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A REMEDY FOR PERFECTIONISM OF MODERN WESTERN CULTURE OR THE LATEST DESIGN TREND? THE WESTERN UNDERSTANDING OF JAPANESE *WABI* AND *SABI* AESTHETICS

Abstract

In an age of globalization phenomena, ideas or traditions considered typical for one culture may appear in another or even in an entire cultural environment. Of course, as they adapt to the recipient culture, they will be different from what they were originally. In this essay, the author analyzes the phenomenon of the popularity of the Japanese philosophy known as *wabi-sabi* in Western culture, while, at the same time, contrasting the original Japanese understanding of this term with its western “translation”. The author also tries to answer the question of why *wabi-sabi* has been understood in this particular way – essentially as a design trend – and what are the causes and effects of such an understanding.

Keywords: *wabi-sabi*, *wabi*, *sabi*, *hygge*, design

The year 2018 can be clearly described as “the year of *wabi-sabi*” when, due to globalization, this characteristic element of Japanese culture appeared in the Western cultural environment. However, has it been properly “translated” or is Western *wabi-sabi* something different from than the original Japanese concept?

Looking from a Japanese perspective, probably just the attempt to define what *wabi-sabi* is exactly may cause this term to be purged of its essence. However, as Leonard Koren has written, it is better to de-romanticize

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wabi-sabi and define it accurately with the aim of preserving it for future generations (Koren, 1994, p. 18). In addition, an accurate definition is necessary in order to confront those two understandings – Japanese and Western. This will enable one to answer questions regarding what way Western culture has understood and adopted Japanese *wabi* and *sabi* aesthetics, merging them into the concept of *wabi-sabi*, and why it happened in this particular way.

THE JAPANESE UNDERSTANDING OF *WABI* AND *SABI*

Generally speaking, *wabi-sabi* can be described as an aesthetic category which has its roots in medieval Japan. However, it is important to note that these two terms – *wabi* and *sabi* – began to occur together at the beginning of the 20th century, subsequently becoming inseparable since the 1930's (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 68). Before describing the Japanese understanding of *wabi* and *sabi*, both words which create this term require explanation. Let us start with *wabi*.

The etymology of this word is connected with the verbs *wabu* and *wabiru*, which mean “to wilt, to weaken” and with the adjective *wabishii*, which means “sad, hopeless” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 65). As can be seen, initially the word *wabi* connoted a rather negative meaning, one which was subsequently changed by Buddhist monks and the masters of the Japanese tea ceremony. Monks, according to the rules imposed in Buddhist monasteries, lived a very modest and ascetic life, discovering in this poverty an opportunity for spiritual enrichment through liberation from earthly sorrows (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 65). As mentioned above, masters of the tea ceremony also helped to change the previous meaning of *wabi*, especially a tea master called Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), who contributed to the development of the concept of *wabicha* – tea prepared in the *wabi* aesthetic style. Although he did not define *wabi*, Rikyū was happy to cite a poem by Fujiwara no Ietaka,² which in his opinion, perfectly portrayed its spirit.

To those who wait
Only for flowers
Show them a spring

² Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158–1237) was a Japanese poet from the Kamakura period.

Of grass amid the snow
 In a mountain village (quoted in Haga, 1995, p. 200)

This lack of definition was characteristic not only for Rikyū, but for Zen Buddhism in general, as it was “reluctant concerning any type of knowledge contained in writings” (Cichy, 2011, p. 51), which came from a belief that “essential knowledge [...] could only be transmitted from mind to mind, not through the written or spoken word” (Koren, 1994, p. 16). However, from the western perspective, establishing a particular definition of *wabi* is necessary for this essay, in order for *wabi* to be defined not only as an aesthetic but also ethical category which can be termed “the beauty of dignified poverty” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 65) or the “acceptance of poverty” (Suzuki, 2010, p. 13). From the outside, *wabi* might seem poor, cold, and raw, but inside is vital and warm (Varley, 2006, p. 159) – exactly as the “grass amid the snow”, described by Fujiwara no Ietaka. The important factor here is that the beauty of *wabi* is not obvious, but is more “hidden deeply behind a facade and available only to the cognoscenti” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 65). Indeed, to live *wabi* means “ineffable, calm joy, deeply hidden behind inconceivable poverty” (Suzuki, 2010, p. 190). The *wabi* aesthetic is not only about objects, but can be found almost in every aspect of Japanese life and culture: in poetry, calligraphy, literature, painting, gardening, architecture, food, and, of course, the tea ceremony (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 65).

