
**Mono no Aware**

The aesthetic category of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), or the “poignant beauty of things,” describes a cultivated sensitivity to the unavoidable transience of the world. Due to their vivid fragility, cherry blossoms, which are easily scattered by the slightest wind or rain, have become the archetypal symbol of the melancholic beauty of impermanence — the transitory presence of the cherry blossom intensifies the experience by underscoring the blossoms’ delicate beauty. *Mono no aware* foregrounds finite existence within the flow of experience and change.

Since *mono no aware* developed as an everyday expression of pathos, it resides at the center of the Japanese premodern aesthetic sensibility and thereby has become something of a broad aesthetic category. However, since the interpretation of MOTOORI Norinaga (1730-1801) *mono no aware* has been most notably associated with literary texts like Heian (794-1185) court poetry (*waka* — Chinese-style poetry in Japan) and *The Tale of Genji* by MURASAKI Shikibu (ca. 1010).

The notion of *mono no aware* originates in the indigenous Shintō (神道) sensibility, which was highly sensitive to the awe-inspiring dimensions of the natural world. As a religious sensibility, *mono no aware* is related to two other notions, namely, “the vitality of things” (*mono no ke*) and “the mood of things” (*mono no kokoro*).

The vitality of things concerns the vital energy (*ke*) exuded by real world things (*mono*). For example, the gates or archways (*torii* 烏居) of shrines and temples originally were meant to have a vital energy and therefore served as a sacred place with cosmic charisma.

In terms of religious practice, Shintō aims at the cultivation of heightened openness. In other words, one strives to capture “the mood of things” (*mono no kokoro*) or feel the tangible world, thereby realizing a profound sympathetic resonance with one’s environment. To be affectively and cognitively attuned to the things around us is the most intimate form of knowledge — that is, to know the heart-mind (*kokoro*) of a thing (*mono*).

Thus, *mono no ke* and *mono no kokoro* provide the background against which *mono no aware* emerges as an aesthetic notion. *Mono no aware*, then, represents a refined sensibility indicating a sincere heart capable of resonating with the vital energy of things in a constantly changing world.

With the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, the awareness of the world as a process became explicitly conceived as “impermanence” (*mujō* 無常 — literally, “without constancy”). The traditional Buddhist attention to the problem of “angst” or “suffering” (Sanskrit *dukkha*) in the face of the impermanence of things became aestheticized in Japan. *Mono no aware* is not only a living realization of impermanence, but also an aesthetic orientation towards the deep beauty inherent in the transitory nature of existence.
**Wabi-Sabi**

While the aesthetic categories of *wabi* (侘び), “rustic beauty,” and *sabi* (寂), “desolate beauty,” can be treated separately, they are ultimately complimentary concepts that support a coherent aesthetic sense. The qualities usually associated with *wabi* and *sabi* are: (1) austerity, (2) imperfection, and (3) a palpable sense of the passage of time.

Like *mono no aware*, *wabi* and *sabi* are embedded in a deep sense of mortality. Both concepts invoke a contemplative mood of loneliness, a plaintive attentiveness to the passage of time, and sensitivity to the human being’s place within the natural world. To put it somewhat differently, it is against the holistic background of nature, as an endless process of creation and destruction, formation and decay, life and death that the individual human being stands out in her solitariness and uniqueness. It is in this state of solitariness that one is brought back to one’s authentic self and back to confront the fuller existential and religious dimensions of human experience.

Moreover, it is philosophically significant that nature represents the fundamental background of human existence, which is to say that these traditional Japanese categories reject any form of the culture vs. nature dichotomy. Indeed, the aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi* insist that our most refined cultural practices need to express the essential relationship between human beings and the natural world. The aestheticization of nature is the human, i.e., cultural, contribution to nature rather than something distinct from nature. Due to the centrality of nature in Japanese aesthetics, “imperfection” became valued as a fundamental quality of beauty. The writings of the Buddhist monk YOSHIDA Kenkō (1283-1350) represent one of the classical statements concerning the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection:

> It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at the top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful. I was impressed to hear the Abbot Kōyū say, “It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everythings. Imperfect sets are better.” In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity and completeness are undesirable.


While Shintō forms the cultural basis for the Japanese love of nature, the resolute confrontation with the impermanence of Buddhism represents a philosophical commitment to facing things as they are, rather than how they ought to be. It is important to note, however, that this is not a form of resignation in the face of imperfection, but an embracing affirmation of the inherent imperfection of all things. Thus, the aesthetics of *wabi-sabi* exemplify the intertwining of a religio-philosophical viewpoint and the aesthetics that are intended to bring it to its fullest expression.