

What is *Wabi-Sabi*?

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Pared down to its barest essence, 侘寂 *wabi-sabi* is the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death. It's simple, slow, and uncluttered—and it reveres authenticity above all. *Wabi-sabi* is flea markets, not warehouse stores; aged wood, not Pergo; rice paper, not glass. It celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind. It reminds us that we are all but transient beings on this planet—that our bodies as well as the material world around us are in the process of returning to the dust from which we came. Through *wabi-sabi*, we learn to embrace liver spots, rust, and frayed edges, and the march of time they represent.

Wabi-sabi is underplayed and modest, the kind of quiet, undeclared beauty that waits patiently to be discovered. It's a fragmentary glimpse: the branch representing the entire tree, *shoji* screens filtering the sun, the moon 90 percent obscured behind a ribbon of cloud. It's a richly mellow beauty that's striking but not obvious, that you can imagine having around you for a long, long time—Katherine Hepburn versus Marilyn Monroe. For the Japanese, it's the difference between *kirei*—merely “pretty”—and *omoshiroi*, the interestingness that kicks something into the realm of beautiful (*omoshiroi* literally means “white faced,” but its meanings range from fascinating to fantastic). It's the peace found in a moss garden, the musty smell of geraniums, the astringent taste of powdered green tea. My favorite Japanese phrase for describing *wabi-sabi* is *natsukashii furusato*, or an “old memory of my hometown” (this is a prevalent mind-set in Japan these days, as people born in major urban areas such as Tokyo and Osaka wax nostalgic over grandparents' country houses that perhaps never were. They can even “rent” grandparents who live in prototypical country houses and spend the weekend there).

Daisetz T. Suzuki, who was one of Japan's foremost English-speaking authorities on Zen Buddhism and one of the first scholars to interpret Japanese culture for Westerners, described *wabi-sabi* as “an active aesthetic appreciation of poverty.” He was referring to poverty not as we in the West interpret (and fear) it but in the more romantic sense of removing the huge weight of material concerns from our lives. “*Wabi* is to be satisfied with a little hut, a room of two or three tatami mats, like the log cabin of Thoreau,” he wrote, “and with a dish of vegetables picked in the neighboring fields, and perhaps to be listening to the pattering of a gentle spring rainfall.”

In Japan, there is a marked difference between a Thoreau-like *wabibito* (*wabi* person), who is free in his heart, and a *makoto no hinjin*, a more Dickensian character

whose poor circumstances make him desperate and pitiful. The ability to make do with less is revered; I heard someone refer to a *wabibito* as a person who could make something complete out of eight parts when most of us would use ten. For us in the West, this might mean choosing a smaller house or a smaller car, or—just as a means of getting started—refusing to supersize our fries.

The words *wabi* and *sabi* were not always linked, although they've been together for such a long time that many people (including D. T. Suzuki) use them interchangeably. One tea teacher I talked with begged me not to use the phrase *wabi-sabi* because she believes the marriage dilutes their separate identities; a tea master in Kyoto laughed and said they're thrown together because it sounds catchy, kind of like Ping-Pong. In fact, the two words do have distinct meanings, although most people don't fully agree on what they might be.

Wabi stems from the root *wa*, which refers to harmony, peace, tranquillity, and balance. Generally speaking, *wabi* had the original meaning of sad, desolate, and lonely, but poetically it has come to mean simple, unmaterialistic, humble by choice, and in tune with nature. Someone who is perfectly herself and never craves to be anything else would be described as *wabi*. Sixteenth-century tea master Jo-o described a *wabi* tea man as someone who feels no dissatisfaction even though he owns no Chinese utensils with which to conduct tea. A common phrase used in conjunction with *wabi* is “the joy of the little monk in his wind-torn robe.” A *wabi* person epitomizes Zen, which is to say, he or she is content with very little; free from greed, indolence, and anger; and understands the wisdom of rocks and grasshoppers.

