profoundly unstable. The way in which they are made – and their intentionality, the kinds of investment that you have in them as a maker – is one element of their being. But that's endlessly fissile. It's provocative. As soon as you've made something, and it's out in the world, your ownership of it, your sense of control of where it will be, in whose hands it might travel, its uses, and its productivity in terms of its creation of new possibilities and new meanings are extraordinary.

For me as a maker and as a writer, I'm dealing with things and their meanings the whole time: one, as a creator of objects out into the world, knowing that briefly my naming of them, my placing of them, and my pausing of them – I use the word pause an awful lot, taking it from Paul Celan, as a moment of possibility – are temporary. I have a very small window to control anything that I make as it goes out into the world. So that's me as a maker, making things and putting them out to the world.

But, of course, my life is threaded with thinking about provenance: thinking about the objects and things that I have in my life and the ways in which they've come into my life all the way back, to the different places, people, generations, and cultures in which things have happened.

That is both in my family stories, which I might navigate through the books – *The Hare with Amber Eyes* and *Letters to Camondo* – but also simply in terms of my life as a potter and the ceramics that I trace back in the *The White Road* and in other books. These are all failed attempts to try and navigate what provenance might mean.

There's a line at the end of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, where I say objects have always been bought, sold, bartered, lost, looted, recovered. And I go on and say that inheritance is part of that. But you know, you get given things, but that's not a safe transaction. So, in the same way, provenance as a process of looking for antecedents, looking for beginnings, is a necessary search for meaning, search for identity, search for a place. It's also iterative – it's not one journey, it's many journeys. You can go back again, and again, and again. Each time you go back, it's a different journey; it's a different beginning.

So, that's a very long answer to begin with, to say it's plural, it's complicated, it's contingent. It doesn't get any easier the older you get. And it is absolutely vital. It's a necessary political, personal act.

Uncle Iggie holding the netsuke.
© De Waal family archive

Sharon:
The subtitle of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is *A Hidden Inheritance*. There seems to be in your writing a strong sense – even a compulsion or obligation – that those hidden things need engagement. Where does that come from?

Edmund:
The hidden is really important, because there are so many reasons why things are hidden. And increasingly as I get older, I realize that the hiddenness and silences in family stories often indicate places of trauma – places where a particular generation in a family has decided not to hand something on, not to hand on a particular history, not to hand on a story, not to hand on something they've experienced. Of course, that's a very loving and protective act. It's also a way of making a very provocative silence within a family, within a person's life.

Over the years, many people have talked to me about being on a similar journey – journeys in order to understand their own histories. So many of them have said, 'I can't find anything. There's nothing there. All I've got is, you know . . . things run out'; 'I can go back one generation'; or 'I can go back to my grandmother. But she died before I thought of

asking her questions'; or 'I have a silver teaspoon that may have come from Latvia. But I don't know . . .' There's a profound need and possibly an obligation to try and discover, to look deep into the past, to discover your present condition, and to see what you want to hand on to your children in terms of storytelling.

So, hiddenness is really important. And as soon as you use the word *hidden*, it's got so many different levels of meaning, because there's the personal hiddenness of someone deciding not to tell you something or being in an emotional place when they can't tell you something. And then, of course, there are all the extraordinarily painful ways in which people's histories are taken away from them and are deliberately hidden. And that can be through the Shoah, and it can be through the African American experience of trying to reconstruct family stories, where, of course, there is a massive lacuna. And it can be more recently in terms of refugee stories where things have been deliberately taken away in order that people can't return to their countries.

Sharon:
You sometimes use the word *commemoration* in relation to what you are doing.

Edmund:
Commemoration is naming at its heart. So, what any of this is, is an attempt to name the people who are lost. That's why it matters. And that's why it is often, in lots of different communities, incredibly painful and intrinsically difficult, because names have been removed, erased, defaced.

Tal:
In our book, we look at different examples of artistic provenance research, and we also ask: What change, if any, did it produce? Did it make any change to the field of provenance or the field that the work was relating to, to the subject, or to the people around the work, and also to the makers themselves? So, in that sense, how did your books influence, first of all, you, maybe your family, and the field?

