

Wabi and Sabi as the Background of Japanese Color Aesthetics: Pursuing the Special Qualities of Japan's Color Sensibility

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ABSTRACT

Wabi and sabi, a part of traditional Japanese aesthetics, can be seen in the everyday lives of Japanese people even in the twenty-first century, and shapes the base of Japanese culture. *Wabi* expresses how even in a situation of poverty and deficiency, there is a “value of beauty in contentment” that comes from seeking fulfillment in simplicity. The spirit of valuing simplicity came from Zen, and reflected a spirit of valuing the subtle and profound. The hues of *wabi-sabi* make use of colors coming from materials in the natural world, suggesting the beauty of natural ingredients such as wood and earth. The colors of *wabi-sabi* are represented by static and low-saturation subdued and refined hues. Unmixed colors are avoided as dominant colors. Simple beautiful colors that retain the smell of freshly cut grasses and trees are used, and neutral colors, mainly subdued browns and greens, express the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic.

KEYWORDS: Wabi/Sabi, Beauty in Simplicity, Impermanence and Beauty

INTRODUCTION: WABI-SABI AT THE CORE OF JAPANESE CULTURE

Wabi and sabi, a part of traditional Japanese aesthetics, can certainly be seen in typical examples of arts and crafts such as *haikai* (Japanese short poetry), *yoruri* (a type of dramatic recitation with puppet theater), pottery, handicrafts, and *washi* (Japanese handmade paper); however, it is an aesthetic that is seen not only in the arts of the past. Even in the twenty-first century, the *wabi-sabi* spirit is deeply rooted in the everyday lives of Japanese people, and shapes the base of Japanese culture.

Originally, *wabi* and *sabi* were separate concepts, but in modern times they are often spoken of together as a single concept. *Wabi* and *sabi* are generally thought of as describing “a tranquil essence,” but at their base is the feeling that life and this world are impermanent. This is not only the Buddhist idea of impermanence, but the aesthetic (or value) that things are beautiful because of this impermanence. *Wabi-sabi* and elegant simplicity are close to the concept of *satori* (enlightenment), and it has been stated that they are core ideas in Japanese culture (cf. Morigami 2015: 24-25).

In this paper we will explain the origin of the notable Japanese aesthetic *wabi* and *sabi* in Japan’s traditional sense of ethics valuing “natural purity.” We will also show that *wabi-sabi* is expressed in subdued and refined hues (*shibui-iro*).

THE COLORS AND TRUE MEANING OF WABI

Etymologically speaking, *wabi* is derived from the archaic intransitive verb *wabu*, and was a word coined to describe a weakened or diminished condition because of impermanence and the ups and downs of life, much like the growth and decay of plants. Its first meaning was “fall on hard times” or “live a hard life,” and was also used to mean “disheartenment, despair, anxiety, grief, and worry.” However, its meaning changed to express how, with positive thinking and an austere and calm state of mind, even when things seem on the surface to be extremely challenging to the point of appearing as an almost desperate situation, one can “enjoy tranquility” and “ask for help when in trouble, and apologize.” That is to say, *wabi* expresses how even in a situation of poverty and deficiency, there is a “value of beauty in contentment” that comes from seeking fulfillment in simplicity. *Wabi* truly expresses the abandonment of greed, and the “spirit of honest poverty”

seen in living a poor and simple life contentedly. It has been said that *wabi* is a feeling of resignation, while *sabi* is a feeling of contentment (cf. Morigami 2015: 22). Resignation, though, refers to the feeling of enlightenment that one gains from overcoming giving up, and so resignation and contentment are two sides of the same coin. This is why they are often considered to be a single concept.

Wabi means aesthetic sense of being moved and finding beauty in refined, elegant simplicity. The source of the *wabi* spirit is in natural materials such as wood, earth, rocks, straw, bamboo, and various foodstuffs. The essence of *wabi* is to take these materials and bring out beauty with their natural colors, shapes, textures, flavors, and scents. Even more than the beauty these things have in their natural state, the greatest beauty of these materials can be brought out by human hands. It means the subtle beauty of something that is simple, without artificial embellishments or decorations, almost to the point of being shabby, but which is still beautiful (cf. Itoh et al. 1993: 7).

To sum up, as stated above, the colors of the world of *wabi* are represented by static and low-saturation subdued and refined hues (*shibui-iro*), which suggest the beauty of natural ingredients such as wood and earth.

