An exhibition, a book
Lettres à Camondo
Press kit

7 Oct 2021 — 15 May 2022

Summary

→ Press release
→ Foreward
   by Olivier Gabet
→ Introduction
   by Edmund de Waal
→ Exhibition layout
→ Additional installation views
→ Useful information
British artist and author Edmund de Waal will present a major new exhibition this autumn at the spectacular Musée Nissim de Camondo, Paris, one of the city’s best kept secrets, inspired by his acclaimed book Letters to Camondo (April 2021, Chatto & Windus).

The exhibition, which runs from 7 October 2021 through 15 May 2022, marks Edmund de Waal’s first solo exhibition in France and the first time a contemporary artist has been invited to create an exhibition for the museum.

In Letters to Camondo, Edmund de Waal traces the story of the Jewish Camondo family, who made their home in Paris in the 1870s and became fixtures of Belle Époque high society, as well as targets of antisemitism, much like de Waal’s relations, the Ephrussi family to whom they were connected. Moïse de Camondo created a remarkable house on the rue de Monceau, on the edge of Parc Monceau, and filled it with an exceptional private collection of French 18th century art for his son Nissim to inherit. When Nissim was killed in the First World War the house became a memorial, with instructions that nothing be changed. In 1936 the mansion became the Musée Nissim de Camondo and its management was entrusted to Les Arts Décoratifs.
Edmund de Waal has been given unique access to the historic surrounds of the Musée Nissim de Camondo, creating an exhibition of new sculptures reflecting on the Camondo family, their story, and their memory. The works will be installed throughout the museum’s exquisite rooms and courtyard, in close dialogue with its collection of 18th century art, furniture and objects assembled by Moïse de Camondo.

Edmund de Waal said: “In the courtyard, I have made a series of eight stone sculptures from golden Hornton stone. The stone has seams of darkness. They are monumental blocks worn into smoothness made to sit on singly, or with others. Each has a very small piece of hammered lead and gold on its edge: they are markers of loss and repair. It is a form of kintsugi – the art of visible repair of an object with a line of gold and lacquer.”

In the hall stands a long table on which I have written and rewritten one of my letters to Moïse de Camondo through layers of porcelain into gold, a kind of palimpsest. And then in the house, there are several installations of objects – broken shards, vessels, words written into paper – thin sisthers of porcelain. They are held in oak vitrines to sit on particular pieces of furniture, frame views and sightlines.”
Inviting a contemporary artist into a museum of classical art is an obvious choice. But when it is the Musée Nissim de Camondo, an invitation of this type may seem, quite rightly, more complicated. The spirit of the place is intensely paradoxical: the home of a family annihilated by the events of history from the Great War to the absolute horror of the Holocaust, it was also the home of one of the most enlightened collectors of his time and remains a homage to the art of the eighteenth century. When he donated it, Count Moïse de Camondo undoubtedly had no idea that in addition to dedicating it to the history of art, he was also setting the stage for it to become a place of remembrance.

Opening the museum to contemporary art is a singular challenge, and Edmund de Waal rises to meet it. Exhibited in the most outstanding museums in the world, from the Victoria & Albert Museum to Waddesdon Manor, Edmund de Waal’s work draws upon his inexhaustible curiosity for Song dynasty China, Edo-period Japan, and the spirit of the Bauhaus.

An acclaimed writer, he has delighted millions of readers with the beauty of the pages that he dedicated to his family history in The Hare with Amber Eyes (2010), which follows his Ephrussi ancestors between the Vienna of the Ringstrasse and Manet’s Paris. A citizen of the world, he has never ceased to present this history as a life lesson for all to see, as in Venice in 2019, with his library of exile, 2,000 books that were later donated to the library of the University of Mosul in Iraq, as it rose from the ashes.

Between his latest book, Letters to Camondo (2021), and this exhibition, Edmund de Waal again weaves connections between his life and the lives of others in a sensitive, inframince exhibition which inhabits the interstices of the residence all the way down to its inaccessible spaces, like the beating heart that we feel and hear but cannot see.

Olivier Gabet
Director of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the Musée Nissim de Camondo
Introduction
by Edmund de Waal

This is a street I know well. This beautiful hill of golden houses on the edge of the Parc Monceau is a street of beginnings, a place for families to settle and start to become French. The stories are lambent and they are fissile and they break your heart.

The musée Nissim de Camondo has been in my life for a long time. My grandmother visited her cousins here in the 1920s, they lived ten houses up from the museum. I haunted it when researching the history of a collection I had inherited, bought in the 1870s. So to receive an invitation to make an exhibition here in this family house was an honour mixed with anxiety. It is not simple. It should never be straightforward to bring anything new into a place that is so storied. Here is a tremor of trespass. Where is off-limits? This house is not an empty house.