The second term, *sabi*, comes from the verbs *sabu*, *sabireru* (Cichy, 2011, p. 55) and the nominative *sabishisa* which means “loneliness”, but in the meaning of “loneliness which someone has overcome” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 84). Subsequently, it also came to mean “to be getting old, to become covered with a patina” (Cichy, 2011, p. 55). A very important figure associated with *sabi* is the poet Matsuo Bashō, who used this aesthetic category in his poetry and understood it as the “beauty of spiritual isolation, detachment or solitude” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 84–85). However, of importance here is that this solitude is connected with the beauty of the surrounding natural environment (Cichy, 2011, p. 56). Indeed, he depicted this mood in his haiku:

Loneliness –
 among the blossoms
 a false cypress
 (Bashō, 2004, p. 197)

Thus, it can be said, that *sabi*, as an aesthetic category, is both connected with the spiritual and material aspects of life: spiritual, because it values the beauty of loneliness and solitude; and material, because it admires the beauty of things, which are imperfect, subtle, irregular-shaped, and time-worn (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 67), as well as in earthy, faded colors (Cichy, 2011, p. 55). Although they may be covered with a patina, even the suggestion of them being old and used is already *sabi* (Suzuki, 2010, p. 14). As Barbara Kubiak Ho-Chi rightly points out, *sabi* “refers mainly to external symptoms of beauty and its aesthesis” (Kubiak Ho-Chi, 2009, p. 67).

Having explained these two terms which create *wabi-sabi*, it is now finally possible to define its meaning. Thus, *wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic-ethical category which portrays a sensitivity to the ephemeral, imperfect, humble, and inconspicuous beauty of the surrounding world – actual moments, nature, physical objects, loneliness but also the presence of another person. As Leonard Koren correctly remarks, *wabi-sabi* “provides an integrated approach to the ultimate nature of existence (metaphysics), sacred knowledge (spirituality), emotional well-being (state of mind), behavior (morality), and the look and the feel of things (materiality)” (Koren, 1994, p. 41).

To sum up, it can be said that *wabi-sabi* is an aesthetic-ethical category which descends from the traditional Japanese culture of medieval times and is strongly connected with Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony, but also other fields of art. It is important to note that it still has a strong influence on modern Japanese culture and mentality. Today, of course, the spirit of *wabi-sabi* can be found in the tea ceremony and the utensils which are used for it, but also in *hanami* (the tradition of contemplating the transient beauty of cherry blossoms) or *kintsugi* (the tradition of repairing broken pottery with gold lacquer).

THE WESTERN UNDERSTANDING OF *WABI-SABI*

As mentioned in the beginning, *wabi-sabi* conspicuously appeared in Western consciousness around 2018 when it became immediately “the hottest living trend” (Wabi-Sabi, n.d.). Nevertheless, it had been described earlier by western authors, such as the artist and architect Leonard Koren (*Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 1994), or Richard R. Powell (*Wabi-Sabi Simple: Create beauty. Value imperfection. Live deeply*, 2004). The Western understanding of *wabi-sabi*, just as the original

concept, detects two dimensions of this phenomenon, namely aesthetic and ethical.

