Wabi-Sabi

Objects and environments that embody naturalness, simplicity, and subtle imperfection achieve a deeper, more meaningful aesthetic.

Wabi-sabi is at once a world view, philosophy of life, type of aesthetic, and, by extension, principle of design. The term brings together two distinct Japanese concepts: *wabi,* which refers to a kind of transcendental beauty achieved through subtle imperfection, such as pottery that reflects its handmade craftsmanship; and *sabi,* which refers to beauty that comes with time, such as the patina found on aged copper. In the latter part of sixteenth-century Japan, a student of the Way of Tea, Sen no Rikyu, was tasked to tend the garden by his master, Takeno Jo-o. Rikyu cleared the garden of debris and scrupulously raked the grounds. Once the garden was perfectly groomed, he proceeded to shake a cherry tree, causing a few flowers and leaves to fall randomly to the ground. This is wabi-sabi.[1]

In many ways, the primary aesthetic ideals of wabi-sabi—impermanence, imperfection, and incompleteness—run counter to traditional Western aesthetic values. For example, Western values typically revere the symmetry of manufactured forms and the durability of synthetic materials, whereas wabi-sabi favors the asymmetry of organic forms and the perishability of natural materials. Wabi-sabi should not, however, be construed as an unkempt or disorganized aesthetic, a common mistaken association often referred to as *wabi-slobby.* A defining characteristic of wabi-sabi is that an object or environment appears respected and cared for, as with Rikyu's garden. The aesthetic is not disordered, but rather naturally ordered—that is, ordered in the way that nature is ordered, drawn of crooked lines and curves instead of straight lines and right angles. With the rise of the sustainability movement, Western ideals have begun to evolve toward wabi-sabi, albeit for different reasons. A home interior designed to be wabi-sabi would be clean and minimalist, employ unfinished natural materials such as wood, stone, and metal, and use a palette of muted natural colors (e.g., browns, greens, grays, and rusts). A home interior designed to be sustainable would also employ many of the same natural materials, but the emphasis would be on their sustainability and recyclability, not their aesthetics.

Though wabi-sabi is a humble aesthetic, it is also a sophisticated aesthetic that runs contrary to many innate biases and Western cultural conventions. Accordingly, consider wabi-sabi when designing for Eastern audiences or Western audiences that have sophisticated artistic and design sensibilities. Incorporate elements that embody impermanence, imperfection, and incompleteness in the design. Employ these elements with subtlety, however, as their extremes can undermine the integrity of the aesthetic (e.g., a dwelling that looks as though it may collapse at any moment is too impermanent and too incomplete). Favor colors drawn from nature, natural materials and finishes, and organic forms and motifs.

See also Biophilia Effect, Desire Line, Propositional Density, and Symmetry.

[1] See *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* by Leonard Koren, Stone Bridge Press, 1994; and *Wabi Sabi Style* by James Crowley and Sandra Crowley, Gibbs Smith, 2005.

The Wabi Sabi House by architect Rick Sundberg features asymmetric forms, unfinished wood and stone, colors drawn from nature, and a minimalist aesthetic. It is an excellent example of striking a balance between wabi-sabi aesthetics and the practical needs of modern Western living.