

Off The Wall

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A Little Art and Practice of Wabi Sabi in the BVI - "Fresh beauty opens one's eyes wherever it is really seen, but the very abundance and completeness of the common beauty that besets our steps prevents its being absorbed and appreciated. It is a good thing, therefore, to make short excursions now and then to the bottom of the sea among dulse and coral, or up among the clouds on mountain-tops, or in balloons, or even to creep like worms into dark holes and caverns underground, not only to learn something of what is going on in those out-of-the-way places, but to see better what the sun sees on our return to common everyday beauty." - John Muir

If you enjoy nature and a tranquil lifestyle - the BVI is good place to practice the art of wabi sabi. Take a stroll on a quiet beach. Breathe in the fresh air. Take in the beauty of the blue sky and turquoise sea. Appreciate a moment of solitude, as you wander along, watching for treasures of old shells washed with holes, gnarly driftwood and pieces of beach glass tumbled smooth and frosted from years at sea. Beach combing like this - is wabi sabi.

Wabi sabi is a Zen Buddhist concept wrapped in a Japanese phrase that rolls playfully off the tongue.

It is a Zen practice brought from China to Japan by a 12th century Monk, a practice of living serenely in the moment and appreciating every day life - in a modest and uncluttered way. It is appreciating the asymmetry in nature and understanding that everything changes with time.

Wabi sabi is a process, a state of mind, a practice of seeing and appreciating the beauty in aged and time-worn objects and recognizing that, whether they are natural or hand-made, their quirks and imperfections create character and add value.

As with all things Zen, wabi sabi is hard to put into words, it is like that empty space in a vase being the most valuable part of the vase or the space between notes being the most important part of a piece of music - because without that emptiness neither exists.

The two words, wabi sabi, do not need to be linked. The wa in wabi means tranquility, peace and harmony. Wabi means, in tune with nature, earthy and humble. Sabi is an appreciation of decay, or rust, an understanding that beauty is temporary and evolves and changes with time - not into something that is less valuable but into a different form of existence, with elegance with dignity.

Quite the opposite of our opulent western credo that symmetry and permanence is perfection, bigger is better and the more of it you have - the better off you are. Though we have tried to bring in the flavor of wabi sabi, like artificial Vanilla, it's not the same. We've created faux aged plaster and paint techniques, new distressed furniture, sepia tinted photographs and even our new frayed jeans. We know tattered has an element of time and history, a comfort that doesn't come with shiny and new. So we try, but true wabi sabi cannot be replicated or recreated by machine.

The art and practice of wabi sabi shows a reverence for living in the moment. It is our ability to see serenity in things that are time worn and unassuming. It is old family photos that have aged to soft sepia tints or their Kodak colors slowly fading to pastels. It is great grandmother's hand sewn quilt, with its cotton feathered edges, being hand repaired and still used - because it is favored above all other quilts. It's the old table that is still polished and used daily, showing the teeth marks of the puppy on one leg and old crayon markings on the underside. The objects, all everyday items, but lavished with generations of care and respect. We often acquired antiques for this very reason, a feeling about them, a remembrance, we may not know the facts of its past but we can admire and appreciate its history.

I'd always thought my attraction toward time-tattered places and things was simply an artist's quirk, a way of seeing the world a bit askew.

I prefer antiques and works of art that show the brush marks and chisel lines of the creator's hand.

It wasn't until I was living in Thailand, that I discovered that this tendency toward simple and worn objects actually had a name, and what I was doing was practicing the art of wabi sabi. A lifetime of preferring my oldest pair of jeans or favorite hand painted batik sarong with dragons, to crisp new clothes. Even my favorite necklace is a beach-find, a chip of blue and white china that's been tumbled smooth from years at sea. I'm attracted to ancient trees with

gnarled roots, old ruins, crumbled walls and cobble stone streets - that have moved with the earth over the centuries, old plaster, peeling paint, natural patina on a bronze sculpture. My bookshelves are lined with treasures, old books that I hope to read again, shells, driftwood and coral from remote beaches, small art objects from my travels. I have an old teapot that I use and wouldn't trade for a new one, because it has personality in its aged crackle and chips, it's old but not an antique - I probably wouldn't get a dollar for it at a yard sale, I just enjoy it.

Nothing about wabi sabi is shabby. It's simply humble and worn by time to perfection.

The reoccurring phrase by people who don't know me is, "Why do you want that?" I'm not alone with this quest. Many people that I admire - are (or were) a wabi person. Artists and writers often practice wabi sabi, in method and practice, if not in name. Georgia O'Keefe, during her years painting the beauty she found around her home in New Mexico. Henry David Thoreau, writing his observations and philosophy from his cabin in the woods. John Muir, while hiking and camping the wilderness of the Sierra Nevada, writing of the natural beauty and the need for man to hold on to it. Just to name a few. The esthetics of these remote locations, with their timeless beauty, fueled their creative work, helped to remove the clutter and chaos of our western civilization from their lives and gave them a new perspective, that less - is more.

It is easy to get caught up in the daily routines and the balancing act of work, family and the numerous frustrations that come at us from all sides. We forget to truly see the beauty in front of us.

Give yourself the gift of an hour, to go walk the beach or roam around an old ruin, spend a little time observing and appreciating the beauty we have around us. And remember, even if you have been to a particular beach a thousand times - today it is different and so are you.

"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see."
"Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain." - Henry David Thoreau

"Sun-bleached bones were most wonderful against the blue - that blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished." - Georgia O'Keefe

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