

**[SLIDE 1] Wabi-Sabi: [Beauty of things imperfect.]**

**[SLIDE 2] Some initial definitions/impressions**

**[ *Wabi-sabi* is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. ]**

**[ It is a beauty of things modest and humble. ]**

**[ It is a beauty of things unconventional. ]**

**[ *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, by Leonard Koren ]**

## **WHAT IS WABI-SABI?**

The Japanese view of life embraced a simple aesthetic that grew stronger as inessentials were eliminated and trimmed away.

-architect *Tadao Ando*

**[SLIDE 3] Pared down to its barest essence, wabi-sabi is the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death. It's simple, slow, and uncluttered-and it reveres authenticity above all.**

**[SLIDE 4] Wabi-sabi is flea markets, [ not warehouse stores;]**

**[SLIDE 5] aged wood, [ not Pergo ] ; [ rice paper ], [ not glass].**

**[SLIDE 6] It celebrates cracks and crevices [ and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind.] It reminds us that we are all but transient beings on this planet-that our bodies as well as the material world around us are in the process of returning to the dust from which we came.**

**[SLIDE 7] Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace liver spots, rust, and frayed edges, and the march of time they represent.**

Wabi-sabi is underplayed and modest, the kind of quiet, undeclared beauty that waits patiently to be discovered. It's a fragmentary glimpse:

[SLIDE 8] the branch representing the entire tree, shoji screens filtering the sun, the moon 90 percent obscured behind a ribbon of cloud. It's a richly mellow beauty that's striking but not obvious, that you can imagine having around you for a long, long time-

[SLIDE 9] Katherine Hepburn versus Marilyn Monroe. For the Japanese, it's the difference between *kirei* -merely "pretty"-and *omoshiroi*, the interestingness that kicks something into the realm of beautiful. (*Omoshiroi* literally means "white faced," but its meanings range from fascinating to fantastic.) [SLIDE 10] It's the peace found in a moss garden, [ the musty smell of geraniums, [ the astringent taste of powdered green tea.

[SLIDE11] ... The words wabi and sabi were not always linked, although they've been together for such a long time that many people (including D. T. Suzuki) use them interchangeably. ... [ 11-1 Wabi stems from the root wa, which refers to **harmony, peace, tranquility, and balance**. Generally speaking, [ 11-2 wabi had the original meaning of **sad, desolate, and lonely**, [ 11-3 but poetically it has come to mean **simple, unmaterialistic, humble** by choice, and **in tune with nature**. Someone who is perfectly herself and never craves to be anything else would be described as wabi. Sixteenth-century tea master Jo-o described a wabi tea man as someone who feels no dissatisfaction even though he owns no Chinese utensils with which to conduct tea. A common phrase used in conjunction with wabi is "the joy of the little monk in his wind-torn robe." A wabi person epitomizes Zen, which is to say, he or she is content with very little; free from greed, indolence, and anger; and understands the wisdom of rocks and grasshoppers.

...[ 11-4 Sabi by itself means "the bloom of time." [ 11-5 It connotes natural progression-tarnish, hoariness, rust-- the extinguished gloss of that which once sparkled. It's the understanding that beauty is fleeting. The word's meaning has changed over time. [ 11-6 In it's earliest meaning it meant "to be desolate." [SLIDE 12] Over time it achieved a more neutral meaning of "to grow old." By the thirteenth century, sabi's meaning had evolved into **taking pleasure in things that were old and faded**. A proverb emerged: "Time is kind to things, but unkind to man."

Sabi things carry the burden of their years with dignity and grace: [ the chilly mottled surface of an oxidized silver bowl, [ the yielding gray of weathered wood, [ the elegant withering of a bereft autumn bough.

[ An old car left in a field to rust, as it transforms from an eyesore into a part of the landscape, could be considered America's contribution to the evolution of sabi. An abandoned barn, as it collapses in on itself, holds this mystique.