Edmund:
How can you not be changed by the process? I mean, it's the first thing to say. If you do this kind of research on a very immediate and personal level, it does completely change you. It changes your sense of where you stand in the world, and actually, in my experience, it makes you more unstable – not safer, not more secure about identity, but much more aware of the instability. I've gone on record saying that the first book

Eine Stadt ein Buch edition, Vienna, 2021. © Paul Zsolnay Verlag

[*The Hare with Amber Eyes*] was an attempt to try and deliberately get my father to talk about things he wouldn't talk about. It was an attempt, while he was getting older and my children were getting older, to actually make a connection, generationally. It has been extraordinary for us as a family. It took us back to Vienna and made the connection with this diasporic family: four siblings had gone to Japan, to England, Mexico, and to America. It couldn't be more Jewish in that sense. It was an extraordinary experience, in Vienna, of the family coming together for the exhibition around the book. But it was also difficult – it was a new reality.

But what it has done is that it has allowed access between generations. It's something that happened, something that I don't own. The book has opened a conduit. It doesn't map what then happened. And that's terrific – very, very extraordinary.

And then, of course, it's influenced everything else: how I make things, and my sense of sort of where I want to be in the world, what I want to do, the projects I want to do. It's done lots of different things.

On another level, it's actually had, surprisingly, quite a substantive impact on things in Austria. I had a very moving encounter with the president of Austria who said that the book has helped change the kind of awareness in Austria of Jewish families. It's done a lot in terms of moving some of the ground about where and how people thought about Jewish families – so, not just as victims. As I said in my speech when I presented the book in Vienna, it is about actually bringing a family back to Vienna. It's a powerful act of restitution. It's not just about looking for the lost art that sits in a box – a complicated box – of 'them'. Instead, it brings a family back into an 'us'. And they've changed the law so that Holocaust-era families can reclaim citizenship. About bloody time too! So, my father has reclaimed his citizenship and so have my brothers. I haven't yet, but I will, at some point.

Two years ago, there was an initiative in Austria called 'Eine Stadt, ein Buch', in which the government distributed one hundred thousand free copies of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. I mean, that's pretty cool for

a book about provenance.[1]

Tal:
Yes, it is, and it brings so many things to mind regarding what we are writing about, especially the evolution of provenance research from being a market tool of the rich and the powerful to, in recent decades, being transformed into a tool of social and historical justice.

This has to do with our next question, which I would like to pose by quoting a paragraph from your book *Letters to Camondo*: 'I've got to ask you about selling everything that you inherited. It is quite startling to read that you sent off to auction all the paintings of mosques and courtyards and houris that your father loved'.

But this question is not only about your giving up the netsuke collection. When you published the book, you already created, in a way, another provenance entry in the netsuke collection. And then there were the exhibitions, then the loans, and then the auction and the donation. And all these things actually added provenance entries. In *Letters to Camondo*, you reflect back on your speech in Vienna and quote Jean Amery: 'Nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled'.

Edmund:
That Jean Amery quote is really important. It's at the heart of this question, which deals with the contingency of memory and its connection to objects. You might feel that you want to nail things down: 'so this is where it is', 'this is what it means', 'this is where its value lies'. But that's not truthful. You can't hold things forever in one place; they don't have one meaning. And so, the decision, which was taken with my family, to sell an element of the netsuke collection, was during the first Syrian refugee crisis, in order to directly fund an element of the Refugee Council.[2]

It was saying that the inheritance was an inheritance of objects, but it was also an inheritance of the idea of migration. It was the idea of exile, the idea of crossing a border. It was the idea of some of the family being able to escape. That's what I've inherited. That's in the story. And actually, being truthful to the heart of the story suggests that you don't just keep the collection locked away in a vitrine, but you see that it has

[1] For more on this initiative, see the website of 'Eine Stadt. Ein Buch', accessed June 21, 2025, https://echoevent.at/eseb. See also the German-language edition of the book: Edmund de Waal, *Der Hase mit den Bernsteinaugen*, trans. Brigitte Hilzensauer (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2012).
[2] See Ben Luke, '"A Moment of Total Crisis in Europe" Prompted Edmund de Waal to Sell His Prized Netsuke Collection', *The Art Newspaper*, December 6, 2018, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/12/06/a-moment-of-total-crisis-in-europe-prompted-edmund-de-waal-to-sell-his-prized-netsuke-collection.

continuing agencies in the world. Therefore, two things were simultaneous: One was the loan of the collection to the Jewish Museum in Vienna, to say that it can work harder in Vienna in the museum than it can work at home. My children were at that point almost twenty. And the second thing was to do something emphatic and real in the present moment to help refugees. When we published my grandmother's novel, called *Exiles Return*, which was her unpublished novel about her return to Vienna, all the proceeds from that also go forever to the Refugee Council. We haven't taken any of the proceeds from that book.

