

The Beauty of Wabi Sabi

by Leonard Koren

□ In 1992, while living in Japan, I embarked on a project to locate and define the kind of beauty that I felt most deeply attracted to. By "beauty" I meant that complex of exciting, pleasurable sensations ostensibly emanating from things—objects, environments, and even ideas—that makes us feel more alive and connected to the world; that urgent feeling we equate with "the good," "the right," and "the true."

□ Instinctively I was drawn to the beauty of things coarse and unrefined; things rich in raw texture and rough tactility. Often these things are reactive to the effects of weathering and human treatment. I loved the tentative, delicate traces left by the sun, the wind, the heat, and the cold. I was fascinated by the language of rust, tarnish, warping, cracking, shrinkage, scarring, peeling, and other forms of attrition visibly recorded.

□ Chromatically, I was enamored of objects and environments whose once-bright colors had faded into muddy tones, or into the smoky hues of dawn and dusk. I was particularly taken by the non-color colors, gray and black. When closely observed, there is an infinite spectrum of blue-grays, brown-grays, red-grays, yellow-grays. . . And green-blacks, orange-blacks, violet-blacks, purple-blacks. . . .

□ I was also aroused by the beauty of things odd, misshapen, and/or slightly awkward; what conventional thinking might consider "not in good taste" or "ugly". I was aroused by understated, unstudied, unassuming objects that possessed a quiet authority. I gravitated toward things that reduced the emotional distance between them and I; things that beckoned me to get closer, to touch, to relate with.

□ And lastly, I was attracted to the beauty of things simple, but not ostentatiously austere. Things clean and unencumbered, but not sterilized. Materiality, pared down to essence, with the poetry intact.

□ I was aroused by understated, unstudied, unassuming objects that possessed a quiet authority.

□ Having identified what this beauty looked and felt like, I wanted to understand it better intellectually. With pencil and paper I diagrammed the contours of a plausible aesthetic universe. Provisionally, I encapsulated my new domain in the phrase, "a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete."

□ Over the next year and a half, in libraries both in Japan and the United States, I pored over volumes on any subjects I thought related. Ultimately I condensed a mountain of vague, amorphous, and sometimes contradictory information into a paradigm. The skeletal foundations of this paradigm came from an old diary I kept when, as a young

man, I had studied the Japanese tea ceremony.¹ Subsequently I packaged this paradigm as a book which I titled *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*.

□ In this book, for the sake of rhetorical clarity, I broke wabi-sabi down into roughly two components, which I would characterize now as "form" and "spirit."

□ By "form" I mean the material manifestations; how things wabi-sabi look, feel, sound, etc.

□ By "spirit" I mean the philosophical basis; the underlying ideas that arguably give rise to wabi-sabi's form.

□ In truth, identifying wabi-sabi's idea substratum—it's spirit—was an imaginative exercise in induction and inference. Nevertheless, I felt the notions I finally came up with were useful and true. For example:

□ * On a metaphysical level, wabi-sabi is a beauty at the edge of nothingness. That is, a beauty that occurs as things devolve into, or evolve out of, nothingness. Consequently, things wabi-sabi are subtle and nuanced.

□ * The beauty of wabi-sabi is an "event," a turn of mind, not an intrinsic property of things. In other words, the beauty of wabi-sabi "happens," it does not reside in objects and/or environments. By analogy, if you fall in love with someone or something—say a physically unattractive person, place, or thing—thereafter you will perceive this someone or something as beautiful (at least some of the time), even if the rest of the world doesn't.

□ * Wabi-sabi has a compelling pedagogic dimension. Because things wabi-sabi reveal "honest" natural processes such as aging, blemishing, deterioration, etc., they graphically mirror our own mortal journeys through existence. Accordingly, interacting with wabi-sabi objects and environments surely inclines us towards a more graceful acceptance of our existential fate.

□ * Wabi-sabi is, at root, an aestheticization of poverty—albeit an elegantly rendered poverty. As such, wabi-sabi is a democratic beauty available equally to rich and poor alike.

□ * Wabi-sabi is the antithesis of the Classical Western idea of beauty as something perfect, enduring, and/or monumental. In other words, wabi-sabi is the exact opposite of what slick, seamless, massively marketed objects, like the latest handheld wireless digital devices, aesthetically represent.

□ This last point proved especially resonant for many readers of my book. Perfection is one of our culture's preeminent values. Indeed, we often tacitly define beauty as perfection objectified. But somewhere buried in our psyches is the realization that being human fundamentally implies being imperfect. So when someone suggests that imperfection may be just as beautiful—just as valuable—as perfection, it is a welcome acknowledgement.

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□ There is just one minor problem with all that I have related thus far. Although "wabi-sabi" appears to be a Japanese term, if you look "wabi-sabi" up in a Japanese dictionary, you

won't find it.

□ "Wabi" and "sabi" have long existed in Japanese culture, but as separate terms. "Sabi" is ancient. It is found in the first Japanese poetry anthology compiled in the 8th century. At the time, "sabi" meant "to be desolate."

□ By the 12th century, "sabi" had become an important ideal and critical term of Japanese poetry. "Sabi" then meant "taking pleasure in that which is old, faded, and lonely". It also referred to "a beauty of things withered."

