Wabi-Sabi: The Essentials of Japanese Aesthetics
By Catherine Maxwell (Editor)

The beauty expressed in Japanese arts and culture is often very different from that of Western arts and culture. In Japanese art and architecture, poetry, Buddhist tea ceremonies, Ikebana and others, there is a noticeable and highly decorative tea utensils imported from China, placing objects in the use of simple, indigenous homestyle tea utensils over the expensive aesthetics to the 'Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West'.

Although somewhat vague and difficult to define, I will endeavour to explain the concept of wabi and sabi here.

Originally, the meanings of neither wabi nor sabi were specifically related to aesthetic qualities, however these developed over time. Wabi is derived from the verb "wabi" (to languish) and the adjective "wabu" (lonely, comfortless). The original meaning of sabi is "rust" or "patina", but it also connotes loneliness and desolation as reflected in the adjective "sabu" (lonely), particularly with reference to old age. Wabi tends to be more philosophical in usage, referring to a reclusive way of life, 'free from worldly concerns' and associated with poverty. In comparison, sabi is more objective and usually refers to the appearance of 'rust'. In this sense, sabi is more related to aesthetic qualities, however these developed over time.

The development of the wabi-sabi aesthetic began in earnest during the Kamakura Period (1185-1333) coinciding with the spread of new schools of Buddhism, in particular the school of Zen. Zen ideas about transcending the mundane world and conventional ways of living at things - through concepts like emptiness, impermanence and renunciation - inspired a kind of appreciation of 'negative' experiences such as old age, poverty and loneliness. Hermits, priests and poets leading a solitary wandering life in search of spiritual insight incorporated this sense of appreciation in their works and teachings. As these ideas gained momentum, people tried to resign themselves to the sufferings of life and began to see a kind of beauty in them. Expressed in artistic forms, this in turn evolved into the aesthetic appreciation of wabi-sabi.

The development of the tea ceremony in the 18th century marks another important step in the evolution of wabi-sabi. Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), credited with establishing the tea ceremony in its current form, was also influential in establishing wabi-sabi as an aesthetic concept. He espoused the use of simple, indigenous homestyle tea utensils over the expensive and highly decorative tea utensils imported from China, placing objects expressing wabi-sabi at the pinnacle of aesthetic appreciation. Initially, these new aesthetics could only be 'discovered', in the humble utensils used by the common people, or in a neglected stone lantern overgrown with moss. However, in time works were intentionally created to reflect this sense of wabi-sabi, for example, nibi earthenware tea bowls or the design of the tea house, which took on the style of a simple rural hut, with space inside for only two tatami mats (around 3.5m²) or less.

There are numerous anecdotes about Sen no Rikyu that illustrate his sense of wabi-sabi. For example, when a disciple swept the garden completely clear of leaves, Rikyu admonished him saying he did not know sabi and shook a branch to provide a scattering of leaves. On another occasion he made no comment on a plain tea caddy which a teamaster had specially selected to serve tea to him. Offended by this, the teamaster smashed the caddy. However it was skilfully glued back together and used on another occasion to serve tea to Rikyu. This time, recognising the caddy, Rikyu commented that it had become a piece of wabi-sabi.

Although wabi-sabi became the essential spirit of the tea ceremony, it also appears extensively in other Japanese art forms. It is particularly demonstrated in poetry. The following wabi poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) was used by Sen no Rikyu as an illustrative example:

All around, no flowers in bloom
Nor maple leaves in glare,
A solitary fisherman's hut alone
On the twilight shore
Of this autumn eve.

Almost a century after Rikyu, the wabi-sabi aesthetic was further developed in haiku (short poems in the pattern of 5-7-5 syllables), especially by the haiku-master Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). Basho, very lifestyle could be said to embody wabi-sabi, as he travelled the length and breadth of Japan with just a few possessions, staying in simple lodgings, appreciating nature and the everyday situations he found himself in. He encouraged the cultivation of wabi-sabi aesthetics in the poems of his students and is said to have found sabi in this haiku of his disciple Kyorai Muki: Two blossom-watchmen With their white heads together

I hope you have gained some understanding of wabi-sabi from this article. Next time you view Japanese works of art or cultural activities, whether traditional or contemporary please bear in mind the ideas of wabi-sabi and appreciate at a deeper level the subtlety of Japanese beauty.

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