

# WABI-SABI

# BY RICHARD MARTIN

**"WABI-SABI IS A BEAUTY OF THINGS IMPERFECT, IMPERMANENT, AND INCOMPLETE. IT IS A BEAUTY OF THINGS MODEST AND HUMBLE. IT IS A BEAUTY OF THINGS UNCONVENTIONAL"**

LEONARD KOREN

This article is about looking at the everyday, the commonplace, and finding magic in the ordinary—a reminder that nothing in life, or design, is perfect. It is about appreciating the aesthetic concept of wabi-sabi, finding it or seeing it in things that already exist in the visual world around us—to encourage and develop an intuitive way of seeing that involves becoming aware of the moments that make life rich and paying attention to the simple pleasures that can be over-shadowed by the chaos and excess of our consumerist society.

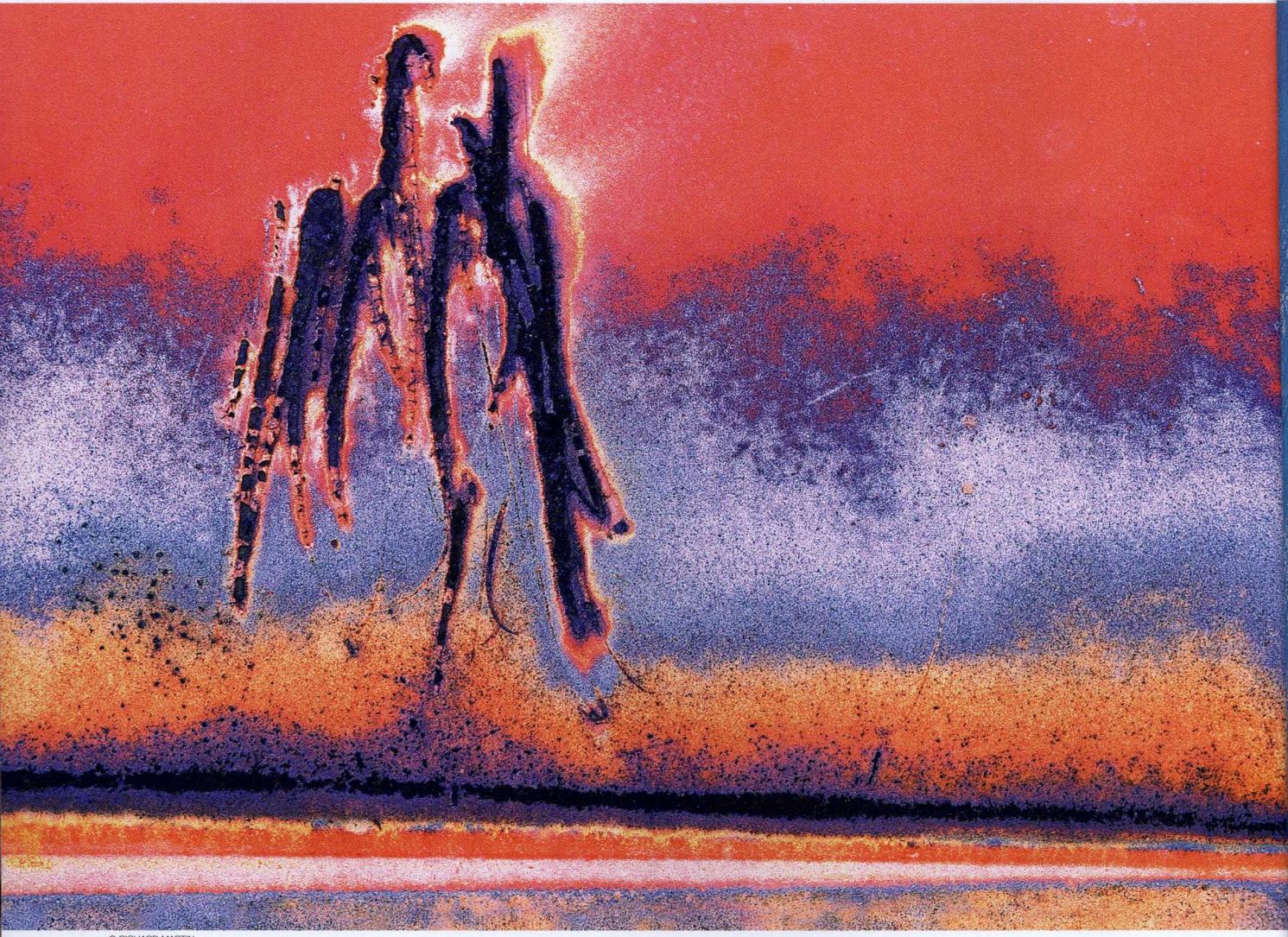
Wabi-sabi represents a comprehensive Japanese aesthetic focused on the acceptance of impermanence or transience. The phrase, meaning an aesthetic sensibility, comes from two of the key Japanese aesthetic concepts: *wabi* and *sabi*. Their definitions are difficult to explain or translate precisely in Western terms. The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete," according to Leonard Koren in his book *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. It is a concept derived from the Buddhist assertion of the first noble truth: Dukkha, or in Japanese, *mujyou* (impermanence). According to Koren, wabi-sabi is the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty

and it "occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West."

