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EXHIBITION / 'I WILL BE THERE BRIEFLY AND THEN REMOVE MYSELF AWAY'

## In Paris exhibit, Edmund de Waal gets rare invitation to alter a cherished space

UK artist is 1st to showcase work at Musée Nissim de Camondo, which has remained unchanged since its 1936 dedication; he also penned a book of letters to its deceased benefactor

By [RENEE GHERT-ZAND](#) | 7 October 2021, 11:21 pm



Moïse and Nissim de Camondo (© MAD, Paris/Jean-Marie del Moral)

When author and artist [Edmund de Waal](#) was in Paris researching his 2010 bestselling book, "[The Hare with Amber Eyes](#)," he would walk up and down the Rue de Monceau in the 8th Arrondissement.

De Waal was drawn to the mansion at 63 Rue de Monceau, built by [Count Moïse de Camondo](#), a Sephardic Jewish Ottoman-born banker and art collector. A museum since 1936, the grand building is filled with French decorative art

from the second half of the 18th century, and is dedicated to Camondo's son Nissim, who was killed in World War I.

Moïse de Camondo bequeathed the museum to the French people in an act of gratitude for welcoming and granting emancipation to the Jews in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The only condition was that the mansion's contents remain unaltered — nothing shifted, added or removed.

Now, in the first and only exception to de Camondo's stipulation, de Waal is staging an [exhibition](#) of 20 site-specific artworks throughout the museum. The exhibition runs from October 7, 2021, through May 15, 2022.

“This is a really exceptional thing. I am allowed to bring things in... and it's a very great honor, as you can imagine. It's only temporary. I will be there briefly and then remove myself away,” de Waal told *The Times of Israel* in a recent interview from his London studio just prior to heading to Paris.

De Waal said the invitation from the [Musée Nissim de Camondo](#) (operated by the [Musée des Arts Décoratifs](#)) was extended in recognition of his extensive work around memory and memorial, both in his art and his writing.



Courtyard and garden of the Musée Nissim de Camondo (© MAD Paris / Photo: Jean-Marie del Moral)

“It is a difficult honor. Working out how to be in dialogue with that story is hugely difficult and painful,” the artist said.

De Waal spoke of the tragic history of the Camondo family, and that of the many Jewish banking and intellectual families who lived on the Rue de Monceau from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries.

Despite their best efforts to integrate into French society after arriving from faraway places — like Odessa in the case of de Waal's ancestors the Ephrussis, or Constantinople for the Camondos — they were constantly vilified by antisemites such as journalist [Edouard Drumont](#). Many, including all of Moïse de Camondo's direct descendants, were

ultimately murdered in the Holocaust.

“You could not be more generous. You could not be more Parisian. Your private and public life are in alignment. You are a French patriot,” de Waal writes in “[Letters to Camondo](#),” a collection of imaginary correspondence he penned to Moïse de Camondo that was published in May.

After mentioning a laundry list of arts and civic societies, committees and clubs Camondo led or was associated with, de Waal “asks” the count a pointed question: “If you belong to enough things does that make you belong here?”

The invitation to create the exhibition predated de Waal’s writing “Letters to Camondo” by several years. When the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns in 2020 prevented de Waal from traveling to Paris to conceptualize the exhibition, he shifted his engagement with Moïse Camondo’s legacy in a different way.

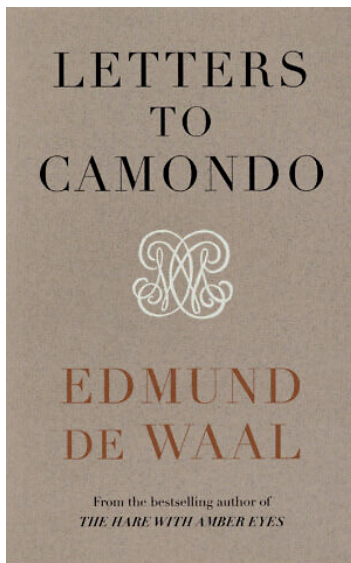
“The pandemic gave me space to do something different, which was to write these letters,” de Waal said.

De Waal’s having already spent a significant amount of time over the years in the

Musée Nissim de Camondo, and also in Moïse de Camondo’s extensive archives held on one of the mansion’s upper floors, enabled him to carry out this one-sided “dialogue” from afar.



Irène Cahen d'Anvers and her children, Béatrice and Nissim Camondo and Claude Sampieri, c. 1905. (© MAD, Paris/Jean-Marie del Moral)



'Letters to Camondo' by Edmund de Waal (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

Through the letters, we learn about four generations of Camondos in Paris. The family, led by Moïse's father and uncle, arrived in the French capital in 1869 and settled in the Rue de Monceau. By 1910, Moïse tore down his father Nissim's mansion at number 63 and sold off almost all of his material inheritance — Oriental art and artifacts that Moïse deemed too old-country. Moïse then proceeded to build his own mansion on the site. Working with the leading architect [René Sergent](#), he aimed to create a more classic, restrained look.

In the meantime, Moïse wed the much younger [Clara Irène Elise Cahen d'Anvers](#). The marriage produced two children, but did not last long. Irène, as she was known, ran off with her riding instructor, who was in charge of the Camondo racing stables. She also converted to Christianity. Moïse gained custody of son Nissim and daughter Béatrice.

After Nissim's death in World War I, only Béatrice was left. She married composer Léon Reinach in 1919. The marriage announcement described the bride's father as "*le collectionneur et sportsman connu*" (the known collector and sportsman).

The young couple moved to the suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, near the Bois de Boulogne, where Béatrice, an avid horsewoman, rode and boarded her horses. Léon and Béatrice had a daughter, Fanny, and a son, Bertrand. Fanny was an equestrian like her mother.