So, it's basically, trying to locate the agency that you have. Provenance research, as you cunningly suggested, is often thought of as a tool of auction houses – of people who want to make that great list in their sale-room catalogue in order to commodify objects. All my practice is about breaking that up and going: 'You know what, you want complexity? Bring the word provenance in. You want complexity? Bring the word restitution in'. It's using the lens of Amery as justice being a continuous act. Not something in the past tense – it's an enacting of something rather than a coding of something.

Tal:
You also write about there being some things that you 'don't want to pass on': 'I don't want to live with it anymore'.

Edmund:
This has two elements: One was discovering from my grandmother that she burned hundreds of letters from her grandmother in the 1950s. She kept them, and then actually let them go. She just burned them; she didn't want to pass them on. So, there was that act. And, of course, burning things is a very symbolic and powerful act that I return to in the *library of exile* project.[3] And the second element was the sense in which, for me, writing these books was an attempt of not passing on to my children. It sounds perverse because it's a long-winded way of not passing things on, but it was an attempt to not pass on silences. And then we made a decision that the archive should go to the Jewish Museum in Vienna. You don't have to have it yourselves; you just need to know where it is.

A footnote to that is that the Jewish Museum in Vienna discovered a vast, monumental history painting from 1840 of cavalry officers. This had been looted in '38 from the family house, and it ended up in the Museum

[3] Edmund de Waal, *library of exile*, the British Museum, London, August 27, 2020 – January 12, 2021; see the website for the exhibition at https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/edmund-de-waal-library-exile.

of Military History in Vienna, which is not too far from the house. It had been hanging there since 1938, and in the records from 1950, they noted that 'this belonged to the Ephrussi family'. But . . . anyhow, it was restituted to us, and there was a family discussion about what happens with it, because there was no point selling it. So, what do you do with it? In fact, the title is going to be passed to the Jewish Museum in Vienna.[4] So, it will have moved. But I was arguing for something slightly different, which was to say that it should stay in the Military Museum with a great text about provenance, which would have been very provocative, a kind of beautiful way of doing it and in itself a kind of artistic intervention.

Sharon:
I love that idea – why didn't it happen?

Edmund:
Because I'm one of several. All of this is complicated because you hold a bit of the story, or you think you hold the shape of the story. And of course, it's everyone's story. Other people can write other histories or feel other histories. So, you have to be very aware and sensitive to just how complicated this is. There's no straight line.

Sharon:
Yes, it's important to reflect on that, and in your writing you reflect a lot on these very processes. One thing that you mentioned that changed through your doing this provenance research was your own artistic practice. Could you say more about that? And about the relationship between your pottery and your writing, especially in relation to these questions of provenance?

Edmund:
I think what doing that work has done is that the background has become the foreground. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* wasn't the first book I wrote. I've written about ceramics for years. But it allowed me a space to reflect more straightforwardly on these things. What has happened is that I've developed a kind of language of the vitrine. That's not arbitrary. And in fact, when I was finishing *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, I was doing my first ever large-scale, site-specific installation at the same time. It was up

[4] Jewish Museum Vienna, 'The Jewish Museum Vienna and the Austrian Ministry of Defense Make Restitution to the Ephrussi Family Possible', news release, September 1, 2021, https://www.jmw.at/en/news/the_jewish_museum_vienna_and_the_austrian_ministry_of_defense_make_restitution_to_the_ephrussi_family_possible.

in the dome of the V&A Museum, a huge red ring of objects.[5] Its opening was in the same month that I had the proof of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and I realized that I was getting up ladders and putting objects out of harm's way – I was making objects which were non-diasporic, because unless you got a scaffold and got seventy feet up in the air, you can't get these objects down. And, simultaneously, I was writing about lost things.