**[SLIDE13]** The closest English word to wabi-sabi is probably “rustic.” Webster’s defines “rustic” as “simple, artless, or unsophisticated... [with] surfaces rough or irregular.” ... Wabi-sabi does share some characteristics with what we commonly call “primitive art,” that is, objects that are earthy, simple, unpretentious, and fashioned out of natural materials. (p. 21)

**[SLIDE14]** In order to elucidate and get a feel for what wabi-sabi is about, Leonard Koren compares it with Modernism, which he sees as the dominant aesthetic sensibility of our industrialized international society of today. Koren points to the kind of Modernism embodied in most of the pieces of art contained in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. This form of Modernism, which he calls “middle Modernism” (we want to avoid the extremes!), includes most of the slick, minimalistic appliances, machines, automobiles, and gadgets produced since the Second World War. It also includes concrete, steel, and glass box buildings of the sort that houses the Museum of Modern Art.

Koren first points out that there are similarities between these two aesthetic sensibilities: Modernism and Wabi-sabi:

[ Both apply to all manner of manmade objects, spaces and designs...

[ Both are strong reactions against the dominant, established sensibilities of their time. Modernism was a radical departure from 19<sup>th</sup> century classicism and eclecticism. Wabi-sabi was a radical departure from the Chinese perfection and gorgeousness of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and earlier...

**[SLIDE15]** Both hold that decoration must be integral to structure...

[ Both are abstract, nonrepresentational ideals of beauty...

[ And both have readily identifiable surface characteristics. Modernism is seamless, polished, and smooth. Wabi-sabi is earthy, imperfect, and variegated.

[SLIDE 16] Yet there are crucial differences between [ Modernism and Wabi-sabi:

MODERNISM: **click to move back and forth...**

Primarily expressed in the public domain

Implies a logical, rational worldview

Absolute

Looks for universal, prototypical solutions

Mass produced/ modular

Future-oriented

[SLIDE 17] Believes in the control of nature

Romanticizes technology

People adapting to machines

Geometric organization of form (sharp, precise, definite shapes and edges)

Box as metaphor (rectilinear, precise, contained)

[SLIDE 18] Manmade materials

Ostensibly slick

Needs to be well-maintained

Is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction

Cool

Generally light and bright

Function and utility are primary values

Everlasting

WABI-SABI:

Primarily expressed in the private domain

Implies an intuitive view

Relative

Looks for personal, idiosyncratic solutions

One-of-a-kind/ variable

Present-oriented

Believes in the fundamental uncontrollability of nature

Romanticizes nature

People adapting to nature

Organic organization of form (soft, vague shapes and edges)

Bowl as metaphor (free shape, open at top)

Natural materials

Ostensibly crude

Accommodates to degradation and attrition

Is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction

Warm

Generally dark and dim

Function and utility are not so important

To every thing there is a season

## [SLIDE19] Tea Time for Wabi Sabi

[ The most comprehensive example of the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi is found within the traditions of the tea ceremony. To understand Japanese aesthetics, it is necessary to understand the unique features of the Japanese tea ceremony, known as chanoyu, chado, or sado. The tea ceremony is the serving of tea, ritualized over time and rooted in Zen Buddhism. [ One of the greatest developers of the tea ceremony was **Sen no Rikyu** (1522-1591) the son of a rich merchant in Sakai, near Osaka. Rikyu grew up in the most prosperous trading port in Japan in the sixteenth century. His background brought him into contact with the tea ceremonies of the rich, but he becomes more interested in the way priests approached the tea ritual as an embodiment of Zen principles for [ *appreciating the sacred in the everyday*.

[ The preparation to receive a friend for a cup of tea, the brewing of hot water and the pouring of fresh tea into a well-cherished cup for an old friend or a new guest, are all ways of helping us to slow down and notice what is before us... that in the steaming water, in the worn cup, in the smile of a friend, in the aroma of the tea, our God is present and blessing us. Such a cup of tea can help us appreciate the sacred in the everyday.