Until the fourteenth century, when Japanese society came to admire monks and hermits for their spiritual asceticism, *wabi* was a pejorative term used to describe cheerless, miserable outcasts. Even today, undertones of desolation and abandonment cling to the word, sometimes used to describe the helpless feeling you have when waiting for your lover. It also carries a hint of dissatisfaction in its underhanded criticism of gaud and ostentation—the defining mark of the ruling classes when *wabisuki* (a taste for all things *wabi*) exploded in the sixteenth century. In a country ruled by warlords who were expected to be conspicuous consumers, *wabi* became known as “the aesthetic of the people”—the lifestyle of the everyday samurai, who had little in the way of material comforts.

Sabi by itself means “the bloom of time.” It connotes natural progression—tarnish, hoariness, rust—the extinguished gloss of that which once sparkled. It's the understanding that beauty is fleeting. The word's meaning has changed over time, from its ancient definition, “to be desolate,” to the more neutral “to grow old.” By the thirteenth century, *sabi*'s meaning had evolved into taking pleasure in things that were old and faded. A proverb emerged: “Time is kind to things, but unkind to man.”

Sabi things carry the burden of their years with dignity and grace: the chilly mottled surface of an oxidized silver bowl, the yielding gray of weathered wood, the elegant withering of a bereft autumn bough. An old car left in a field to rust, as it transforms from an eyesore into a part of the landscape, could be considered America's contribution to the evolution of *sabi*. An abandoned barn, as it collapses in on itself, holds this mystique.

There's an aching poetry in things that carry this patina, and it transcends the Japanese. We Americans are ineffably drawn to old European towns with their crooked cobblestone streets and chipping plaster, to places battle scarred with history much deeper than our own. We seek *sabi* in antiques and even try to manufacture it in distressed furnishings. True *sabi* cannot be acquired, however. It is a gift of time.

So now we have *wabi*, which is humble and simple, and *sabi*, which is rusty and weathered. And we've thrown these terms together into a phrase that rolls off the tongue like Ping-Pong. Does that mean, then, that the *wabi-sabi* house is full of things that are humble, plain, rusty, and weathered? That's the easy answer. The amalgamation of *wabi* and *sabi* in practice, however, takes on much more depth.

In home decor, *wabi-sabi* inspires a minimalism that celebrates the human rather than the machine. Possessions are pared down, and pared down again, until only those that are necessary for their utility or beauty (and ideally both) are left. What makes the cut? Items that you both admire and love to use, like those hand-crank eggbeaters that still work just fine. Things that resonate with the spirit of their makers' hands and hearts: the chair your grandfather made, your six-year-old's lumpy pottery, an afghan you knitted yourself (out of handspun sheep's wool, perhaps). Pieces of your own history: sepia-toned ancestral photos, baby shoes, the Nancy Drew mysteries you read over and over again as a kid.

Wabi-sabi interiors tend to be muted, dimly lit, and shadowy—giving the rooms an enveloping, womblike feeling. Natural materials that are vulnerable to weathering, warping, shrinking, cracking, and peeling lend an air of perishability. The palette is drawn from browns, blacks, grays, earthy greens, and rusts. This implies a lack of freedom but actually affords an opportunity for innovation and creativity. In Japan, kimonos come in a hundred different shades of gray. You simply have to hone your vision so you can see, and feel, them all.

Wabi, Not Slobby

Wabi-sabi can be exploited in all sorts of ways, and one of the most tempting is to use it as an excuse to shrug off an unmade bed, an unswept floor, or a soiled sofa. "Oh, that. Well, that's just *wabi-sabi*." My nine-year-old son, Stacey, loves this tactic.

How tempting it might be to let the split running down the sofa cushion seam continue on its merry way, calling it *wabi-sabi*. To spend Saturday afternoon at the movies and let the dust settle into the rugs: *wabi-sabi*. To buy five extra minutes of sleep every morning by not making the bed—as a *wabi-sabi* statement, of course. And how do you know when you've gone too far—when you've crossed over from simple, serene, and rustic to über-distress?

A solid yellow line separates tattered and shabby, dust and dirt from something worthy of veneration. *Wabi-sabi* is never messy or slovenly. Worn things take on their magic only in settings where it's clear they don't harbor bugs or grime. One senses that they've survived to bear the marks of time precisely because they've been so well cared for throughout the years. Even the most rare and expensive of antiques will never play well in a house that's cluttered or dirty.