THE SPIRIT OF SABI IN WABI-SABI

The word *sabi* is derived from a form of the verb *sabu*, and the adjective *sabishi* (lonely) and the verb *sabiru* (rust) are related to it. It is the sense of beauty coming out as a result of the passage of time and aging, as in the expressions “becoming tasteful with age” and “charm from aging.” It means the beauty and taste that naturally develop as something is used every day with love.

Sabi-iro (reddish-brown) is referred to as rust in English, and *sabi* is explained in English with the word rustic, representing simplicity and plainness. The color referred to as rust and *sabi-iro* in English and Japanese is by chance almost the same; however, the range of meaning covered by the word *sabi* is broader.

Behind the psychology of the mind of people who deeply value *wabi* and *sabi*, we can see reflected the ethics and outlook on life of people who have lived in the natural environment of Japan.

JAPANESE CULTURAL TRADITIONS FUNDAMENTAL TO WABI-SABI

In the environment of Japan, abundantly blessed with nature comfortable for human life, there is a spirit of helping one another that comes from an agrarian culture. In traditional Japanese ethics there is a recognition that no one can live alone. Human relationships (ties) are emphasized, and a pure internal mind (absent of greed) and sincerity (integrity) are pursued. These attitudes promote people to live their life now sincerely, and are related to the *wabi* idea of seeing old and aged things and people as “mature” (because traditionally age and maturity are seen as going hand in hand, and the ideal was to live throughout one’s life sincerely and without greed). Also there is a spirit of emphasizing an innately honest heart and the idea that humans are alive thanks to nature. These attitudes are also important for the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic.

In Japan there is a spirit of stability coming from honesty, as well as resignation and being prepared for whatever might come – ideas based on impermanence in life (cf. Sagara 2009: 153). The idea here is somewhat different from the idea of 19th century nihilism, which rejected existing value systems. The Japanese concept is expressed in the word *haka-nasa*, which has two parts, *haka* and *nasa*. *Haka* refers to both having a job to do as well as the results of carrying out that work. *Nasa* means without. Together these express the concept that there is both poverty and a lack of work. The word for resignation (*akirame*) is based on a different meaning of the word – a homonym written with different Chinese characters – which means to see things clearly. The Japanese idea of resignation and preparedness are seen as dignified and righteous, and are not a concept of self-denial, but reflect an attitude similar to enlightenment. In Japan there is a traditional way of thinking that holds humans live thanks to and within nature (not above it or controlling it). *Wabi-sabi* contains the teaching that it is important to live through life honestly, and even when faced with hard times, it is important to live now sincerely.

The sincerity of Japanese people is not a sincerity based on absolute unchanging principles of reason or logic, but a sincerity based on the situation and conditions at the time (cf. Sagara 2009: 101). It is a position that brings forth a spirit valuing harmony, and at its base is a lack of greed, cherishing human relationships, and living sincerely and naturally. From these traditional Japanese ethics comes the typical Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*.

SEN-NO-RIKYU’S CREATION, WABI-CHA

Wabi-cha is one style of tea ceremony. It refers to tea ceremony emphasizing the spirit of *wabi-sabi* – valuing simplicity and plainness – rather than the fancy and gorgeous tea ceremony in the tea rooms of the

nobility. It became popular during the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573-1603) in the history of Japan. After it was founded by *Murata Jukou* (1422-1502), its form was perfected by *Sen-no-Rikyu* (1522-1591). Because it is practiced in small tea houses with straw and other grass-based materials used for roofing, it is sometimes called *souan-no-cha* or “thatched cottage tea” (meaning to drink tea in a cottage that is not extravagant).

During the Muromachi period (1336-1573) tea ceremony and Noh were practiced as necessary cultural accomplishments of those in power. The *daimyo* in the Warring States Period, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), both loved tea ceremony as a way to show their social position and wealth.

The founder of *wabi-cha*, Murata Juko, reduced the size of the tea room to four and a half tatami mats, changed the roof shape to a four-sided design, used cedar planks without knots for the ceiling, and made other significant changes toward simplicity. Sen-no-Rikyu later reduced the size even further, making tea rooms that were three and even two tatami mats in area. He emphasized deep heart-to-heart communication between guest and host. It is said that Rikyu always hung a simple flower vase from Korea in the alcove pillar of a tea room. Besides this vase, he used a black and neutrally red colored tea bowl made by the founder of *raku* ware, Chojiro (1516-1592). Of the tea bowls produced by Chojiro, Rikyu regarded seven as masterpieces. Three were *kuro-raku-chawan* (black tea bowls), and four were *aka-raku-chawan* (neutral red tea bowls, close to crimson). He also used a beautifully symmetrical and stable iron teakettle by Chojiro, and hung Zen art that focused on the spirit. In addition to these things Rikyu used simple *kai-seki* meals (explained below) of one soup and three main dishes as important ways of bringing out *wabi-sabi*.