Those parallel journeys have inflected each other ever since. And so much of my work is also in dialogue with particular people – with Paul Celan, for instance, where there are strong connections between the brokenness of language and new language, and an attempt to say something, and a compulsion to say something, alongside the need to stay silent. All those sorts of themes are also present in the ways in which I hold my work back or let it come out into the world, as in my use of shards, my use of brokenness.

This is also about the places where I have worked. My intervention at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is a very difficult example of that. What do you do if you're invited by the Kunsthistorisches Museum to do something? You say no, you say no, again you say no, and finally you say yes. That project is called *During the Night*, after a Dürer watercolour of a nightmare.[6] There was a whole discovery of broken objects within the museum. So that's part of my practice – making something, making an exhibition. And, more recently with *Letters to Camondo*, that's both the book and an exhibition.[7] Well, I can't call it an exhibition, because it's not: it was a presence within the house, both seen and unseen.

So, how are my writing and pottery linked? You know, I'm one person. Some things get written, some things get made. I'm never totally sure what's going to go where. If you were in the studio at the moment – which I wish you were – there are books everywhere, and there's clay everywhere. It doesn't feel to me like two practices at all.

Tal:
I want to follow up on something that you mentioned and to talk about vitrines. I am also thinking a lot about vitrines, in general, and about how you use vitrines, and also how you write about vitrines. I think there

[5] Edmund de Waal, *Signs & Wonders*, permanent installation, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2009; for an installation view, see https://www.edmunddewaal.com/making/signs-wonders.
[6] *Edmund de Waal meets Albrecht Dürer. During the Night*, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, October 11, 2016 – January 29, 2017.
[7] The exhibition, or what de Waal calls 'a presence', is Edmund de Waal, *Lettres à Camondo*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, October 7, 2021 – May 15, 2022; see the website for the exhibition at https://www.edmunddewaal.com/writing/books/letters-to-camondo/about. The book is Edmund de Waal, Letters to Camondo (London: Chatto and Windus, 2021).

are different levels of how you write about them and how you use them in your artistic practice. You write about vitrines as thresholds, and also about them as defining a space. But I was also captivated by how you wrote about the ceremony around the vitrines. When talking with provenance researchers who might do 'straightforward' research, we sometimes say that artistic provenance research is also about the things that are around the objects themselves. So, maybe your writing itself, or the book, is a kind of a vitrine for the stories in a certain way? We also thought that there are two kinds of vitrines: The vitrines that you write about, which can be opened, and where it's this kind of social game of taking things out, etc. But then the vitrines that you use in the installations are closed.

Edmund:
You're spot on, absolutely spot on. Because there is an actual threshold experience of opening a vitrine, which I talk about, as you say. And then there's this liminality of opening something up and handing it around, – that activation of something.

As you say, my vitrines are closed, and you can't open them. But for me, they are absolutely thresholds, still thresholds, liminal, because you read them. For me, the objects are also sounds and words. It's a kind of choreography. It's a sort of notational system as well. It's got that kind of feeling to me. It's much more like a kind of John Cage score of possibilities. You don't have to open the vitrine up and move the pots around for it still to be active. And, of course, you're right that it's just like how you don't expect a book to open up, and the words to start falling around, and the chapters to start mingling; but you also know that opening a book is essentially a liminal thing. You open it up, and you move within the text. The relationship between the page and a vitrine is very, very close to me.

just (for RMR), Edmund de Waal (Waddesdon Manor installation view), 2022. © Chris Lacey

So, the answer is yes – absolutely yes.

Sharon:
The other term from artistic provenance research that we haven't particularly touched on directly is the *research* aspect.

Putting *artistic* and *research*

together doesn't always make sense to people doing more conventional provenance research, where there's such an emphasis on 'this has to be the case' to carry a particular weight. You often use the term *stories* in relation to what you write as well as *journeys*, and that means you show us the process, which is fabulously compelling. Could you say a bit more about your thoughts on research?

Edmund:
I have an academic background, as well as a profession of being a potter. And so, I have a sort of academic training. When I left my university, I could have gone two ways: pottery or PhD. Happily, pottery it was.