Cleanliness implies respect. Both ancient and modern tea masters teach that even the poorest *wabi* tea person should always use fresh green bamboo utensils and new white cloths for wiping the tea bowl. In tea, the host's cleanliness is considered a clear indicator of his state of mind and his devotion to the way of tea. *Chanoyu Ichieshu*, a tea textbook published in 1956, even goes so far as to advise guests to look into the host's toilet if they wish to understand his spiritual training.

I'm definitely not advocating this extreme. In fact, I'm mortified at the thought of anyone judging me on the state of my own toilets. But the tea masters' point is valid: Spaces that have been thoroughly and lovingly cleaned are ultimately more welcoming. When the bed is neatly made, the romance of a frayed quilt blossoms. The character imparted by a wood floor's knots and crevices shines through when the crumbs are swept away. A scrubbed but faded kilim, thrown over a sofa that's seen one too many stains, transforms it into an irresistible place to rest.

Wabi-sabi's roots lie in Zen Buddhism, which was brought from China to Japan by Eisai, a twelfth-century monk. Zen, with its principles of vast emptiness and nothing holy, stresses austerity, communion with nature, and above all, reverence for everyday life as the real path to enlightenment. To reach enlightenment, Zen monks lived ascetic, often isolated lives and sat for long periods of concentrated meditation.

To help his fellow monks stay awake during these excruciating meditation sessions, Eisai taught them how to process tea leaves into a hot drink. Once Eisai was gone, though, tea took on a very different life of its own. Around the fourteenth century, the upper classes developed elaborate rituals involving tea. Large tearooms were built in an ostentatious style known as *shoin*, with numerous Chinese hanging scrolls and a formal arrangement of tables for flower vases and incense burners. Tea practitioners proved their wealth and status through their collections of elegant Chinese-style tea utensils during three-day weekenders where up to one hundred cups of tea—as well as food and sake—were served.

Then along came Murata Shuko, an influential tea master who also happened to be a Zen monk. In a radical fashion departure, Shuko began using understated, locally produced utensils during his tea gatherings. Saying “it is good to tie a praised horse to a straw-thatched house,” he combined rough, plain wares with famed Chinese utensils, and the striking contrast made both look more interesting. Shuko's successor, Jo-o, was even more critical of men whose zeal for rare or famed utensils was their main motivation for conducting tea. Jo-o began using everyday items such as the *mentsu*, a wooden pilgrim's eating bowl, as a wastewater container, and a Shigaraki *onioke*, a stoneware bucket used in silk dyeing, as a water jar. He brought unadorned celadon and Korean peasant wares into the tearoom.

It was Jo-o's disciple Sen no Rikyu, however, who is widely credited with establishing the quiet, simple ceremony that made it possible for everyone—not just the wealthy—to practice tea. In the sixteenth century—the beginning of an age of peace following several long centuries of civil war in Japan—gaudiness was all the rage, and Rikyu's tea became an oasis of quiet, simple taste. He served tea in bowls made by anonymous Korean potters and indigenous Japanese craftsmen, the most famous of which are the Raku family's style. He created tiny tea huts (one and a half tatami mats, as opposed to the four-and-one-half- to eighteen-mat rooms that had been

the norm) based on the traditional farmer's hut of rough mud walls, a thatched roof, and organically shaped exposed wood structural elements. The hut included a *ni-jiriguchi*, a low entryway that forced guests to bow and experience humility as they entered. Rikyu made some of his own utensils of unlacquered bamboo (as common as crabgrass in Japan, but nowadays a Rikyu original is worth as much as a Leonardo da Vinci painting), and he arranged flowers simply and naturally in bamboo vases (*shakuhachi*) and baskets. Rikyu's ceremony became known as *wabichado* (*chado* 茶道 means "the way of tea"), and it endures in Japan to this day.

