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The Wabi Sabi Way: Antidote for a Dualistic Culture?

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of the Japanese philosophical, aesthetic attitude known as Wabi Sabi. Tracing the history of Wabi Sabi from ancient times to the modern day this paper examines the tea ceremony in Japan, the production of handmade pottery, and the Zen way of artistic creation. Intermixed I offer a view of my artistic development and personal evolution of consciousness as I have come to understand them through the lens of Wabi Sabi.

Keywords: Wabi Sabi, consciousness, Zen, art.

Introduction

If the sight of the blue skies fills you with joy, if a blade of grass springing up in the fields has power to move you, if the simple things in nature have a message you understand rejoice, for your soul is alive, Eleanora Duse.

I have heard the strange, little term *wabi sabi* many times and thought it was an interesting concept that I should explore sometime. But, when I recently heard the term used again I determined to investigate more thoroughly. What I found has been a revelation with synchronicities mirroring my aesthetic development beyond any point I might have imagined. Wabi Sabi is a somewhat mysterious and elusive attitude toward aesthetics that impacts the Eastern way of life, particularly in Japan. Most Japanese, in fact, will not give a concrete definition of Wabi Sabi, preferring instead to frame it as a state of mind (Juniper, 2003).

As a Westerner I was raised in the Hellenic tradition of valuing perfection, symmetry, grandeur, materials that withstand the test of time without aging, and a color pallet influenced by advertising and the media; however, as a creative person and a sensitive soul I was naturally drawn to the asymmetric, the imperfect, the fragile, the odd and unusual, and the objects found in nature that show the effects of weathering and decay. My encounter with Wabi Sabi connected me to a tradition valuing much of the same predilections.

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The artist who aims at perfection in everything achieves it in nothing, Eugene Delacroix.

Figure 1

To trace the history of Wabi Sabi it is necessary to first understand how it developed. The Taoists of China sought to live close to nature and embrace the Tao, or the force that they believed guides everyone's lives (Juniper, 2003). The Tao, to the Chinese, is a river, ever-moving and changing in random patterns and sporadic flows. Zen was later to spring from this spiritual tradition with Wabi Sabi arising around the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279).

To Taoism that which is absolutely still or absolutely perfect is absolutely dead, for without the possibility for growth and change there can be no Tao. In reality there is nothing in the universe which is completely perfect or completely still it is only in the minds of men that such concepts exist, Alan Watts.

The first instances of Wabi Sabi in painting can be traced to the *wen-jen hua*, or literati paintings. These painters were amateurs who differed from the official style and produced works of a less grandiose nature, often a single rock or tree. This use of space allowed room for the viewer to participate in the painting. Later, the Ma-Hsia school employed this use of space with One-Corner Ma (Ma Yuan) becoming famous for creating much of a painting in just one corner, leaving the rest of the paper empty or filled with mist. The open space suggested infinity. The nothingness, to these painters, was as important as the somethingness they painted.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Zen Buddhist monks painted in a looser, freer way, one described by critics as done by "crazed drunkards." This love of the unconventional became a key factor in Wabi Sabi as they decorated their often underfunded temples with simple items easily available to them like bamboo, wildflowers, and driftwood (Juniper, 2003).

Focusing on the natural, the impermanent, and the imperfect allowed contemplation of the random patterns created by nature, making them objects for contemplation of universal truths. Wabi Sabi evolved as the term used to describe this quality, or *mujo*. Elevating one's state of mind became the passion of the Zen monk artists who created works in very rapid fashion often without ever lifting the inked brush from the paper.

Master Kajita Esshuu (梶田越舟, 1938 - present)

Figure 4

The Zen monasteries led Japanese art forward and the principles of Wabi Sabi soon permeated Japanese culture. The Zen and Taoist emphasis on transcending duality and favoring a more natural state of nondualism in which reality is viewed as it naturally is profoundly differentiates the dualistic state Westerners experience reality in. In Zen it is our use of words that bind us to a lack of deeper understanding of the world. Zen instead focuses on bringing about a new awareness as a flash of insight, rather than a gradual process. Instead of training the mind to think more the task is to think less, to perceive the world directly, clearly, and with no preconceptions (Juniper, 2003). For Zen practitioners the lessening of the ego, loosening of the self, and unlearning of dualism permits a state where creativity can begin.