I'm very clear that there is a real discipline in research, in one kind of research: a discipline of being in the archives and cross-checking and noting everything down. There's a cupboard of research behind me, old-style research materials; it's all pre-Google; it's all from going to places. Which brings me to the second point, which is the somatic research. The reason I use the words *stories* and *journeys* so much is that, for me, the research isn't purely the experience of tracking down texts and materials in libraries and archives. It's about actually being present in the places where things happened. Now, how do you notate that? How do you put that into a different kind of provenance? A methodology? But you should! Walking up and down, and counting the steps, and finding the distance between one place and another, or trying to trace a morning walk in Vienna for my grandmother – these are as important to me as those hours in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

If you think about objecthood as being objects in the round, then you have to deal with the body. You have to deal with the physical presence of something, and the places that it's been, and all those other things.

So, for me, that is an absolutely compelling part of research. You can call it artistic research, research-research, I don't care. But it's real research.

Sharon:
Research raises the question of degrees of faithfulness to what has been encountered. How much poetic licence do you allow yourself?

Edmund:
Well, 'not much' is the answer. I think I indicate where I'm present in a story and conjecturing, and where I know what happened. So, with *Letters to Camondo*, obviously there are huge archival resources that I could use. But I'm also clear about when I'm talking to him and say 'I don't know what it was like', 'I wish I was next to you on this particular

dinner table', or 'what was it like to hear the sounds from one room to another?' And, you know, I got some things wrong. And people are very, very keen on pointing out when you get things wrong. So, I know exactly what I got wrong, because, apart from some really moving letters, I've had letters where they go 'you idiot, if you come out of Schottengasse and turn left, and then left', 'any fool knows that you should', or 'the entrance to your great-grandfather's café moved in 1910'. What you don't get are letters saying 'actually, we know where the Rafael copy that was looted in 1938 now is'.

So, it's interesting that people are very prepared to tell you what you've got wrong. But actually, you know what? It'd be quite helpful if people wrote in and went 'actually, we know where all that went', or 'we've got it'.

Tal:
For me at least, it's also about the aesthetics of research – about the way that you're writing, the aesthetics of writing. When I was reading *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, I was also thinking about Stefan Zweig's book on Marie Antoinette. I was always thinking, 'How the hell did this guy do that, what kind of research did he do, how many archives?' But it's not only the facts. It's really about wanting to understand. And both of you managed to write in such a way as to create this identification and affect. I think of it as the aesthetics of doing the research.

Edmund:
Thank you very much for any sentence with reference to Stefan Zweig!

There's something about having done enough research. The fullness of research. To be able to try and bring someone to life. To have enough sense of milieu, of tone, of the weather . . . in order to make it happen. And bluntly, I felt responsibility.

You talk about aesthetics of it, and this is the ethics of it, which is 'don't screw it up'. If you have one shot at trying to say anything about the Shoah, anything at all – be careful. And somewhere towards the end of the book I say, 'Be careful, walk it again, walk it again, make sure you get it right'. And of course, I did get some things wrong. But I got it right enough for the people I care about for it to work. That triangle of father, me, children – for that kind of triangle to happen.

Tal:
You mentioned the funny letters by the readers, and I was wondering – because it is also connected to the impact of your work – did you also encounter Antisemitic readings of your work?

Edmund:
Absolutely, yes. There were people who were offended on different levels. One was just saying 'another book about rich Jews'. And then other people . . . there was a particular review – actually, a couple of reviews in America – which went 'most of the family got away, so what's the story?' So, there was a sort of hierarchy of suffering. You know, I haven't reached the threshold of appropriate suffering in order to write a book, according to them.

Of course, there are those readings. But I have to say, what it has done is to connect, very powerfully, which has been hugely meaningful for me, not only to parallel families in the Jewish community but to many other non-Jewish families who have other experiences of exile. And that's been absolutely extraordinary.

I've written about this: Some beautiful Meissen plates, looted from the von Klemperer family in Dresden in 1938 were destroyed into fragments during the firebombing in 1945. I bought them, and then had them repaired using the Japanese art of kintsugi and showed them back in Dresden.[8] In terms of your beautiful circles that you're drawing in the air about belonging and objecthood, and in some ways about inscription – about how much you need to inscribe on something in order to indicate provenance – they were kind of like a beautiful footnote.

Sharon:
That sounds like a lovely place to end this interview. Thank you very much!

[8] *library of exile*, Japanisches Palais, Dresden, November 30, 2019 – February 16, 2020; see also the website for the exhibition at https://japanisches-palais.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/library-of-exile-edmund-de-waal.