



SPLENDOR AND SIMPLICITY

An Introduction to Japanese Artistic Style



WHEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE JAPANESE AESTHETICS OR ARTISTIC STYLE, MANY PEOPLE MIGHT FIRST THINK OF THE SIMPLICITY AND AUSTERITY OF A ZEN ROCK GARDEN OR A THATCHED TEAHOUSE. OTHERS MIGHT PICTURE A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN WHITE MAKE-UP AND A VIBRANTLY COLORED KIMONO.

HOWEVER, JAPAN DOES NOT HAVE ONE SINGLE ARTISTIC STYLE OR SENSIBILITY. THE EXAMPLES ABOVE ARE AMONG NUMEROUS ASPECTS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS THAT HAVE EVOLVED OVER TIME IN RESPONSE TO THE TASTE OF DIVERSE PATRONS, INCLUDING MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL COURT, BUDDHIST PRIESTS, TEA MASTERS, SAMURAI WARLORDS, MERCHANTS, COURTESANS, AND EVEN FOREIGNERS. THE RESULT IS THAT MULTIPLE AESTHETICS AND MOODS CO-EXIST IN JAPANESE ART. AMONG THEM ARE *WABI*, *SABI*, *MIYABI*, *KABI*, AND *ASOBI*. BY EXAMINING JAPANESE ART WORKS WITH THESE DIFFERENT SENSIBILITIES IN MIND, WE ARE BETTER ABLE TO UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF JAPANESE ARTISTIC STYLE.



Sake Bottle (*Tokkuri*), Japan, 20th century, Bizen ware: stoneware with kiln-ash glaze, Gift of Stanford Moore Smith in memory of Professor Roy Smith, 2003.21.15

WABI and SABI

The related aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi* developed within the context of the Japanese tea ceremony. The tea ceremony has its origins in the religions of Japan, particularly Shinto, an indigenous tradition that teaches a respect for nature, and in Zen Buddhism with its emphasis on austerity, humility, and spontaneity. Over the centuries, practitioners of the tea ceremony have primarily championed the simple, the humble, and the irregular in art and design, and this aesthetic sensibility has permeated much of Japanese art and culture.

Wabi reflects the austere beauty that can be found in simple forms and natural materials. Although *wabi* can also be linked to the term *wabishii*, meaning desolate or wretched, the term is usually used to describe objects that would seem appropriate in a farmhouse. Objects inspired by the *wabi* aesthetic are usually made using simple techniques and materials, such as a hand-built tea bowl or a length of plain woven cotton cloth. To convey a sense of humility and modesty, these works are typically undecorated or unpolished. The unassuming beauty of *wabi* works of art is often deceptive as they are sometimes created by famous artists, and made of rare and expensive materials.

Sabi is a closely related concept, a beauty that comes with age and long, loving use. The word *sabi* is related to *sabishii*, or "lonely." *Sabi* can also mean "rust." Objects attributed with *sabi* have gained beauty and character with the passage of time: their colors fade, splits and cracks distort their original forms, and a new patina appears on surfaces.

MIYABI

Miyabi refers to a refined, elegant beauty associated with the sophisticated taste of Japan's imperial court. The term *miyabi* (or *miyabita*) can be interpreted as graceful, refined or genteel.

Traditionally, *miyabi*-style objects would be displayed in the homes of aristocrats, reflecting their wealth and high social status as well as their knowledge and appreciation of art and literature. Over time, the *miyabi* style was also adopted by warlords and wealthy merchants who emulated imperial courtly culture.

Miyabi works may be simple in design but they often feature exquisitely painted, inlaid, and embroidered details. Gold is used, but sparingly, only as a delicate accent as in the sprinkled gold used to subtly embellish lacquer wares, rather than as the main color in the palette. Objects conveying the *miyabi* aesthetic are typically finished with glaze, lacquer, and polish, to enhance their elegance and appearance of great value and expense.

Mori Sosen (Japanese, 1747-1821)

Monkey Performing the Sambaso Dance

Japan, Edo period (1600-1868), dated 1800 (Year of the Monkey)

Hanging scroll: ink on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Ross

1985.55.4



KABI

Kabi refers to a bold, sumptuous style that reflects the taste and influence of both indigenous Japanese and foreign cultures. An art work that conveys *kabi* typically is elaborately crafted and features an abundance of decoration with surfaces often fully embellished with a variety of motifs in rich colors.

Kabi can be used to describe the ostentatious style of military rulers who used works of art as symbols to proclaim their great power and impress their subjects. It also relates to the lively style of the inhabitants of Japan's urban centers. This exuberant spirit is most apparent in the art and decoration related to weddings, festivals, and other celebrations. *Kabi* can also be used to describe many of the vividly colored and ornamented Japanese art works such as Imari and Satsuma ceramics that have been popular export items to Europe and North America.

Otsu-e Folk Painting Depicting a Cat and Mouse (*Neko to Nezumi*)

Japan, Edo period (1600-1868), late 18th – early 19th century

Ink and color on paper

Museum Purchase

1997.56.5



Although the term *kabi* is not as widely used as *wabi*, *sabi*, and *miyabi*, it can be applied to many areas of Japanese art. Even more so than the other terms, *kabi* is very subjective and depends very much on the viewer's own personal taste. Used in different forms, the word *kabi* can have opposing meanings including "splendid" and "gorgeous" as well as "pompous" and "gaudy."

ASOBI

Asobi is not so much an aesthetic term as a playful mood, and it is apparent in all aspects of Japanese art and culture. It is found in multiple art forms, and in combination with the other aesthetic sensibilities. For example, a Zen ink painting can have a playful *asobi* subject but be *wabi* in its style.

The noun *asobi* comes from the verb *asobu*, meaning to play, and it can be translated as play, amusement, diversion, or pleasure. In art, *asobi* is usually reflected in the subject matter depicted, such as a dancing monkey or other animals parodying human behavior. It can also be found in object forms such as food vessels made to look like vegetables, or in sword fittings crafted in the shape of folk gods. *Asobi* can also take the form of a surprise element within the design, like a secret compartment in a box or a design applied to the interior of an otherwise unadorned kimono.

Finally, *asobi* can also relate to the function of an art object. Nowhere is this more apparent than in netsuke toggles which were used as counterweights when suspending small personal items from the kimono sash. These miniature sculptures featuring comical subjects were actually meant to be held and played with by their owners.

Cover: **Tray with Heron and Lotus Design**

Japan, Edo period (1600-1868), c. 1830

Lacquered wood with sprinkled gold and silver powder designs (*maki-e*)

Gift of Elly Nordskog

1998.30.1

ADMISSION: \$7 adults, \$5 students/seniors. Children 11 and under free.

PARKING in the museum lot on the corner of Los Robles and Union.



46 North Los Robles Ave., Pasadena, CA 91101
626-449-2742 www.pacificasiamuseum.org