The aesthetic dimension is relevant to the perception of *wabi-sabi* as a design trend or inspiration for design – mostly interior design, but also of other items, such as furniture or pottery. From this perspective, *wabi-sabi* focuses on “perfectly imperfect” interiors in earthy colors, filled with handmade objects (especially ceramics) and imperfect, irregular furniture and elements which are built from natural materials, such as wood, bamboo, or linen. The perception of *wabi-sabi* as a design trend yielded the creation of many new things, such as furniture store collections (Wabi Sabi, n.d.), along with places and interiors designed in the *wabi-sabi* style. One famous example is the TriBeCa Penthouse (The TriBeCa Penthouse, 2019), in the Greenwich Hotel in New York, which was designed by Japanese architect Tatsuro Miki and Belgian designer Axel Vervoordt.³ Another less-famous, but also *wabi-sabi*-inspired example, could be the Happa to Mame cafe in Poznań, created by Shota Nakayama and Marcin Cieśluk (Baran, 2017). Whether some of these places really have the spirit of *wabi-sabi* or others just pretend to have it, in any case all of them gained something from this Japanese concept, which was then transferred into a Western context. Of interest is the fact that sometimes *wabi-sabi* is considered as an antidote to Western consumer society, due to its appreciation of used and unique items which are not mass-produced (Driver, 2017) in comparison with today’s throwaway culture.

The second dimension refers to *wabi-sabi* as a philosophy or a way of being. This mostly comes down to finding beauty in imperfection – especially our own – which is connected with the acceptance of ourselves, the things which we have, the moment in which we are in our lives, and the fact that we are not perfect, all of which is fine and also beautiful. *Wabi-sabi* in the Western understanding of the concept is quite similar to the concept of mindfulness, because being “here and now” is a very important part of it. Moreover, it postulates the acceptance of the passage of time and its influence not only on things but also (and maybe most of all) on ourselves. It can be concisely summarized as “the subtle art of being at peace with yourself and your surroundings” (Griggs, 2001). *Wabi-sabi* is very often presented as a remedy for the Western culture of perfectionism,

³ Axel Vervoordt is also the author of book *Wabi Inspirations*.

which, especially today in times of social media, where everyone is trying to create the perfect version of themselves and their life, is very pervasive, frustrating, and pressing us to be the best – which means the most perfect – version of ourselves.

What is typical for the general Western understanding of *wabi-sabi* is a non-professional approach, which does not require any skills or knowledge to use it in life – *wabi-sabi* is for everyone, as well as the fact that *wabi-sabi* seems to be the opposite of the Western culture of perfectionism rooted in ancient Hellenic tradition, referring not only to architecture and objects, but nowadays also to people. *Wabi-sabi* was incredibly popular in 2018, with hundreds of books and articles having been published up to today, which not only describe the idea of *wabi-sabi*, but also give advice how to embrace it in life. Of interest is the fact that quite often *wabi-sabi* is compared with Danish *hygge*⁴, Swedish *lagom*⁵ or even Chinese *feng shui*⁶, which, as *wabi-sabi*, can be understood both as a philosophy and a design trend. This comparison is crucial, because it shows that *wabi-sabi*, just as *hygge*, which after all descends from the Western cultural environment, may be perceived in the West as a current but short-lived trend. This begs the question whether *wabi-sabi* has a chance to take root in Western culture and if so, whether it will be more as a design trend or a way of being. Although this will be answered in the summary, let us now compare the Japanese and Western understandings of *wabi-sabi*.

COMPARISON OF JAPANESE AND WESTERN UNDERSTANDINGS OF *WABI-SABI*

After discussing these two understandings of *wabi-sabi* it is obvious that they are not identical. In the beginning, their three main similarities will be briefly described, followed by the five main differences between them.

Similarities:

⁴ *Hygge* – the Danish word for “cosiness”, used also in the meaning of the sense of inner peace, safety, and joy. It became popular all around the Western world in 2016.

⁵ *Lagom* – the Swedish word for “just the right amount”, which can be perceived also as a kind of sustainable way of living.

⁶ *Feng shui* – an ancient Chinese practise of planning the space in order to find the best flow of energy, which can affect a person’s life.

1. Problem with defining *wabi-sabi*

Neither understanding has a single precise definition of *wabi-sabi*. In the Japanese understanding its spirit is mostly encapsulated in poems, whereas very often in the Western version there is a simple definition along with additional examples being given of what *wabi-sabi* is, such as a “well-loved teacup, made by an artist’s hands, cracked or chipped by use” (Sholl, 2019).