We Westerners tend to scratch our heads at the thought of four hours spent sitting on our knees, participating in an elaborate ritual during which a charcoal fire is built, a meal of seasonal delicacies is served with sake, one bowl of green tea is made and shared among the guests, and then individual bowls of frothy thin tea are made by whisking hot water and matcha. What most of us don't realize, however, is that tea embodies so much of the beauty that makes up Japanese culture. To truly understand tea, you must also study poetry, art, literature, architecture, legacy, and history. Tea practitioners are accomplished in the arts of flowers, fine cuisine, and—perhaps most important—etiquette (*sarei*). And the four principles of tea—harmony (和 *wa*), respect (敬 *kei*), purity (清 *sei*), and tranquillity (寂 *jaku*)—could of course be the means to any good life.

Tea, in its current form, was born out of a medieval society rife with terrible warfare, yet the samurai were willing to set aside their rank—and their swords—to become equals within the tearoom. The room's design is deliberately simple and clean; it's meant to be a sanctuary. "In this thatched hut there ought not to be a speck of dust of any kind; both master and visitors are expected to be on terms of absolute sincerity; no ordinary measures of proportion or etiquette or conventionalism are to be followed," declares *Nanbo-roku*, one of most ancient and important textbooks on tea. "A fire is made, water is boiled, and tea is served; this is all that is needed here, no other worldly considerations are to intrude." As soon as we enter the tearoom, we're asked to shake off our woes and worries and connect with others, "face harmonious, words loving."

"Tea brings people together in a nonthreatening place to escape the modern world, then they can go back out and take that with them," Gary Cadwallader, an American-born tea master who teaches at the Urasenke Center in Kyoto, explained to me. It seems to me that we Americans who lack the time—or the desire—to learn tea could take the essence of that statement and apply it to our own lives.

"If a friend visits you, make him tea, wish him welcome warmly with hospitality," Jo-o, one of Japan's earliest tea masters, wrote. "Set some flowers and make him feel comfortable." This is embodied in a common Japanese phrase, "*shaza kissa*," which translates, "Well, sit down and have some tea." What if we adopted that phrase and learned to say it more often—when the kids get home from school (before the rush to hockey and ballet), when our neighbor stops by, when we feel our annoyance level with our spouse starting to rise? If we just allowed ourselves to stop for a moment, sit down together, and share a cup of tea, what might that moment bring?

In learning tea, we're constantly reminded that every meeting is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion to enjoy good company, beautiful art, and a cup of tea. We never

know what might happen tomorrow, or even later today. Stopping whatever it is that's so important (dishes, bill paying, work deadlines) to share conversation and a cup of tea with someone you love—or might love—is an easy opportunity to promote peace. It is from this place of peace, harmony, and fellowship that the true *wabi-sabi* spirit emerges.

Wabi-sabi is not a decorating “style” but rather a mind-set. There's no list of rules; we can't hang crystals or move our beds and wait for peace to befall us. Creating a *wabi-sabi* home is the direct result of developing our *wabigokoro*, or *wabi* mind and heart: living modestly, learning to be satisfied with life as it can be once we strip away the unnecessary, living in the moment. You see? Simple as that.

This is tough in any culture, of course, but darned near impossible in our own. In America we're plied daily with sales pitches that will help us improve ourselves, our circumstances, our homes. We can have the whitest teeth, the cleanest carpets, and the biggest SUV money can buy. All of this flies in the face of *wabigokoro*, as described in Rikyu's sacred tea text, *Nanporoku*: “A luxurious house and the taste of delicacies are only pleasures of the mundane world,” he wrote. “It is enough if the house does not leak and the food keeps hunger away. This is the teaching of the Buddha—the true meaning of *chado*.”

This is un-American. Or is it? I believe there exists in all of us a longing for something deeper than the whitest teeth, sparkling floors, and eight cylinders. What if we could learn to be content with our lives, exactly as they are today? It's a lofty thought... but one that's certainly worth entertaining.

You can start cultivating this mind-set in small ways, taking a lesson from tea. In learning to conduct tea, we're taught to handle every utensil, from the bamboo water scoop to the tea bowl, as if it were precious, with the same respect and care we would use to handle a rare antique. You can do the same thing with the items you use every day.



和 wa, 敬 kei, 清 sei, 寂 jaku
Calligraphy by Onozawa Kankai