Understanding Wabi and Sabi in the Context of Japanese Aesthetics

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Abstract
Whether consciously or not, aesthetics in Japan often takes precedence over other cultural elements. In fact, the whole idea of "Japanese beauty" is the very foundation of Japanese culture and the unifying medium of national identity. Though Japanese aesthetic concepts are deeply rooted in the country's cultural fabric, it doesn't mean that they cannot appeal to the tastes of non-Japanese. Moreover, they are well-known and appreciated abroad and have become part of the non-Japanese cultural and artistic fabric, especially in recent decades. The aesthetic concept of Wabi is probably the most well-known one outside Japan. However, it is almost always used as a part of the "Wabi-Sabi tandem". This paper will challenge the validity of using both concepts only as a tandem. While an object most often possesses qualities attributed to more than just one aesthetic concept, and there are times when applying Wabi and Sabi together works, most of the time it seems inaccurate to blend them as one. This paper will discuss the challenges of cultural borrowing and possibly wider applications of these borrowed aesthetic concepts beyond art, in such areas as education, for example, as well as a phenomenon of cultural "borrowing back" where "well-travelled" aesthetic concepts may possibly reinforce their place in their culture of origin.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Culture, Chanoyu, Mindfulness, Contemplation, Intercultural Studies

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Introduction

Rapid cultural globalization makes inter-cultural borrowings easily accessible. Sometimes, terms are being adapted and applied rather freely or even changed once used in a different cultural context, with little regard to their origins. In Japan, aesthetics and the conscious or unconscious appreciation of beauty is built in the whole cultural fabric of the society from high art to the everyday elements. There is a wide range of beauty forms specific to the place and time carefully protected and passed down through many generations virtually unchanged. While they are uniquely Japanese, they certainly can be and are appreciated by non-Japanese both actively and passively, however in both cases appreciation of the cultural context is the key. Aesthetics concepts in Japan also do not stay unchanged as new materials, new artistic forms, and new artists constantly emerge. While deeply rooted in the past, the concepts themselves are not static or archaic, they are a vital source for the new inspirations. I suggest that application of so called "Japanese beauty" to a wide range of life and living makes Japanese aesthetics concepts valuable for other cultures.

Wabi

Wabi is probably the most widely used (and misused) Japanese aesthetics term. Traditionally, most aesthetic concepts are introduced indirectly, through poetry for example. Two poems by Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241) are often mentioned when explaining wabi. One depicts a thatched-roofed hut on a seashore at dusk in autumn. It describes the specific state of an object, certain place in certain time of the day and season. Things wabi are appreciated "as they are" - natural, unadorned, in their natural state. They are also considered friendly, human, approachable.

The other poem talks about the very first green shoots in spring peeping through the snow, which are compared to the splendour of the cherry blossoms. Humble, modest, unpretentious beauty that need to be noticed, found, experienced as an active process.

The spirit of wabi is particularly well seen in wabicha – a wabi style of Chanoyu, commonly known as a Japanese tea ceremony. Instead of highly prized Chinese utensils ideals of wabi inspired simple, accessible utensils such as a wooden well bucket, green bamboo lid rest or unglazed pottery often shaped by hand. Started by Takeno Joo (1502-1555), continued by Sen Rikyu (1522-1591) and perfected by his grandson Sen Sotan (1578-1658) wabicha nourished simple austere type of beauty to compliment the serene transcendental state of mind of Chanoyu ("Hot Water for Tea" – an older name for tea ceremony). Wabi style was informed by the hermit's hut built and described by Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216) as well as much earlier unglazed pottery of Jōmon and Yayoi.

Wabi as a method inspires creativity and the development of new ideas. While tea procedures and methods in a tearoom are consistently traditional, creative thought brings immediacy and freshness to each encounter in Chanoyu. Denis Hirota writes: "The creative vision was, I think, associated in Joo's mind with humility and sincere aspiration of the beginner and the amateur." (Hirota, 1980). In the "Broom Tree Record" the accomplished amateur is termed "wabi sukisha" - "one devoted to tea in the spirit of wabi". (Hirota, 1980) While this chajin ("person of tea") could not take possession of the priceless tea utensils of the Chinese origin, and therefore could not be considered a true connoisseur by then common standard, but instead is characterized as "possessing creativity" and would by necessity be inclined to develop the new ways and objects. In the "Letter on Wabi" Takeno Joo characterizes

earnestness and freedom as “shojiki” – sincerity, openness and straightforwardness. It stands against merely mimicking the style of the accomplished master but connecting deeply to the tradition and finding best possible the ways of expression under the circumstances. Takeno Joo comments on the cultivating “illuminating discernment” by unassuming appreciation of things.

While wabi can characterize objects, poetry, spaces, it can also describe human relations, groups of people, approach or attitudes. Wabi can characterize music, scent, cuisine. In fact, kaiseki meal, served to the guests prior to partaking the tea is rooted in a temple meal “shojinryōri” – “a meal to advance the spirit”. This kaiseki meal is cooked from local seasonal ingredients with minimal cooking and is served in small portions on mostly black lacquer to bring out their natural colours. Its partaking is slow paced, mindful and attentive. For example, white rice is served in a black lacquer lided bowl. It is served three times, as it is continuously cooking, naturally offering three different stages of it. In the end hot water is poured over the “crust” and offered as a kind of digestive.

