

Our book for November was "The Hare with the Amber Eyes" by Edmund de Waal which is essentially the history and travels of a group of 264 Japanese netsuke and their owners.

Netsuke are tiny carvings originally designed to be the closure device for the enamelled "pockets" worn with traditional Japanese dress. Many were exquisitely crafted by master artists, often in Ivory, taking many years to complete. Others were carved in a more naive fashion in various woods for use by their makers. All were on a very small scale and depicted everyday objects, local people or animals, such as fishermen, water barrels and the eponymous hare.

"Our" netsuke began their European adventure in Belle Epoque Paris when they were collected by Charles Ephrussi the fabulously rich second son of a Jewish banker. With his father and elder brother to run the family bank Charles was free to become the editor of a respected Art magazine, patron of Renoir and Degas and collector of all things artistic. The craze for everything "Japonaise" swept 1890's Paris and the netsuke found a home in a custom made cabinet in Charles's suite of rooms in the palatial family home in the newly built 18th Arrondissement.

In 1899 the netsuke, along with their cabinet, were sent as a wedding present to Charles's cousin Viktor and his very youthful bride Emmy and are installed in Emmy's dressing room in the huge Ephrussi Palais on the Ringstrasse in Vienna where they eventually become playthings for their three children. The family and the netsuke are then swept through the maelstrom of early 20th century Austrian history via the First World War, the fall of the Hapsburg dynasty, the rise of Fascism, the Anschluss and the scattering of the family to escape the Nazis.

Following the war Emmy's granddaughter, the author's mother, returns to Vienna to investigate the fate of the family's home, belongings and banking firm. Virtually all that could be salvaged were all 264 netsuke, literally saved from under the eyes of the German military by Anna, Emmy's dresser, who managed to secret them from their cabinet one by one and hide them in her mattress.

They then followed Emmy's son Iggy to post war Japan during the American Occupation where he found his sole mate, a successful career and a home for the rest of his long life. The netsuke had come full circle.

The book is a fascinating tale of lost worlds, huge wealth and huge loss and an illuminating description of the underlying anti-semitism in apparently "civilised" Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries.