

Wabi-Sabi

*for Artists,
Designers,
Poets &
Philosophers*

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Introduction

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 extinction of a beauty. The immediate catalyst for this book was a widely publicized tea event in Japan. The Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi has long been associated with the tea ceremony, and this event promised to be a profound wabi-sabi experience. Hiroshi Teshigahara, the hereditary *iemoto* (grand master) of the Sogetsu school of flower arranging, had commissioned three of Japan's most famous and fashionable architects to design and build their conceptions of ceremonial tea-drinking environments. Teshigahara in addition would provide a fourth design.¹ After a three-plus-hour train and bus ride from my office in Tokyo, I arrived at the event site, the grounds of an old imperial summer residence. To my dismay I found a celebration of gorgeousness, grandeur, and elegant play, but hardly a trace of wabi-sabi. One slick tea hut, ostensibly made of paper, looked and smelled like a big

white plastic umbrella. Adjacent was a structure made of glass, steel, and wood that had all the intimacy of a highrise office building. The one tea house that approached the wabi-sabi qualities I had anticipated, upon closer inspection, was fussed up with gratuitous post-modern appendages. It suddenly dawned on me that wabi-sabi, once the preeminent high-culture Japanese aesthetic and the acknowledged centerpiece of tea, was becoming—had become?—an endangered species.²

Admittedly, the beauty of wabi-sabi is not to everyone's liking. But I believe it is in everyone's interest to prevent wabi-sabi from disappearing altogether. Diversity of the cultural ecology is a desirable state of affairs, especially in opposition to the accelerating trend toward the uniform digitalization of all sensory experience, wherein an electronic "reader" stands between experience and observation, and all manifestation is encoded identically.

In Japan, however, unlike Europe and to a lesser extent America, precious little material culture has been saved. So in Japan, saving a universe of beauty from extinction means, at

this late date, not merely preserving particular objects or buildings, but keeping a fragile aesthetic ideology alive in any form of expression available. Since wabi-sabi is not easily reducible to formulas or catch phrases without destroying its essence, saving it becomes a daunting task indeed.

Idealistic beauty. Like many of my contemporaries, I first learned of wabi-sabi during my youthful spiritual quest in the late 1960s. At that time, the traditional culture of Japan beckoned with profound "answers" to life's toughest questions. Wabi-sabi seemed to me a nature-based aesthetic paradigm that restored a measure of sanity and proportion to the art of living. Wabi-sabi resolved my artistic dilemma about how to create beautiful things without getting caught up in the dispiriting materialism that usually surrounds such creative acts. Wabi-sabi—deep, multi-dimensional, elusive—appeared the perfect antidote to the pervasively slick, saccharine, corporate style of beauty that I felt was desensitizing American society. I have since come to believe that wabi-sabi is related to many of the more emphatic anti-aesthetics that

invariably spring from the young, modern, creative soul: beat, punk, grunge, or whatever it's called next.

The Book of Tea redux. I first read about wabi-sabi in Kakuzo (a.k.a. Tenshin) Okakura's enduring *The Book of Tea*, which had been published in 1906. Although Okakura touched on many aspects of wabi-sabi, he avoided using the term "wabi-sabi." He probably didn't want to confuse his readers with foreign words that were not absolutely essential to his discussion of aesthetic and cultural ideas. (The book was written in English for a non-Japanese audience.) He may also have avoided explicit mention of wabi-sabi because the concept is so full of thorny issues for the Japanese intellectual.

Almost a century after Okakura's book, however, the term "wabi-sabi" makes a perfunctory appearance in practically every book and magazine article that discusses the tea ceremony or other arcane things Japanese. Oddly enough, the two or three sentences used in these publications to describe wabi-sabi (the phrases at the beginning of this introduction) are almost always the same. And the

term is also used as a derisive shorthand by foreign and domestic critics to put down the sort of prissy dilettantism practiced by some devotees of Japan's traditional arts.

Perhaps now is an auspicious cultural moment to get beyond the standard definitions, to dive a little more deeply into the murky depths. In this spirit I have searched for the various pieces of wabi-sabi—tarnished, fragmented, and in disrepair though they may be—and have attempted to put them together into a meaningful system. I've gone as far as the orthodox wabi-sabi commentators, historians, and cultural authorities have ventured—and then I've taken a few steps further. Reading between the lines, matching intention to actuality, I have attempted to grasp the totality, the holism of wabi-sabi, and make some sense of it.³

The result, this skinny volume, is thus a tentative, personal first step toward "saving" what once constituted a comprehensive and clearly recognizable aesthetic universe.

A Provisional Definition

Wabi-sabi is 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.⁶ Wabi-sabi can in its fullest expression be a way of life. At the very least, it is a particular type of beauty.

The closest English word to wabi-sabi is probably "rustic." Webster's defines "rustic" as "simple, artless, or unsophisticated . . . [with] surfaces rough or irregular." While "rustic" represents only a limited dimension of the wabi-sabi aesthetic, it is the initial impression many people have when they first see a wabi-sabi expression. Wabi-sabi does share some characteristics with what we commonly call "primitive art," that is, objects that are earthy, simple, unpretentious, and fashioned out of natural materials. Unlike primitive art, though, wabi-sabi almost never is used representationally or symbolically.

Originally, the Japanese words "wabi" and "sabi" had quite different meanings. "Sabi" originally meant "chill," "lean," or "withered." "Wabi" originally meant the misery of living alone in nature, away from society, and



suggested a discouraged, dispirited, cheerless emotional state. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both words began to evolve in the direction of more positive aesthetic values. The self-imposed isolation and voluntary poverty of the hermit and ascetic came to be considered opportunities for spiritual richness. For the poetically inclined, this kind of life fostered an appreciation of the minor details of everyday life and insights into the beauty of the inconspicuous and overlooked aspects of nature. In turn, unprepossessing simplicity took on new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty.

Over the intervening centuries the meanings of wabi and sabi have crossed over so much that today the line separating them is very blurry indeed. When Japanese today say "wabi" they also mean "sabi," and vice-versa. Most often people simply say "wabi-sabi," the convention adopted for this book. But if we were to consider wabi and sabi as separate entities, we could characterize their differences as follows:

wabi refers to

- a way of life, a spiritual path
- the inward, the subjective
- a philosophical construct
- spatial events

sabi refers to

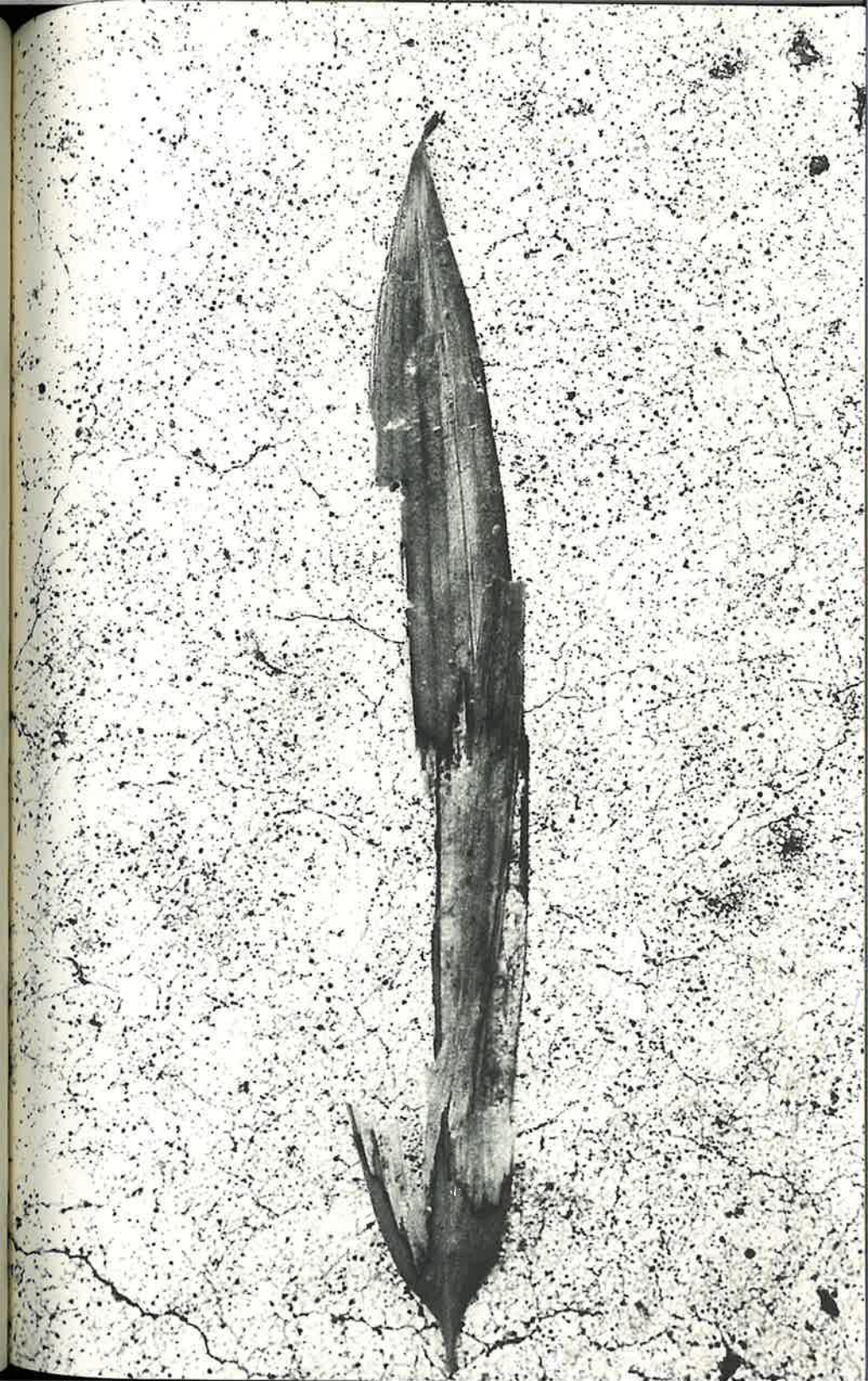
- material objects, art and literature
- the outward, the objective
- an aesthetic ideal
- temporal events

Wabi-Sabi Spiritual Values

What are the lessons of the universe?

Truth comes from the observation of nature.²⁰ The Japanese have tried to control nature where they could, as best they could, within the limits of available technology. But there was little they could do about the weather—hot and humid summers, cold and dry winters, and rain on the average of one out of every three days throughout the year, except during the rainy season in early summer when everything is engulfed in a fine wet mist for six to eight weeks. And there was little they could do about the earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, fires, and tidal waves that periodically and unpredictably visited their land. The Japanese didn't particularly trust nature, but they learned from it. Three of the most obvious lessons gleaned from millennia of contact with nature (and leavened with Taoist thought) were incorporated into the wisdom of wabi-sabi.

1. *All things are impermanent.* The inclination toward nothingness is unrelenting and universal. Even things that have all the earmarks of substance—things that are hard, inert, solid—



present nothing more than the *illusion* of permanence. We may wear blinders, use ruses to forget, ignore, or pretend otherwise—but all comes to nothing in the end. Everything wears down. The planets and stars, and even intangible things like reputation, family heritage, historical memory, scientific theorems, mathematical proofs, great art and literature (even in digital form)—all eventually fade into oblivion and nonexistence.

2. *All things are imperfect.* Nothing that exists is without imperfections. When we look really closely at things we see the flaws. The sharp edge of a razor blade, when magnified, reveals microscopic pits, chips, and variegations. Every craftsman knows the limits of perfection: the imperfections glare back. And as things begin to break down and approach the primordial state, they become even less perfect, more irregular.

3. *All things are incomplete.* All things, including the universe itself, are in a constant, never-ending state of becoming or dissolving. Often we arbitrarily designate moments, points along the way, as “finished” or “complete.” But when



does something's destiny finally come to fruition? Is the plant complete when it flowers? When it goes to seed? When the seeds sprout? When everything turns into compost? The notion of completion has no basis in wabi-sabi.

"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 not found in nature at moments of bloom and lushness, but at moments of inception or subsiding. Wabi-sabi is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold landscapes. 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.

Like homeopathic medicine, the essence of wabi-sabi is apportioned in small doses. As the dose decreases, the effect becomes more potent, more profound. The closer things get to nonexistence, the more exquisite and evocative they become. Consequently to experience wabi-sabi means you have to slow way down, be patient, and look very closely.²¹

Beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness. Wabi-sabi is ambivalent about separating beauty from non-beauty or ugliness. The beauty of wabi-sabi is, in one respect, the condition of coming to terms with what you consider ugly. Wabi-sabi suggests that beauty is a dynamic event that occurs between you and something else. Beauty can spontaneously occur at any moment given the proper circumstances, context, or point of view. Beauty is thus an altered state of consciousness, an extraordinary moment of poetry and grace.

To the wealthy merchants, samurai, and aristocrats who practiced tea, a medieval Japanese farmer's hut, which the wabi-sabi tea room was modeled on, was a quite lowly and miserable environment. Yet, in the proper context, with some perceptual guidance, it took on exceptional beauty. Similarly, early wabi-sabi tea utensils were rough, flawed, and of undistinguished muddy colors. To tea people accustomed to the Chinese standards of refined, gorgeous, and perfect beauty, they were initially perceived as ugly. It is almost as if the pioneers of wabi-sabi intentionally looked for such examples of the

conventionally not-beautiful—homely but not excessively grotesque—and created challenging situations where they would be transformed into their opposite.