You want to know how to paint a perfect painting? It's easy. Make yourself perfect and then just paint naturally, Robert Pirsig.

Wabi Sabi Essentials

Wabi Sabi can be said to incorporate four major tenets.

- Everything that is comes from nothing and returns to nothing.
- This impermanence is embodied by Wabi Sabi art.
- Wabi Sabi promotes a consideration and contemplation on impermanence.
- Wabi Sabi encourages us to view life in a more holistic way appreciating the transient qualities of life.

Wabi Sabi found expression in pottery, no theater, painting, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony stands out as extremely important to our discussion because it is a semi-religious ceremony that fully incorporates Wabi Sabi.

The Tea Ceremony


Figure 5

Wabi and Sabi first appeared as poetic references in Japanese literature with Wabi generally referring to things in their most austere, natural state and Sabi expressed as the lonely sense of impermanence mirroring the natural cycle of life (Durston, 2006). Both are closely associated with the tea ceremony, a spiritual practice invented by Zen monks in the 15th century. True to the Zen way the monks took an everyday task – the preparation and serving of tea – and elevated it to a carefully orchestrated ceremony intended to remove the participants from the cares of the world for a brief time and remind them of the beauty in the simplest of things.

This meticulous orchestration includes selection of an imperfect tea bowl (to remind guests that nothing is perfect), a small scroll painting with open space (to suggest infinity and allow the imagination of the beholder to soar), a simple flower in a bamboo vase (suggesting understated beauty), a simple wooden, cedar box (exemplifying the raw beauty of natural materials), and a bronze tea kettle with a rustic patina (reminding guests of the passage of time and the impermanence of things).


Figure 6

The tea ceremony is carried out by a tea host, who carefully chooses the time of day, prepares the space by anticipating the needs of the guests, and equips the tea room (a dedicated space used only for this ceremony) with objects of contemplation. In effect, art becomes life with wabi sabi permeating the ceremony (Durston, 2006). Sen no Rikyu, the monk responsible for elevating the Way of Tea in the 16th century, observed "*make a delicious bowl of tea; lay the charcoal so it heats the water, arrange flowers as they are found in the field; in summer suggest coolness, in winter, warmth; do everything ahead of time, prepare for rain, and give to those with whom you find yourself every consideration.*" The tea ceremony gives full voice to wabi sabi expression.

We do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love colors and sheen that call to mind the past that made them, Tanizaki Junichiro.

Figure 7

Tea bowls used in the tea ceremony are often ceramic and fired by a method known as raku. Raku roughly means *enjoyment of freedom* and is a firing process by which the clay pot is rapidly heated to 1,900 degrees – the point at which the low-fire glaze on the surface of the pot melts – and removed from the kiln by the potter using metal tongs. This red-hot, glowing pot is either placed into a reduction chamber filled with sawdust, or similar combustible material or directly plunged into a vat of cold water. The resultant shock to the pot creates characteristic cracks in the glazed surface and unpredictably beautiful surface effects.

This technique privileges the path of the flame and its interaction with the various metallics (cobalt, copper, tin) used in the glaze. The effects can be stunning to subdued and rustic. The resulting surfaces exhibit cracks the potter may rub black ink into, to augment the visual impact. This combination of earth, air, fire, and water is a perfect display of Wabi Sabi.

Figure 8

For the tea ceremony guest the raku-fired tea bowl is a tangible reminder of the Tao. No two raku pieces are ever the same and, due to their low-fired nature, the surfaces dim and fade in time, perfectly exemplifying wabi sabi.

Figure 9

Figure 10

The use of objects derived from elements of the Earth, with tangible marks, cracks, apparent age, and imperfections perpetuated the Zen ideals of nondualism, perceiving reality directly, and focusing on remaining ego-less. Contrast this with the Western ideal of individualism, materialism, and perception of the world through a decidedly dualistic lens and one can rapidly see the effects of Zen and wabi sabi on Japanese consciousness as being more grounded in simplicity, humility, and appreciation for the here and now (Juniper, 2003).

Figure 11

The Zen Way of Creation

To study the Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things, Eihei Dogen.

