

the hare with the amber eyes

The hare with the amber eyes is a mesmerizing tale that intertwines art, family heritage, and the beauty of cultural history. The story revolves around a unique collection of Japanese netsuke, particularly focusing on a captivating hare carved from ivory, which serves as a central motif in Edmund de Waal's bestselling memoir. This article delves into the significance of the hare with the amber eyes, exploring its historical context, the author's personal journey, and the broader themes of loss and memory that permeate the narrative.

Understanding the Netsuke and Its Significance

Netsuke are miniature sculptures that originated in Japan during the Edo period (1603-1868). They were traditionally used as toggles to secure small items carried by the Japanese nobility. The art of netsuke is not just about functionality; it is also about storytelling and artistry.

The Art of Netsuke

1. Cultural Importance: Netsuke reflect the artistic styles and cultural narratives of their time. They often depict animals, mythical creatures, and everyday scenes, illustrating the rich tapestry of Japanese life.
2. Materials Used: Netsuke can be made from various materials including wood, ivory, and even ceramic. The choice of material often enhances the storytelling aspect of the piece.
3. Symbolism: Many netsuke carry symbolic meanings, representing virtues, myths, or historical tales. For instance, animals like hares can symbolize fertility, speed, and in some cultures, rebirth.

The Story Behind the Hare with the Amber Eyes

Edmund de Waal's memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, narrates the journey of his family's collection of netsuke, particularly the hare that inspires the title. The story intertwines de Waal's personal experiences with the historical backdrop of his family, the Ephrussis, a wealthy banking dynasty in 19th-century Europe.

A Family Legacy

1. The Ephrussi Family: The Ephrussi family was originally of Jewish descent

and made their fortune in banking, art, and culture. They were deeply involved in the European art scene and collected numerous valuable artworks.

2. The Netsuke Collection: De Waal inherits 264 netsuke from his great-uncle, which leads him on a quest to understand their history and his family's past. The hare, with its striking amber eyes, becomes a symbol of continuity amidst the family's tumultuous history.
3. The Impact of War: The narrative explores how World War II devastated the Ephrussi family, leading to the loss of wealth and status, and how the collection of netsuke survived as a testament to their history.

The Themes of Memory and Loss

One of the central themes of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is the exploration of memory and loss. Through the lens of the netsuke, de Waal examines how objects can hold personal and collective memories.

The Role of Objects in Memory

1. Tangible Connections: Objects, like the netsuke, serve as physical reminders of the past. They can evoke memories of people, places, and experiences, creating a bridge between generations.
2. Cultural Heritage: The hare and other netsuke represent not just personal memories for de Waal, but also a broader cultural heritage that connects him to his ancestors and their stories.
3. Preservation of History: By recounting the history of the netsuke, de Waal highlights the importance of preserving stories and memories that might otherwise be lost to time.

The Artistic Journey of Edmund de Waal

Edmund de Waal is not only an author but also a renowned potter. His artistic background deeply informs his writing, allowing him to weave a narrative that is rich in visual and tactile detail.