Wabi doesn’t necessarily capture you immediately. Its appreciation is a destination, a journey, a process. The more one looks the more one sees. That is why one doesn’t get tired from wabi objects and spaces but rather continues to enjoy them over time.

Sabi

The category of Sabi refers to the appreciation of age and aging as part of an aesthetic experience. Rust, patina, natural change of material is appreciated and highlighted rather than “cleaned” or polished. It refers to the aesthetics of tarnished silver, aged wood, moss grown stones, etc. Objects or constructions created from organic materials are of course beautiful when they are brand new. But Sabi describes the new and different phases of beauty that evolve during their use and enjoyment, and the conviction that the aesthetic value of things is not diminished by time but enhanced. The wear and tear of daily use carefully repaired doesn’t detract but adds new aspects of beauty and aesthetic depth.

However, not just the appreciation of such a change of an object but also codified sign of time becomes an intended aesthetics in many cases. Marks of nails on the wooden well bucket rusted in time are now recreated as such. In other words, they are depicted as old and rusted from the very beginning becoming an important and often integral part of the object, the very central point of its appreciation. In Chanoyu koshiguro yakkan metal pourer is used to replenish fresh water in a water container. Black on the lower part depicts the effect left by the use on the fire in the farmer’s kitchen. Though this object has never been used for boiling water, it carries the aesthetic mark of its distant predecessor as an aesthetic norm.

Kintsugi is a method of highlighting repairs of the utensils in gold rather than hiding them using the invisible materials. Such repairs are made either in gold or silver, which will tarnish in time changing the colour and the visual impact, or in red, brown or black lacquer, all very visible and even highlighted. The objects will continue their life as they are in their new imperfect state. The whole idea of perfection and the Japanese aesthetic view of perfection and imperfection is a conversation for a different paper, I am using the term to describe the original form. Once the bowl is broken, it will always be a broken bowl. However, it doesn’t take away its other qualities in the view of the tea masters. In Chanoyu, repaired utensils are commonly used in the month of October, which is called “nagori” - a season of nostalgia for

the warmer days of summer and early autumn. This is the time when mismatched sets and repaired objects are used.

Kirei sabi or "beautiful rust" is another style that makes repairs themselves into a work of art, a canvas for an additional artwork often completely clashing with the initial aesthetics of an object. For example, a portion of a rustic bowl was repaired and restored in black lacquer and a landscape scene will be depicted on the repair in gold adding yet another, completely different dimension to the object.

Wabi-Sabi

We often see terms Wabi and Sabi used together and used as one to characterize rustic beauty. It is especially visible in the works published in English where the terms are almost never used separately. I argue that while every object can reflect more than one aesthetic concept, it is misleading to say the least to merge two terms together and use them collectively or interchangeably while denying them their unique individual qualities.

Sabi refers to an outer, exterior form and cultivates attention, respect and appreciation of time passing and things naturally changing their appearance. Wabi doesn't only describe the outer form, visible state but also refers to the inner quality. Wabi refers to a wider spectrum of qualities. It refers to both outer and inner state, as well as the quality of reception. Appreciation of Wabi objects is a process, a journey, that requires an active participation of a receiver while Sabi aesthetics can be grasped faster. Objects can be made look Sabi but they cannot be made look Wabi, they can only "be" it or not. Objects can be artificially aged, but they can only be left natural. They can't be made Wabi.

Kimura Sōshin mentions that Japanese traditional culture is supported by "sensitivity" and "emotion". Ability to see art needs to be learned, practiced and developed. It doesn't simply happen, nor does it happen because of simply being born in Japan.

May be the very way of defining Japanese aesthetics may need to be adjusted to be rather "dusk-clear" than exact. May be most Japanese aesthetic categories are simply best left vague and ambiguous. They can then inhibit overlapping and partially merging spaces rather than being strictly defined and placed in the cells created with a completely different cultural approach in mind. Defining an area rather than drawing the exact line may be a better approach.

Conclusions

Aesthetics and the sense of beauty in Japan occupy a special place and are at the foundation of the Japanese national identity. As an important part of education, upbringing etc. study of Japanese aesthetics certainly helps to better understand Japan, its culture and people. But it isn't only Japan that we are getting to know.

Mara Miller writes: "The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese…than the truths they expose about the human condition…" (Miller, 2011)

The influence of Japanese aesthetics has reached far beyond Japan. Arguably, it is one of the most influential cannons of beauty in world culture today. It has had and continues to have

significant influence on world architecture, painting, design, culinary arts, garden and flower arts, fashion and so on.

The traditional function of aesthetics in the West is to produce visual, aural, emotional impact and move the audience of spectators. While it is also true when we speak about Japanese aesthetics, there are additional areas where the latter expands the aesthetic experience.

In addition, aesthetics in Japan play an important role in politics, education, ethics, environment, maintaining of national identity, and many other areas. There are simply more categories in which beauty is manifested. Understanding the complex and multilayered categories the way they were intended to be understood will help to get a better cultural context where they originated and where they function. At the same time, aesthetics is also applicable to issues of environment, socialization, team building, leadership, and education just to name a few. I think it would be particularly interesting to apply Japanese aesthetics to the many walks of life outside Japan.

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