To study wabi sabi is to realize it is rooted in the Zen cosmic view of the universe. In that nihilist view nothing is perfect, everything is in a constant state of change, and everything evolves from nothing, only to devolve back to nothing. Wabi sabi art challenges, it does not simply present objects for contemplation. The challenge is to view things with *muga* (no mind), thus seeing them as they truly are and involve oneself in understanding the metaphorical representations of universal forces of impermanence, imperfection, and the cycle of creation and decay. The challenge is to unlearn reason and simply see clearly, without pretense and without intellect.

Zen gardens embody this invitation to see clearly and unchain ourselves from convention. Imploring us to forget scale and perception, to lose ourselves in the flow of the Tao. Zen gardens speak universal truths, open to all who embrace the indefinable infinite (Juniper, 2003).

Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Figure 12

Zen eschews the use of language, instead favoring the communicating of profound truths that encourage the flash of insight. Wabi sabi art became a vehicle for Zen monks to share their insights (Juniper, 2003). *Mushin*, or total absorption in a task, what Czikszentmihalyi (1996) calls *flow*, is a state of mind in which the artist is ego-less and open. In this state one can work free and naturally. My experiences with mushin came very naturally and I question whether creative individuals, because they are able to enter altered states of consciousness more easily than others (Kjellgren, et al., 2009), accounts for wabi sabi's familiarity to me as an attitude.

I admit a natural liking for the weathered and beaten, the decaying and imperfect. In fact, I have often passed up perfectly symmetrical subjects in favor of the unusual. They seem to speak to me in a way the uniform and straight do not. In wabi sabi art the artist is a medium through which the creative force flows. Wabi sabi artists use a meditative approach to still the mind and allow the focus to be on the moment. The moment of enlightenment when the artist creates is the key element for wabi sabi.

Art can be said to represent three functions: emotional expression, communication of ideas, and amusement (Juniper, 2003). For the Zen monks art is about the serious need to pass along their understanding of life, furthering spiritual awareness, and enhancing the built environment.

I shut my eyes in order to see, Paul Gauguin.

Figure 13

I found this lonely, ragged plant growing on a limestone cliff alongside the Missouri River. While everyone else painted bucolic scenes of the river I gravitated to this weathered, beaten survivor clinging to a harsh life. At the time I did not understand why I might be fascinated by it, but I knew I had to paint it.

This painting comprised one of three wabi sabi subjects, though at the time I simply knew I was attracted to them by their weathered, lonely, imperfect existences. This entering communion with the real felt poignant, as if it represented a moment in my creative development when I realized the very different approach I took to art.

Figure 14

This barn similarly fascinated me for years. I sketched and painted it in different seasons and from different views. The weathered barn wood had a pronounced grain obviously in a state of decay, yet powerful in its devolution. The rusted roof patina spoke of rain, hail, and relentless summer sun.

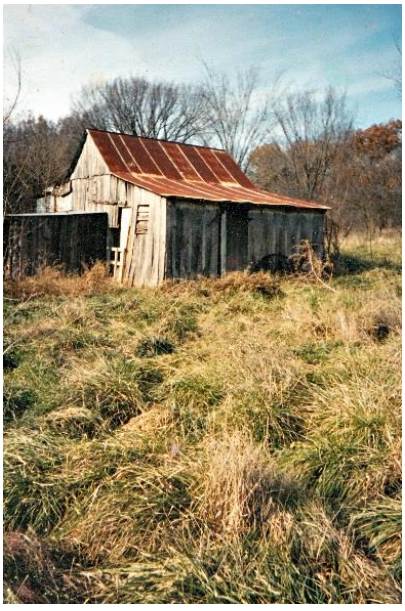

Figure 15

Figure 16

To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away, expand our sense of now, and dissolve the fear in our minds, William James.

These paintings clearly value the worn, weathered, and humble, but incorporate vivid colors, which wabi sabi artists would tend to avoid, instead preferring to leave much of the canvas open to the viewer's interpretations. If I were to repaint these same subjects today I might take a more minimal approach and leave more open space without apology and simply allow the viewer to fill in the blank spaces with their imaginations.

The weathered barn boards, to me, exemplified survival and personality in the whirls and concentric wood grain patterns. In this humble subject I found elements that felt passionate and alive, though to others this was simply a barn in need of paint.