2. The core idea of *wabi-sabi*

Both Japanese and Western perspectives share the same core idea of *wabi-sabi*, which means the beauty and acceptance of the imperfect, irregular, and incomplete, as well as the acceptance of the passage of time and its impact on everything and everyone.

3. Aesthetical ideals

It is common for the Japanese and Western understandings of *wabi-sabi* to appreciate modest, handmade, and unique items made from natural materials on which the signs of use are visible, as well as the usage of natural, earthy colors.

Differences:

1. Who can understand and appreciate the beauty of *wabi-sabi*

While in the Japanese perspective it is possible only for people who have the knowledge and skills to detect and understand the hidden and inconspicuous beauty of *wabi-sabi*, the Western perspective convinces that everyone is able to understand and feel it, which makes the idea of *wabi-sabi* more inclusive and available to people without any knowledge of Japanese traditional culture and art, thus being, in other words, more egalitarian.

2. *Wabi-sabi* and different forms of art

Wabi-sabi in Western culture does not refer to any form of art other than the design of interiors and items, such as furniture or ceramics. In comparison, in Japanese culture *wabi-sabi* occurs in many artistic fields, such as literature, painting, the tea ceremony, gardening, and architecture. However, the reason for this is that in Japan *wabi-sabi* has existed for many centuries, while being present in Western culture only for a few years. Thus, there is still a chance that it will influence more western fields of art.

3. The role of nature

Nature provides a crucial difference not only in the understanding of *wabi-sabi*, but also generally between Western and Japanese culture. First,

regarding *wabi-sabi*: in the Western perspective, although there is an appreciation of nature, this is more as a source of materials, not as nature itself as in Japanese culture. This reflects the different role of nature in those two cultures: in the history of the West, nature was more perceived as an obstacle to development, which should be harnessed – and could only be admired in this aspect. In contrast to this, in Japan nature was and still is very much related to national identity through *shintō* – a traditional Japanese polytheistic religion⁷ – in which gods called *kami* live in the elements of nature, such as trees, rocks, streams, mountains, and so on. That is why the natural world, which in Japan could be almost termed sacred, has also played such a different role in the understanding of *wabi-sabi* in these two cultures.

4. Acceptance of imperfection in ourselves and the world at large

This aspect also shows the differences between Western and Japanese culture. The Western understanding of *wabi-sabi* is quite focused on the acceptance of imperfection, first of ourselves and then of the surrounding world, unlike that in Japan, where it is mostly about the imperfection of the world, not necessary of ourselves. This might correlate with the individual character of Western culture and collective character of Japanese culture.

5. The role of loneliness and poverty

The last difference is connected with the lack of aspects of loneliness and poverty in the Western understanding of *wabi-sabi*, while they are essential for the Japanese understanding of this term. This is probably related to the situation of Western civilization nowadays and the wealth of its society, which has different priorities and very often does not value a humble and modest way of living.

SUMMARY

As it has been presented, the Western understanding of *wabi-sabi* differs from its Japanese counterpart. We could, therefore, call Western *wabi-sabi*

⁷ It is difficult to call *shintō* a religion in the same sense as Christianity or Islam, as it does not have one founder and also allows one to practise other religions, such as, for example, Buddhism. However, the term “religion” is used to describe *shintō* in order to help members of other cultures understand it.

a happier, easier-to-follow version of the original concept, one more accessible to everyone and more focused on beautiful interiors, items, and the acceptance of the imperfections which lie within us. Although *wabi-sabi* may last as a design trend, just like *hygge*, it may stay on for longer as a part of a resistance toward the cult of perfectionism, which is already typical not only for Western culture but also for our whole modern, globalized, consumer world, where there is a need to slow down and appreciate living a life which is not as perfect as in social media. *Wabi-sabi* has been understood in this way in the West because of two reasons. Firstly, it is easier to adapt some traditions in their material aspect than in their spiritual one, as it has happened with Christmas all around the non-Christian world. Secondly, in Japan *wabi-sabi* comes from the history and tradition of this country itself. On the other hand, as this is something brand new for the West, it has been shaped to suit modern Western times and challenges.

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