The idea of wabi-sabi speaks of a readiness to accept things as they are. This is contrary to Western ideals that emphasize progress and growth as necessary components to daily living. Wabi-sabi's fundamental nature is about process, not final product, about decay and aging, not growth. This concept requires the art of "slowness", a willingness to concentrate on the things that are often overlooked, the imperfections and the marks recording the passing of time. For me, this is the perfect antidote to the invasive, slick, saccharine, corporate style of beauty.

Andrew Juniper suggests, "If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be wabi-sabi." Richard R. Powell summarizes by saying, "It (wabi-sabi) nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect."





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The essence of wabi-sabi is that true beauty, whether it comes from an object, architecture, or visual art, doesn't reveal itself until the winds of time have had their say. Rusted metal, for example, has an essence that is lacking in new polished material. Beauty is in the scratches, the worn spots, and the imperfect lines.

## DEFINITIONS:

**Wabi** Wabi symbolizes rustic beauty and quietness. It also denotes simplicity and stillness and can apply to both man-made and natural objects. It can also refer to quirks and anomalies in things, a unique one-of-a-kind flaw, for example, which sometimes occurs during the process of production or creation.

**Sabi** Sabi refers to things whose beauty can come only with age, indicative of natural processes that result in objects that are irregular, unpretentious,

and ambiguous. It refers to the patina, such as a very old bronze statue or copper roof turned green. It also incorporates an appreciation of the cycles of life.

An article published in the *Nanaimo Daily News*, describes sabi as, "a word that originated in Japanese poetry. It expresses the feeling that you get in the autumn when the geese are flying south and the leaves are falling. It is a sort of sombre longing that is felt in the muted colours and earthy aroma of a forest preparing for winter."

## FURTHER VIEWS ON THE SUBJECT

The following excerpts are from a selection of books on the aesthetic concept of wabi-sabi.

THE IDEA OF WABI-SABI SPEAKS OF A READINESS TO ACCEPT THINGS AS THEY ARE.



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**Sabi is beauty or serenity that comes with age, when the life of the object and its impermanence are suggested in its patina and wear.**

"Wabi is the quality of a rustic, yet refined, solitary beauty. Sabi is that trait, be it the green corrosion of bronze, or the pattern of moss and lichen on wood and stone, that comes with weathering and age."

*Reflections of the Spirit: Japanese Gardens in America*, by Maggie Oster

"The word wabi (...) does not lend itself readily to translation, for it can mean a number of things: loneliness, desolation, rustic simplicity, quiet taste, a gentle affection for antique, unostentatious, and rather melancholy refinement."

*The Classic Tradition in Japanese Architecture: Modern Versions of the Sukiya Style*, by Teiji Itoh and Yukio Futagawa

"Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional. (...) The closest English word to wabi-sabi is probably 'rustic'. ...Things wabi-sabi are unstudied and inevitable looking. (...) Unpretentious. (...) Their craftsmanship may be impossible to discern."

*Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, by Leonard Koren

"A certain love of roughness is involved, behind which lurks a hidden beauty, to which we refer in our peculiar adjectives *shibui*, *wabi*, and *sabi*. It is this beauty with inner implications that is referred to as *shibui*. It is not a beauty displayed



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"Greatness exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked details. Wabi-sabi represents the exact opposite of the Western ideal of great beauty as something monumental, spectacular and enduring. Wabi-sabi is about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes." From *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, by Leonard Koren.

before the viewer by its creator. A piece that will lead the viewer to draw beauty out of it for themselves. The world may abound with different aspects of beauty. Each person, according to his disposition and environment, will feel a special affinity to one or another aspect. But when their taste grows more refined, they will necessarily arrive at the beauty that is shibui."

*The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, by Soetsu Yanagi and Bernard Leach

"Wabi-sabi is an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world. It is an understated beauty that exists in the modest,

rustic, imperfect, or even decayed, an aesthetic sensibility that finds a melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things."

*Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, by Andrew Juniper

"The term wabi-sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humbleness, asymmetry, and imperfection. These underlying principles are diametrically opposed to those of their Western counterparts, whose values are rooted in the Hellenic worldview that values permanence, grandeur, symmetry, and perfection."

*Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, by Andrew Juniper ■