Figure 17

Figure 18

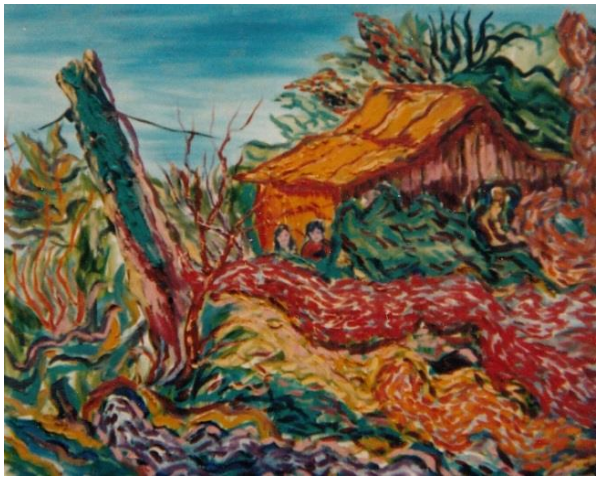

Figure 19

Figure 20

These two trees lived in a pasture, alone, twisted by the thunderstorms and tornadoes over the years. They seemed to me to be figurative, like dancers or lovers. This painting was painted in one of those Zen flashes of enlightenment in under thirty minutes and never retouched. The spirit that was captured felt to me like it was very pure, joyful, and personal.

These three subjects, the plant, the barn, and the trees greatly informed my aesthetic and pointed me toward the humble, the worn, and the impermanent. All three subjects no longer exist, having given way to the forces of nature and man. In wabi sabi it would be said something of the spirit of the artist was captured and lives through the works.

Figure 21

Figure 22

Creation of wabi sabi art relies on attaining the state of no-mind in which there is no intent. The work is not forced or strained, rather by living and seeing in the moment the work appears (Loori, 2005). Another key aspect of seeing directly is recognizing suchness. Suchness is a reality, truth or experience impossible to express with words. Suchness is presence encapsulating reality. In our lives do we have suchness? Or have we given way completely to dualism and the empty path of materialism?

Conclusion

As I continue to learn more about wabi sabi I realize how it is not limited to Japan or Eastern cultures. Wabi Sabi is not Japanese, Chinese, or even American, Wabi Sabi is human. Wabi sabi, as an attitude, is present in Western cultures despite the overall focus on materialism and perfection. Many people appreciate objects with imperfections, wear, and history. Designers have picked up worn and weathered items as decorative materials, perhaps overstepping the intent of wabi sabi, but nonetheless placing value on the humble and imperfect. The Shakers are famous for very simple furniture. Likewise, the current trend toward a simpler lifestyle, one emphasizing local sourcing of food, and de-emphasizing materialism and consumption shows promise for an integration of simpler values and more meaningful lives. As materialism continues to breed legions of antianxiety and antidepressant-dependent masses wabi sabi calls out to us simplify, to slow down and value what is in front of us at this very moment. Not just to look, but LOOK.

As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness weakness, Henry David Thoreau.

Figure 23

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Images

Figure

1: *Tree*, Clinton, Missouri

Photograph by Tracy Cooper

2: *On a Mountain Path in Spring*, Ma Yuan

http://www.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art106/106SG/3Sg106/106Sg3-2.htm

3: *Facing the Moon*, Ma Yuan

http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/gallery-ma-yuan.php

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6: *Teapot*

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7: *Raku*

http://activerain.com/blogsview/259569/raku-art-you-asked-carole-provenzale-

8: Raku Pot Reduction

http://www.eastotto.com/hogshed/processpage.htm

9: Raku Tea Bowl

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10: Raku Bowl

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11: Zuiho In Temple, Kyoto

http://muza-chan.net/japan/index.php/blog/japanese-zen-garden-solitary-meditation

12: *Tree Stump*, Clinton, Missouri

Photograph by Tracy Cooper

13: Photograph by Tracy Cooper

14: Painting by Tracy Cooper

15: *Barn*,

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16: *Winter Barn*, Smithton, Missouri

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17: *Vertical Barn*, Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

18: *Fall Barn*, Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

19: *Barn*, Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

20: *Trees*, Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

21: *Lovers*, Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

22: *Celebration*: Smithton, Missouri

Painting by Tracy Cooper

23: Photograph by Tracy Cooper