It is far from empty. In his will Moïse de Camondo writes that he doesn’t want anyone to move anything. Don’t lend things. Keep the blinds down, keep the dust away, don’t add objects to these collections.

These rooms are a work of art in themselves, a place of memory for his father and for his son, killed in the war. This gift to France was Moïse’s way of reaching into the future through memorial. It did not protect his family. It has become a memorial to Moïse’s daughter, Béatrice, her husband Léon and their two children, Fanny and Bertrand, murdered in Auschwitz.
I listen to him. I listen to the house. It is a house of sounds from the kitchens, the butler’s pantry, the library. And then I go to my studio and start to make things out of porcelain and gold and stone.

I think of where I can place them so that they gently amplify some of the echoes of the house, hold some of the silences. I think that it is possible to be here, briefly. I think it is possible not to move things, but to add. For this is a house of archives, of things cared for and put away. In the attics you open one door of a cupboard and it is full of light fittings, another and it has Louis Vuitton luggage. One room is full of gilded chairs. Béatrice’s dressing room has furniture shrouded with dust sheets.

In my studio I write to Moïse about collecting, about being Jewish, about food and dogs and Proust and family and belonging. And mourning. The letters multiply until there are fifty-eight Lettres à Camondo, a book.

And I make small groups out of porcelain and oak and gold. I shuffle these porcelain fragments. I stack them onto the desks where Moïse wrote to friends and dealers, the desks of the chef and the butler where they wrote their lists, their orders to the tradespeople. I want to add another layer to the archive. I decide that Moïse needs another desk. He had plenty of desks. In most rooms there is a place to sit and write. My desk is in the form of a letter, words written into porcelain brushed over gold leaf. I write: I find this difficult.

I put some shards into a drawer of the Sévres table. I put some piles of porcelain notes into the Library and a few bowls into the Porcelain Room to keep Buffon’s beautiful birds company. There are some bowls stacked in the butler’s pantry because this is where the careful calibration of the passage of objects is focussed.

I make five black vitrines and put lead and shards in them. These are fragments shored against the ruins. These are steles for the family, for Nissim, Béatrice, Léon, Fanny and Bertrand. They are i.m., in memoriam.

I put eight stone benches in the courtyard, places to sit and pause by yourself or with others. They are made from Hornton stone, golden-brown with beautiful dark bands running through them. They are polished smooth so that they feel worn away. A few edges have small gilded lead folds. You may not even notice them. They are my form of kintsugi, the manner in which some broken porcelain in China and Japan are repaired with lacquer and gold, a way of marking loss.

You cannot mend this house or this family. You can mark some of the broken places. You can mark them properly and with dignity, with love. And then move away again, let the house be.

Edmund de Waal
Exhibition layout

Lower ground

Scullery

Chef’s office

2

Hall

1

Court of Honour

Rue de Monceau
Additional installation views

8. Edmund de Waal — *muet, II-IV*
Installation view
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021
© MAD, Paris / Christophe Dellièrè
 Courtesy of the artist and of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

9. Edmund de Waal — *Solid Objects*
Installation view
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021
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10. Edmund de Waal — *muet, V*
Installation view
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021
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11. Edmund de Waal — *Lettres à Camondo (hold still)*
Installation view
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021
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12. Edmund de Waal — *one equal music, I*  
Installation view  
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021  
© MAD, Paris / Christophe Dellière  
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13. Edmund de Waal — *one equal music, I*  
Installation view  
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021  
© MAD, Paris / Christophe Dellière  
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14. Edmund de Waal — *Lettres à Camondo*  
(*pour P.G.*)  
Installation view  
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021  
© MAD, Paris / Christophe Dellière  
Courtesy of the artist and of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

15. Edmund de Waal — *petrichor*  
Installation view  
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021  
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16. Edmund de Waal — *petrichor*  
Installation view  
Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021  
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— **Musée des Arts Décoratifs**
Olivier Gabet, Director of Museum
107 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
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Métro: Palais-Royal, Pyramides, Tuileries
Open Tuesday to Sunday, 11 am–6 pm (Open late on Thursdays until 9 pm: only temporary exhibitions and the jewelry gallery are open)
→ general entrance fee: € 14
→ reduced entrance fee: € 10
→ free admission for under 26

— **Musée Nissim de Camondo**
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Open 10 am–5:30 pm
Closed Monday and Tuesday
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— **Visitor engagement, education and cultural development**
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Open 11 am–18:30 pm
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— **Loulou, restaurant**
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or access via the Carrousel gardens
Open daily 12 pm–2 am
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— **Le Camondo, restaurant**
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Open Tuesday to Saturday from noon to midnight and Sunday during the day
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