□ Almost four hundred years later, in the late 15th century, "wabi" emerges as a term to describe a new aesthetic sensibility just beginning to be used in the tea ceremony. For the next one hundred years "wabi" is very fashionable.

□ During this one-hundred-year period, the meaning of "wabi" expands; "wabi" even subsumes all the meanings of "sabi". In fact, the seminal moment of "wabi" tea is the use of sabi-like terms to describe the new "wabi" objects and environments.

□ Then from the mid-1600s on, "wabi" ceases to be fashionable. . . .

□ By the mid-20th century some scholars use the term "wabi," while others use "sabi," to describe essentially the same thing. Some scholars use both terms interchangeably. I've never found a satisfactory explanation other than that, for various historical reasons, the Japanese have always been comfortable with semantic ambiguity and vagueness.

□ Today, if you ask an educated Japanese person if they know what "wabi-sabi" means, they will invariably answer "yes". If, however, you ask them to define "wabi-sabi," they will probably be unable to do so.

□ In spite of wabi-sabi's enormous conceptual breadth—its rangy embrace of disparate ideas and material manifestations—"wabi-sabi" nevertheless seems to fill legitimate artistic, spiritual, and philosophical needs. To date, more than a dozen other authors have written books that borrow major elements of my paradigm and married them with the term "wabi-sabi."

□ So even if "wabi-sabi" didn't "officially" exist before, it exists now.

□ Wabi-sabi resides in the inconspicuous and overlooked details, in the mirror and the hidden, in the tentative and ephemeral.

□ Twenty-plus years have elapsed since my initial wabi-sabi formulations. Back then, the industrialized world was just beginning its headlong drive to digitize as much of "reality" as possible and transfer it into a "virtual" or "dematerialized" form. Back then, wabi-sabi's nature-based sense of "aesthetic realism" offered genuine comfort and inspiration for sensitive, creative souls. Will wabi-sabi's quintessentially analog sensibility still provide emotional grounding and creative nourishment going forward into the future? For perspective, and possibly insight, it might be helpful to look back at the time and place when the "wabi" tea ceremony—the form and spirit of wabi-sabi—was being developed.

□ Kyoto, Japan in the sixteenth century was embroiled in civil conflict. The mood of the populace was sober, if not dispirited. Many valuable collections of refined Chinese

utensils—the kind of "perfect" objects then favored in the tea ceremony—were being destroyed. Substitute objects were needed. Japanese-made surrogates, though less refined and relatively crude, were available and reasonably priced. So they were used.

□The locus of this "wabi"/wabi-sabi invention was the tea room. In contrast to the luxurious tea rooms that had previously existed, the "wabi" tea room was rustic and often housed in a small, detached hut, usually surrounded by a tiny garden.

□At the beginning of what I would call the "wabi era," tea rooms were four-and-a-half tatami mats, or roughly 81 square feet. By the era's end, tea rooms could be 1/3 that size, or 27 square feet. At the beginning of the wabi era, ceremony participants entered the tea room standing up. By the end of the era, they entered crawling in through a small opening on their hands and knees.

□This compression of space, driven by artistic and "spiritual" motives, had the effect of:

□* Temporarily equalizing social status. (All participants were equally humbled.)

□ Intensifying the intimacy of human relations. (And upped the drama.)

□ Eliminating all unnecessary objects.

□ And, focusing more attention onto the objects that remained.

□As the wabi era progressed, tea rooms and objects became simpler and more modest. Improvisation became commonplace. Objects from non-tea ceremony contexts were increasingly adapted for tea ceremony use. For example, rice bowls were repurposed as tea bowls. Even broken-and-repaired objects were used. Cause and effect made visible—the consequences of use, misuse, and accident—was appreciated.

□From the foregoing, it is apparent that the "wabi" sensibility—the form and spirit of wabi-sabi—began mostly as an aesthetic accommodation to the catastrophic realities of the day.

□There are the parallels in our time. Increasingly, we can make out the dark outlines of catastrophic scenarios to come. It is predicted that more and bigger climate-related events will intersect catastrophically with an expanding global population. How far will our material resources stretch? After the damage is repeatedly cleared away, will most of us be forced into smaller and smaller living environments, with fewer, and more modest objects?

□This need not be tragic. The beauty of wabi-sabi is rooted in modesty—even poverty—that is elegantly perceived. The aesthetic pleasures of wabi-sabi depend on attitude and practice as much, or more, than on the materiality itself. Subtlety and nuance are at wabi-sabi's heart. Wabi-sabi resides in the inconspicuous and overlooked details, in the minor and the hidden, in the tentative and ephemeral. But in order to appreciate these qualities, certain habits of mind are required: calmness, attentiveness, and thoughtfulness. If these are not present, wabi-sabi is invisible.

□Footnote

□1: The Japanese tea ceremony is what we today might call an "art performance." The host—the artist—prepares and serves bowls of whipped, powdered green tea in an

environment consisting of objects, flowers, and a calligraphic scroll, all specifically selected and arranged for his/her guests. The guests, in turn, usually have some prior knowledge of tea ceremony etiquette and artistic precedents, so they can, and do, respond to the host's gestures in an informed spirit. Most contemporary tea ceremonies are, however, highly formalized rituals with little, if any, real invention. Nevertheless, tea ceremony still offers profound aesthetic rewards for receptive participants.

□Photo by Leonard Koren