Wabi-Sabi

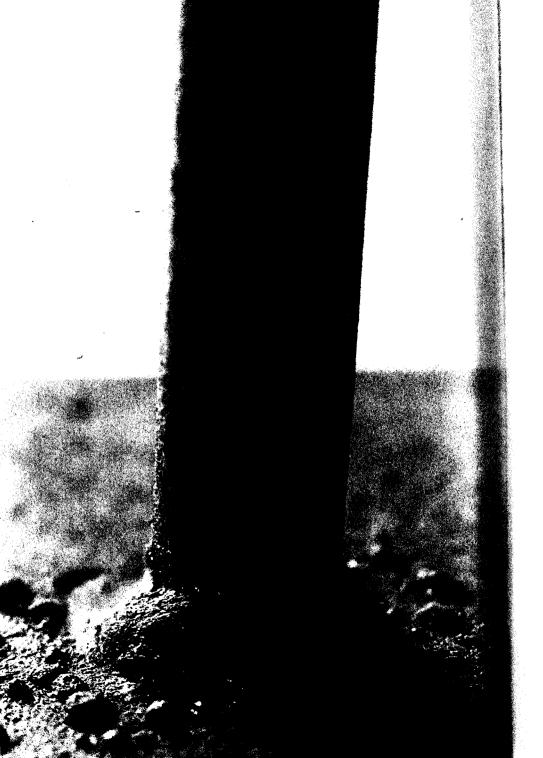
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for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers

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A Comparison with Modernism

To get a better sense of what wabi-sabi isand isn't-it might be helpful to compare and contrast it with modernism, the dominant aesthetic sensibility of mid- to late-20thcentury 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

modernismwabi-sabiPrimarily expressed
in the public domainPrimarily expressed
in the private domainImplies a logical,
rational worldviewImplies an intuitive
worldviewAbsoluteRelative

Looks for universal, prototypical solutions

Looks for personal, idiosyncratic 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) 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	wabi-sabi	Cool
The box as metaphor (rectilinear, precise, contained)	The bowl as metaphor (free shape, open at top)	Genera bright
Manmade materials	Natural materials	Function Fun
Ostensibly slick	Ostensibly crude	Perfect is an io
Needs to be well-maintained	Accommodates to degradation and attrition	Everlas
Purity makes its expression richer	Corrosion and contamination make its expression richer	
Solicits the reduction of sensory information	Solicits the expansion of sensory information	
Is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction	Is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction	

Warm rally light and Generally dark and dim t tion and utility Function and utility rimary values are not so important ct materiality Perfect immateriality ideal is an ideal To every thing there asting is a season

The Wabi-Sabi Universe

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

Wahi-sahi can be called a "comprehensive" aesthetic system. Its world view. or universe, is selfreferential. 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 arethe more conceptual handles, the more ways it refers back to fundamentals-the more useful it is.