



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Background: Wabi-Sabi

Wabi-Sabi : Aesthetic Characteristics

While the aesthetic categories of *wabi* (詫び), “rustic beauty,” and *sabi* (寂び), “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.

The “way of tea” (*chadō*; also called *cha no yu*) is closely associated with the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. For example, the famous tea master Sen no Rikyū (1521-1591) captures the aesthetic of simplicity at the very heart of the tea ceremony: “the art of *cha-no-yu* consists in nothing else but in boiling water, making tea, and sipping it” (cited in D.T. SUZUKI , *Zen and Japanese Culture* . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 280.) Sen no Rikyū’s phrase “consists in nothing else” is meant to indicate the discipline of *cha-no-yu* as a way of spiritual and moral cultivation. In other words, one’s entire being is absolutely and utterly occupied with the seemingly mundane act of tea.

In many ways, this spiritual discipline of tea can be understood in the context of the Zen master Rinzai’s (? – 866) teachings⁽³⁾: “The Buddha-dharma does not have a special place to apply effort; it is only the ordinary and everyday — relieving oneself, donning clothes, eating rice, lying down when tired,” as well as Zen master Dōgen’s (1200-1253)⁽⁴⁾ meditative focus on *shikantaza* (只管打座) or “just sitting.”

See also:

“Japanese Aesthetics, Wabi-Sabi, and the Tea Ceremony” from
<http://www.art.unt.edu/ntieva/artcurr/asian/wabisabi.html>

“What is Wabi-Sabi?”
<http://www.nobleharbor.com/tea/chado/WhatIsWabi-Sabi.htm>

The Japanese Tea Ceremony
<http://brian.hoffert.faculty.noctrl.edu/TEACHING/TeaCeremony.html>

Wabi-sabi : Philosophical Significance

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⁽⁵⁾ 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.⁽⁶⁾ 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.

(YOSHIDA, Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*. Tr. Donald KEENE. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, 115, as quoted. in Yuriko SAITO, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55:4, Fall 1997, 377-385.)

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.