Following Moïse's death in 1935, Béatrice and her family were in attendance at the December 21, 1936, ceremony handing over the house at 63 Rue de Monceau and its collections to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. (The cover of de Waal's "Letters to Camondo" was inspired by the cover of the first catalog produced for the museum.)

Half a decade later, and despite efforts to evade capture by the Nazis and their collaborators (including Béatrice converting to Catholicism and divorcing Léon), the family ended up imprisoned at the Drancy transit camp in Paris, and were later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Fanny, age 22, was murdered in December 1943. Bertrand, age 20, was murdered in March 1944. Léon was murdered in May 1944, two weeks before his 50th birthday. Béatrice, age 50, was murdered in January 1945.

Béatrice's mother Irène, who had left the family decades earlier, was the heir to her daughter's de Camondo fortune, which she mostly squandered.

While Moïse de Camondo's descendants were destroyed, his home, by then the museum, was not. [Jacques Jaujard](#), director of the French National Museums (Musées Nationaux) during the Nazi occupation of France managed to prevent the occupation of Musée Nissim de Camondo and any looting of its contents.



Bertrand Reinach and his dog (© MAD, Paris/Christophe Dellière)



Edmund de Waal, *Lettres à Camondo, I*, 2021. Porcelain, gold, oak, liquid china clay, steel and lead (© Edmund de Waal. Courtesy of the artist/ Photo: Alzbeta Jaresova)



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Moïse's amazing collections remained intact, and de Waal has been given the opportunity to temporarily add to them. In doing so, he considers the words of Walter Benjamin, which he quotes in "Letters to Camondo." "The most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: He takes up the struggle against dispersion."

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"What [Camondo] was trying to do was a classic thing of Jewish collectors, which is a sort of bulwark against diaspora, and against traveling and movement," de Waal said.

"This was the endpoint of the traveling of the family. It was Moïse saying, we are now Parisian and this is where we are, and I am going to keep this all together to represent that. Of course, the painful break of this is that it doesn't work," he said.



Edmund de Waal, petrichor, installation view, Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021 © MAD, Paris (Photo: Christophe Dellière/ Courtesy of the artist and MAD, Paris)

For this reason, many of the artworks de Waal created for the exhibition feature cracks, shards, and other signs of breakage.

"It's a house where everything is 'intact' and beautifully poised, and I am bringing in a lot of fracture," de Waal said.

Many of the pieces are in the artist's signature porcelain, but others required materials and techniques new for de Waal. These include benches placed in the building's outside courtyard, on which he used the Japanese [kintsugi](#) method of repairing cracks with gilded lead.

"A lot of the pieces have text used in quite complicated ways. There's a table, for instance, I made for Moïse de Camondo on which I write [a list of] all the things in his archive. It's barely legible. I covered the table in gold leaf, and then brushed liquid porcelain, and while it was still wet I scratched through with a sort of stylus bits of text into it," de Waal said.

"It's sort of like a palimpsest with one text on top of another on top of another you can barely read. There are layers. It's a different way of holding words and memory," he said.

De Waal also created vessels, which he hid inside the cupboards in Camondo's archive, next to vintage Louis Vuitton luggage. Visitors will know that they are there, but they will not see them.

"They are just there and hidden. So I am sort of making another element of the archive and putting them away," the artist said.

De Waal explained that the artworks symbolize and hold memories, but are susceptible to breakage, exile, and disappearing in all kinds of ways, whether by being gifted, inherited, lost or looted.



Edmund de Waal, Solid Objects, installation view, Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021 © MAD, Paris. (Photo: Christophe Dellière/ Courtesy of the artist and MAD, Paris)

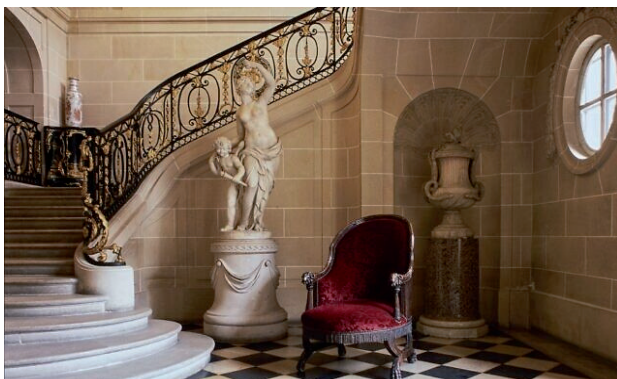


Edmund de Waal, one equal music, I, installation view, Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2021 © MAD, Paris. (Photo: Christophe Dellière/ Courtesy of the artist and MAD, Paris)

Camondo's misled belief that creating a massive collection of French art and furniture would protect him from the inevitable and innate dangers of the Jewish Diaspora inspires complex feelings for de Waal.

"That sort of frustration or anger with the past is part of the structure of the book: Letters into the past, and into the future — and no one writes back. There is absence and silence in it... You endlessly go back into history and ask why didn't you see this coming? Why didn't you do this? How could you possibly have done that?" he said.

But he expressed a powerful empathy for Camondo's "need to create something beautiful and personal and rooted."



Entrance hall of the Musée Nissim de Camondo. (© MAD Paris / Photo: Jean-Marie del Moral)

"You can be angry and massively empathetic at the same time. And those are two interesting things to have in the same space. If you are just angry with the past, what does that do? Because in some ways you are saying to these people who tried to do something, and with tragic consequences, that you are not treating them as full, living, vibrant, connected human beings. You are not allowing them the aspiration," he said.

The Camondo museum conveys "the pain of the powerful pulse of aspiration to belong coupled with the horror of the 20th century," said de Waal.