

Wabi-Sabi

*for Artists,
Designers,
Poets &
Philosophers*

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A Comparison with Modernism

To get a better sense of what wabi-sabi is—and isn't—it might be helpful to compare and contrast it with modernism, the dominant aesthetic sensibility of mid- to late-20th-century international industrialized society. "Modernism" is another slippery term that cuts a wide swath across art and design history, attitudes, and philosophy. Here we will describe "middle" modernism, the kind of modernism embodied in most of the pieces of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Middle modernism includes most of the slick, minimalist 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 itself.

Similarities.

- 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 19th-century classicism and eclecticism. Wabi-sabi was a radical departure from the Chinese perfection and gorgeousness of the 16th-century and earlier.

- Both eschew any decoration that is not integral to structure.
- Both are abstract, nonrepresentational ideals of beauty.
- Both have readily identifiable surface characteristics. Modernism is seamless, polished, and smooth. Wabi-sabi is earthy, imperfect, and variegated.

Differences.⁷

modernism

Primarily expressed in the public domain

Implies a logical, rational worldview

Absolute

wabi-sabi

Primarily expressed in the private domain

Implies an intuitive worldview

Relative

Looks for universal, prototypical solutions

Mass-produced/modular

Expresses faith in progress

Future-oriented

Believes in the control of nature

Romanticizes technology

People adapting to machines

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

Looks for personal, idiosyncratic solutions

One-of-a-kind/variable

There is no progress

Present-oriented

Believes in the fundamental uncontrollability of nature

Romanticizes nature

People adapting to nature

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

modernism

The box as metaphor
(rectilinear, precise,
contained)

Manmade materials

Ostensibly slick

Needs to be
well-maintained

Purity makes its
expression richer

Solicits the reduction
of sensory
information

Is intolerant of
ambiguity and
contradiction

wabi-sabi

The bowl as metaphor
(free shape, open at
top)

Natural materials

Ostensibly crude

Accommodates to
degradation and
attrition

Corrosion and
contamination
make its expression
richer

Solicits the expansion
of sensory
information

Is comfortable with
ambiguity and
contradiction

Cool

Generally light and
bright

Function and utility
are primary values

Perfect materiality
is an ideal

Everlasting

Warm

Generally dark and
dim

Function and utility
are not so important

Perfect immateriality
is an ideal

To every thing there
is a season

Metaphysical Basis

- Things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness

Spiritual Values

- Truth comes from the observation of nature
- "Greatness" exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked details
- Beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness

State of Mind

- Acceptance of the inevitable
- Appreciation of the cosmic order

Moral Precepts

- Get rid of all that is unnecessary
- Focus on the intrinsic and ignore material hierarchy

Material Qualities

- The suggestion of natural process
- Irregular
- Intimate
- Unpretentious
- Earthy
- Murky
- Simple

Wabi-sabi can be called a "comprehensive" aesthetic system. Its world view, or universe, is self-referential. It 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 feel of things (materiality).¹⁸ The more systematic and clearly defined the components of an aesthetic system are—the more conceptual handles, the more ways it refers back to fundamentals—the more useful it is.