[SLIDE20] Jo-o, the sixteenth century Japanese tea master mentioned earlier, wrote. "If a friend visits you, make him tea, wish him welcome warmly with hospitality. Set some flowers and make him feel comfortable." [ This is embodied in a common Japanese phrase, "*shaza kissa*," which translates, "Well, sit down and have some tea." What if we adopted that phrase and learned to say it more often-- when our neighbor stops by, when we feel our annoyance level with our spouse (or community member) starting to rise? If we just allowed ourselves to stop for a moment, sit down together, and share a cup of tea, what might that moment bring?

As author Robyn Griggs Lawrence<sup>1</sup> points out: **[SLIDE21]** *In learning tea, we're constantly reminded that every meeting is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion to enjoy good company, beautiful art, and a cup of tea. We never know what might happen tomorrow, or even later today. Stopping whatever it is that's so important (dishes, bill paying, work deadlines) to share conversation and a cup of tea with someone you love-or might love-is an easy opportunity to promote peace. It is from this place of peace, harmony, and fellowship that the true wabi-sabi spirit emerges.*

**[SLIDE22]** *Wabi-sabi is not a decorating "style" but rather a mind-set. There's no list of rules; we can't hang crystals or move our beds and wait for peace to befall us. Creating a wabi-sabi home is the direct result of developing our wabigokoro, or wabi mind and heart: living modestly, learning to be satisfied with life as it can be once we strip away the unnecessary, living in the moment. ....*

**[SLIDE23]** *... You can start cultivating this mind-set in small ways, taking a lesson from tea. In learning to conduct tea, we're taught to handle every utensil, from the bamboo water scoop to the tea bowl, as if it were precious, with the same respect and care we would use to handle a rare antique. You can do the same thing with the items you use every day.*



Notice that we are talking about a mind-set or an attitude... wabi-sabi is more about the perceiver rather than the world perceived or engaged with. While we talk about wabi-sabi by pointing out various physical traits of objects (faded, worn, cracked, chipped, dim, old... as opposed to shiny, bright, perfect, flawless, new) we are really speaking of our attitude, mind and heart by which we receive, hold, and cherish this world we are a part of. Often in our quest to get it right and to reach perfection or success, we see all that is broken and wrong around us, and can become frustrated, depressed, or angry. But wabi-sabi helps us to know that this world as it is, worn and broken or tired and faded as we may encounter it, is still the world cherished by God.

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<sup>1</sup> Her 2004 book, *The Wabi-Sabi House*, which introduced Americans to the 15th century Japanese philosophy of simplicity, serenity and authenticity, will be re-released this year in paperback as *Simply Imperfect: Revisiting the Wabi-Sabi House*.

**[SLIDE24]** And so I wish to close with this caveat, which can be explained in the saying of Kakuzo Okakura, the author of the classic *The Book of Tea*, who observed: [ *"Translation can at best be only the reverse side of a brocade, - all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of color or design."* ]

If we wish to see the other side of the brocade, if we wish to see rightly, then we must see an object from within... not with just our outer eyes, but with the eyes of our heart. [ As the Fox would say to the Little Prince... "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

**[SLIDE25]** Reflection Questions:

[ Where do you encounter imperfection in your life? How do you relate to flaws or imperfections, within yourself or in the objects/people around you?

[ Where do you experience tension, stress, or hurriedness in your day? What actions or rituals might you enjoy to slow down, settle down, and cherish the moment?

[ Where in poetry, song, art work or literature might you find examples of the spirit exemplified in wabi-sabi?

[ "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench" (*Is 42:3/ Mt 12:20*) reflects a wabi-sabi spirit of compassion and humility. What other scripture images may resonate with this mindset?

**[SLIDE26]** SOURCES:

- *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, by Leonard Koren. Stone Bridge Press, 1994
- "the wabi-sabi house, the Japanese art of imperfect beauty" by Robyn Griggs Lawrence. ([www.wabisabihouse.com](http://www.wabisabihouse.com))
- 侘寂 Wabi Sabi - Learning to See the Invisible, by Tim Wong, Ph.D. & Akiko Hirano, Ph.D. Copyright © Touching Stone Gallery