# *Wabi-sabi*

In traditional Japanese aesthetics, ***wabi-sabi*** (侘寂) is a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.[2] The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of appreciating beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete" in nature.[3] It is a concept derived from the Buddhist teaching of the three marks of existence (三法印, *sanbōin*), specifically impermanence (無常, *mujō*), suffering (苦, *ku*) and emptiness or absence of self-nature (空, *kū*).

Characteristics of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics and principles include asymmetry, roughness, simplicity, economy, austerity, modesty, intimacy, and the appreciation of both natural objects and the forces of nature.

Zen garden of Ryōan-ji. It was built during the Higashiyama period. The clay wall, which is stained by age with subtle brown and orange tones, reflects *sabi* principles, with the rock garden reflecting *wabi* principles.[1]

A Japanese tea house which reflects the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic in Kenroku-en (兼六園) Garden

*Wabi-sabi* tea bowl, Azuchi-Momoyama period, 16th century

## Contents


- Description
- In Japanese arts
- Western use
- See also
- References
- External links


## Description

According to Leonard Koren, *wabi-sabi* can be described as "the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty. 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."[3] Another description of *wabi-sabi* by Andrew Juniper notes that, "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*."[4] For Richard Powell, "*Wabi-sabi* nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect."[5]

The words *wabi* and *sabi* do not translate directly into English; *wabi* originally referred to the loneliness of living in nature, remote from society; *"sabi"* meant "chill", "lean" or "withered". Around the 14th century, these meanings began to change, taking on more positive connotations.[3] *Wabi* came to connote rustic simplicity, freshness or quietness, and can be applied to both natural and human-made objects as an expression of understated elegance. It can also be used to refer to the quirks and anomalies that arise

from the process of making something, which are seen to add uniqueness and elegance to the finished object. *Sabi* refers to the beauty or serenity that comes with age, when the life of the object and its impermanence are evidenced in its patina and wear, or in any visible repairs.

After centuries of incorporating artistic and Buddhist influences from China, *wabi-sabi* eventually evolved into a distinctly Japanese ideal. Over time, the meanings of *wabi* and *sabi* shifted to become more lighthearted and hopeful. Around 700 years ago, particularly among the Japanese nobility, understanding emptiness and imperfection was honored as tantamount to the first step to *satori*, or enlightenment. In today's Japan, the meaning of *wabi-sabi* is often condensed to "wisdom in natural simplicity". In art books, it is typically defined as "flawed beauty".[6]

From an engineering or design point of view, *wabi* may be interpreted as the imperfect quality of any object, due to inevitable limitations in design and construction/manufacture especially with respect to unpredictable or changing usage conditions; in this instance, *sabi* could be interpreted as the aspect of imperfect reliability, or the limited mortality of any object, hence the phonological and etymological connection with the Japanese word *sabi* (錆) (lit., "to rust"). Although the kanji characters for "rust" are not the same as *sabi* (寂) in *wabi-sabi*, the original spoken word (pre-kanji, *yamato-kotoba*) are believed to be one and the same.[7][8]

Modern tea vessel made in the *wabi-sabi* style

A good example of this embodiment may be seen in certain styles of Japanese pottery. In the Japanese tea ceremony, the pottery items used are often rustic and simple looking, e.g. Hagi ware, with shapes that are not quite symmetrical, and colors or textures that appear to emphasize an unrefined or simple style. In fact, it is up to the knowledge and observational ability of the participant to notice and discern the hidden signs of a truly excellent design or glaze (akin to the appearance of a diamond in the rough). This may be interpreted as a kind of *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, further confirmed by the way the colour of glazed items is known to change over time as hot water is repeatedly poured into them (*sabi*) and the fact that tea bowls are often deliberately chipped or nicked at the bottom (*wabi*), which serves as a kind of signature of the *Hagi-yaki* style.

*Wabi* and *sabi* both suggest sentiments of desolation and solitude. In the Mahayana Buddhist view of the universe, these may be viewed as positive characteristics, representing liberation from a material world and transcendence to a simpler life. Mahayana philosophy itself, however, warns that genuine understanding cannot be achieved through words or language, so accepting *wabi-sabi* on nonverbal terms may be the most appropriate approach. Simon Brown[9] notes that *wabi-sabi* describes a means whereby students can learn to live life through the senses and better engage in life as it happens, rather than be caught up in unnecessary thoughts.

