

# Wabi-Sabi: The Art Of Imperfection

*The Japanese tradition of wabi-sabi offers an inspiring new way to look at your home, and your whole life.*

by Robyn Griggs Lawrence, from Natural Home  
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According to Japanese legend, a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the elaborate set of customs known as the Way of Tea. He went to tea-master Takeeno Joo, who tested the younger man by asking him to tend the garden. Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked the ground until it was perfect, then scrutinized the immaculate garden. Before presenting his work to the master, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to spill randomly onto the ground.

To this day, the Japanese revere Rikyu as one who understood to his very core a deep cultural thread known as *wabi-sabi*. Emerging in the 15th century as a reaction to the prevailing aesthetic of lavishness, ornamentation, and rich materials, wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in earthiness, of revering authenticity above all. In Japan, the concept is now so deeply ingrained that it's difficult to explain to Westerners; no direct translation exists.

Broadly, wabi-sabi is everything that today's sleek, mass-produced, technology-saturated culture isn't. It's flea markets, not shopping malls; aged wood, not swank floor coverings; one single morning glory, not a dozen red roses. Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks that time and weather and use leave behind. To discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular beauty in something that may first look decrepit and ugly.

Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet—that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of returning to dust. Nature's cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time.

Bringing wabi-sabi into your life doesn't require money, training, or special skills. It takes a mind quiet enough to appreciate muted beauty, courage not to fear bareness, willingness to accept things as they are—without ornamentation. It depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing to being, to appreciating rather than perfecting.

You might ignite your appreciation of wabi-sabi with a single item from the back of a closet: a chipped vase, a faded piece of cloth. Look deeply for the minute details that give it character; explore it with your hands. You don't have to understand why you're drawn to it, but you do have to accept it as it is.

Rough textures, minimally processed goods, natural materials, and subtle hues are all wabi-sabi. Consider the musty-oily scene that lingers around an ancient wooden bowl, the mystery behind a tarnished goblet. This patina draws us with a power that the shine of the new doesn't possess. Our universal longing for wisdom, for genuineness, for shared history manifests in these things.