The *kai-seki* meals of the tea ceremony were influenced by Zen. *Kai-seki* literally means “a stone placed between a person’s chest and their upper garment,” and refers to the Zen idea that putting a warm stone there would temporarily relieve the sensation of hunger. In tea ceremony it means simple food served before the tea. Sen-no-Rikyu is credited with creating this kind of *kai-seki*.

THE SPIRIT OF THE TEA CEREMONY, AND THE SOUL OF WABI-SABI

In the world of tea ceremony, the garden is called *ro-ji*. The two Chinese characters composing this word have the base meaning of “reveal/expose” and “place.” It represents the idea that in this place one throws off one’s own social rank and status, and reveals oneself truly. The key point in the *ro-ji* is unaffected naturalness. Rikyu expressed the *wabi-sabi* spirit in the *ro-ji* and in the thatched cottage tea rooms that used natural materials in their original form. He used sand and dirt walls, cedar logs with knots, dirt-covered walls on three sides of the *tokonoma* alcove, and often used bamboo for the ceiling of the main room in the tea house. Natural materials like these had neutral colors mixed with white and black, as well as unmixed colors. The neutral colors reflected a blending of Chinese and Zen ideas. From China came the tastes of the literati, who respected elegance and refinement while simultaneously disliking extremes. From Zen came the spirit of valuing simplicity. It also reflected a spirit of valuing the subtle and profound.



(“Tsuibai” at Ryo’an-ji Temple; the basin has a design using four Chinese characters, 吾, 唯, 足, and 知)

The essence of *wabi-sabi* can be seen at Ryo’an-ji Temple in “Tsuibai,” a famous basin (pictured above) where people wash their hands before entering its tea house. The basin has a design using four Chinese characters that all include the symbol for mouth (口), where each character includes mouth in a different

position allowing it to be the large square at the center of the basin. Taken together they read “吾、唯、足るを知る (*ware, tada, taru-wo shiru*),” an expression originally from China which means “I,” “only/simply,” “be enough/adequate,” “know.” Taken together it is the idea of being satisfied with things as they are. Once again it is the concept of forgetting one’s status and station, and allowing one’s true self to come out.

The design itself is interesting in terms of language, because it is based on complex word play and indirectly suggested ambiguous meanings which are valued by Japanese.



(Courtyard at Ryo’an-ji Temple; it has been stated that the walls reflect the soul of *wabi-sabi*)

CONCLUSION: FROM WABI-SABI AESTHETICS TO VIRTUE

Rikyu valued spiritual satisfaction felt in conditions of refined elegance rather than visual beauty seen with the eyes. It is truly beauty seen with the heart. The correct performance of the procedures in the tea ceremony raises a person’s tension in a positive way, and values the concept of *ichigo-ichie*, which means that the encounter is unique, precious, and fleeting. Rikyu incorporated natural materials, colors seen in the natural world, tea utensils, *kai-seki*, and the layout of the tea room to embody the beauty and spirit of *wabi-sabi*.

The oldest remaining tea room in Japan is *Myogian*, and is thought to be designed by Rikyu himself. The *Myogian*’s design embodies *wabi* and *sabi*. It exists in stark contrast to the famous golden tea room designed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. On the surface it would appear that the culture of *wabi-sabi* and the culture that makes use of extravagances like gold are opposites, but in reality they are indivisible and have a complementary relationship. It is a very Japanese idea, but it is thought that *wabi-sabi* does not exclude extravagance, even though the idea is simplicity. That is, in the tea ceremony the host might make use of a brightly colored flower (extravagance), and that is okay if the intention matches the values of *wabi-sabi*.

The hues of *wabi-sabi* make use of colors coming from materials in the natural world. Unmixed colors are avoided as dominant colors. Simple beautiful colors that retain the smell of freshly cut grasses and trees are used, and neutral colors, mainly subdued browns and greens, express the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic.

The *wabi-sabi* aesthetic is not about physical prosperity, but spiritual wealth (being satisfied with things as they are) and refined elegance. When it is understood that *wabi-sabi* includes the spirit of living a sincere life now (at all times), it transforms from an aesthetic to a virtue.

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