

Version 3: October 20, 2015

Wabi-sabi: The Japanese Aesthetic
LLC, Fall Semester, 2015
Course Syllabus
Wednesdays, 10:00am-Noon, Temple Beth-El

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We are embarking on a 9-week investigation of an “evanescent” concept—an aesthetic sensibility very difficult to put into words. The Japanese aesthetic *wabi-sabi* is a set of informing values and principles that lend focus to “the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete.” Another wrote that “*Wabi-sabi* is an expression of the beauty that lies in the brief transition between the coming and going of life, both the joy and the melancholy that make up our lot as humans.”

“*Wabi*” has been translated into English as: tranquil simplicity; austere elegance; unpolished, imperfect, or irregular beauty; rusticity; things in their simplest, most austere, and natural state; a serene, transcendental state of mind. “*Sabi*” has been interpreted as the beauty that treasures the passage of time, and with it the lonely sense of impermanence it evokes. It has also been defined as the patina that age bestows, or as that which is true to the natural cycle of birth and death.

The aesthetic is very much present in various traditional Japanese art forms, including traditional Japanese architecture, gardens, the Tea Ceremony, *Haiku* poetry, flower-arranging (“ikebana”), pottery, brush-stroke painting and other art forms that have a decidedly Japanese feel to them. But *wabi-sabi* sensibilities can also be seen reflected in Western works of art. Many pieces and paintings of American folk art, as just one example, reflect these rustic, seemingly unfinished qualities. It recently occurred to me that the paintings of my favorite American artist, Edward Hopper, with their use of light and shadow and focus on imperfect lives and structures, genuinely embody a very similar aesthetic or way of looking at the world. Participants are encouraged to look beyond the confines of traditional expressions of Japanese art to broaden our understanding of the principles of *wabi-sabi* at play in both the “exotic” Far East and what we are far more familiar with in the West.

Class members should purchase Leonard Koren’s *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. It is a very short introduction to the subject matter and is by no means intended as an exhaustive treatment of *wabi-sabi* or a full-length textbook more customarily used in an LLC setting. Therefore, participants are requested to read the book in its entirety for purposes of our first class session on

Wednesday, September 30th. Class members are also highly encouraged to purchase The Book of Tea by Kakuzo Okakura, a 1906 classic written by a Japanese scholar to introduce a Western audience to the novelty and intricacies of the Japanese Tea Ceremony, a quintessential example of the aesthetic at play. Both books are available at Amazon.

Class Schedule

Session 1: Wed., Sept. 30:

Hours 1 and 2: Gordon Hayes--Class Introduction and Group Discussion of basic *wabi-sabi* concepts.

Assigned reading: Complete text of *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* by Leonard Koren.

Suggested supplemental reading: *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* by Andrew Juniper.

Wabi-Sabi: Further Thoughts by Leonard Koren.

Wabi Sabi: The Art of Everyday Living by Diane Durston.

Session 2: Wed., Oct. 7:

Hour 1: Lily Trayes, The Japanese Garden

Supplemental reading: *Japanese Gardens: Tranquility, Simplicity, Harmony* by Kimie Tade and Murata Noburu

Zen Gardens: The Complete Works of Shunmyo Masuno, Japan's Leading Garden Designer by Mira Locher

Quiet Beauty: The Japanese Gardens of North America by Kendall H. Brown

Hour 2: Roberta Segal, Japanese Brush Stroke Paintings

On the Laws of Japanese Painting by Henry P. Bowie (the “classic work on the philosophy and technique of Japanese art” with 60 illustrations)

Supplemental reading: The Sumi-E Book—Learn to master the four basic brushstrokes of Japanese ink painting and create beautiful brush paintings of your own, by Yolanda Mayhall

Session 3: Wed., Oct. 14:

Hour 1: Carol Hoppe, The Art of Japanese Containers, from Pottery to Bamboo Baskets

Hour 2: Merle Krueger, Classic Japanese Joinery and Its Influence on Western Studio Furniture Design

Session 4: Wed., Oct. 21:

Hours 1 and 2: Janice Goldin, Lessons derived from The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up—The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing.

Additional reading idea: Simply Imperfect: Revisiting the Wabi-Sabi House by Robyn Griggs.

Session 5: Wed., Oct. 28:

Hour 1: Bill Deveney and David Pinkham, Wabi-sabi Influences in Photography.