In one sense *wabi-sabi* is a training whereby the student of *wabi-sabi* learns to find the most basic, natural objects interesting, fascinating and beautiful. Fading autumn leaves would be an example. *Wabi-sabi* can change our perception of the world to the extent that a chip or crack in a vase makes it more interesting and gives the object greater meditative value. Similarly materials that age such as bare wood, paper and fabric become more interesting as they exhibit changes that can be observed over time.

The *wabi* and *sabi* concepts are religious in origin, but actual usage of the words in Japanese is often quite casual because of the syncretic nature of Japanese belief.

## In Japanese arts

Many forms of Japanese art have been influenced by Zen and Mahayana philosophy over the past thousand years, with the concepts of the acceptance and contemplation of imperfection, and constant flux and impermanence of all things being particularly important to Japanese arts and culture.

As a result, many of these artforms contain and exemplify the ideals of *wabi-sabi*, and several display the concept's aesthetical senses particularly well. Examples include:

- *Honkyoku* (the traditional *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute) music of wandering Zen monks)
- *Ikebana* (the art of flower arrangement)
- The cultivation of bonsai (miniature trees) - a typical bonsai design features wood with a rough texture, pieces of deadwood, and trees with hollow trunks, all intended to highlight the passage of time and nature. Bonsai are often displayed in the autumn or after they have shed leaves for the winter, in order to admire their bare branches.
- Traditional Japanese gardens, such as Zen gardens (tray gardens)
- Japanese poetry
- Japanese pottery, such as Hagi ware, Raku ware and *kintsugi*
- Japanese tea ceremony

A contemporary Japanese exploration of the concept of *wabi-sabi* can be found in the influential essay *In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki.

## Western use

Many Western designers, writers, poets and artists have utilised *wabi-sabi* ideals within their work to varying degrees, with some considering the concept a key component of their art, and others using it only minimally.

Designer Leonard Koren (born 1948) in published *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (1994)[3] as an examination of *wabi-sabi*, contrasting it with Western ideals of beauty. According to Penelope Green, Koren's book subsequently "became a talking point for a wasteful culture intent on penitence and a touchstone for designers of all stripes."[10]

*Wabi-sabi* concepts historically had extreme importance in the development of Western studio pottery; Bernard Leach (1887–1979) was deeply influenced by Japanese aesthetics and techniques, which is evident in his foundational book "A Potter's Book".

The work of American artist John Connell (1940–2009) is also considered to be centered on the idea of *wabi-sabi*;[11] other artists who have employed the idea include former Stuckist artist and remodernist filmmaker Jesse Richards (born 1975), who employs it in nearly all of his work, along with the concept of *mono no aware*.

Some haiku in English also adopt the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic in written style, creating spare, minimalist poems that evoke loneliness and transience, such as Nick Virgilio's "autumn twilight:/ the wreath on the door/ lifts in the wind".[12]

During the 1990s, the concept was borrowed by computer software developers and employed in agile programming and Wiki, used to describe acceptance of the ongoing imperfection of computer programming produced through these methods.[13]

On 16 March 2009, Marcel Theroux presented "In Search of Wabi Sabi" on BBC Four, as part of the channel's *Hidden Japan* season of programming, travelling throughout Japan trying to understand the aesthetic tastes of its people. Theroux began by comically enacting a challenge from the book *Living Wabi Sabi* by Taro Gold, asking members of the public on a street in Tokyo to describe *wabi-sabi* - the results of which showed that, just as Gold predicted, "they will likely give you a polite shrug and explain that Wabi Sabi is simply unexplainable."[14]

## See also

- Clinamen
- Higashiyama Bunka in the Muromachi period
- *Iki* (a Japanese aesthetic ideal)
- *Mono no aware*
- *Shibui*
- Teaism
- *Wabi-cha*
- *Kintsugi* (also known as *kintsukuroi*)
- Tao Te Ching
- I Ching

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## External links

- In Search of Wabi Sabi (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2P8z7kYJW0) with Marcel Theroux


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