Supplemental reading: Wabi-Sabi: The Beauty of Photography.

Hour 2: Marie Hennedy, Wabi-sabi Principles embraced in Story-telling and Live Theater.

Supplemental reading: What's the Story by Ann Bogart,
100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write by Sarah Ruhl,
Ten Windows by Jane Hirshfield

Session 6: Wed., Nov. 4:

Hour 1: Charlann Walker, Zentangle—the marriage of Zen (meditation) with “tangle” (beautifully drawn patterned artwork.) Charlann is a Certified Zentangle Teacher and will lead a hands-on drawing exercise for the class.

Hour 2: David Stonestreet, Wabi-Sabi Aesthetic Influences on Japanese Architecture

Wed., Nov. 11—Veterans' Day—Field Trip in lieu of Class

Temple Beth-El will be closed on November 11, but we will have a two-part field trip. The first portion will be to visit New England Bonsai Gardens in Bellingham, MA (914 S. Main Street (Rte. 126), Bellingham, MA 02019, (508) 883-2842.) A cultural aesthete of such majesty as Martha Stewart herself has described the Gardens as “recognized as one of the largest and most comprehensive bonsai nurseries in the country,” and she selected bonsai from the Gardens for installation in the Martha Stewart Center for Living (whatever that is) because she designated bonsai as the Center's symbol since “the bonsai grows more beautiful and valuable with age.”

From Bellingham we would proceed to the Zen Center of Providence which, despite what its name implies, is located in Cumberland (99 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI 02864, (401) 658-1188, info@providencezen.org) There we would have a light dinner

beginning at 5:00pm, try our hand at Zen meditation and participate in a form of Buddhist chanting.

Session 7: Wed., Nov. 18:

Hour 1: Burton Greifer, Wabi-sabi implicit in the Japanese language.

Hour 2: Pamela Perkins, *Ikebana*, The Japanese Art of Flower-Arranging

Supplemental reading: *Zen in the Art of Arranging Flowers: The Classic Account of the Meaning and Symbolism of the Japanese Art of Ikebana* by Gustie L. Herrigel

Wed., Nov. 25—No class, Temple closed.

Session 8: Wed., Dec. 2:

Hour 1: Maxine Goldin, topic to-be-determined

Hour 2: Roberta Segal, The Art of Japanese Haiku Poetry

Session 9: Wed., Dec. 9:

Hour 1: Jean Keith, topic to-be-determined

Hour 2: Lillian Hayes, The Japanese Tea Ceremony

Recommended reading: *The Book of Tea* by Kakuzo Okakura

I thought it would be fitting to conclude the class with a focus on the traditional Japanese tea ceremony which many suggest is perhaps the richest manifestation of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics reduced to a single art form. Here is an excerpt from Diane Durston's *Wabi Sabi: The Art of Everyday Life*:

“First appearing as poetic references in Japanese literature, both *wabi* and *sabi* are closely associated with the tea ceremony, a spiritual practice invented by Zen Buddhist priests in the 15th century. Kakuzo Okakura, who wrote the first Book of Tea in English one hundred years ago, defined the tea ceremony simply as “the art of everyday life.”

The tea ceremony is considered a means of achieving enlightenment and peace of mind through the simple, everyday preparation of tea. The focus is on sharing a quiet moment with friends in an atmosphere of mutual respect, in an environment that reflects the quiet beauty of nature. The tea host and [his or] her guests reflect on the importance of appreciating each moment as it passes, within the greater flow of our brief and often chaotic lives. Life, therefore, becomes art; *wabi* and *sabi* are manifestations of both.

Every object in the tea ceremony plays a role. A rustic tea bowl is a reminder that nothing in life is perfect. The empty sweep of space suggests that incompleteness can inspire the imagination of the beholder. A single flower in a bamboo vase invites you to take time to notice its understated beauty. The pristine finish of an unvarnished cedar box reminds you that wood will always be more beautiful than plastic. The patina that a bronze kettle acquires over time hints that we, too, change as we pass through time.

To Sen no Rikyu, the man who brought the Way of Tea to the height of refinement in the 16th century, the ceremony is nothing more (nor less) than this:

Make a delicious bowl of tea; lay the charcoal so it heats the water; arrange flowers as they are 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. “How hard can this be?” one of his students asked, to which Rikyu replied, “Well, if you can master that, you can teach me.”