

# Wabi-Sabi Savvy

*by Maddy Cranley*

Just when we have all learned to correctly pronounce Feng Shui, the Chinese art of appropriate placement of objects in our living spaces, along comes another ancient Oriental aesthetic philosophy, "wabi-sabi". Seemingly destined to become as popular as Feng Shui, wabi-sabi addresses our relationship to all things that surround us, not just to their positioning in our living and working environments. Plainly stated, the basic tenets of wabi-sabi are simple is best, less is more. Leonard Koren in his book "Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers (Stonebridge Press, 1995) describes it as a beauty "... of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete, modest and humble and of things unconventional."

It is actually a difficult concept to describe. Once it is defined, thereby giving it a form, it loses the essence which makes it what it is. Wabi-sabi began in 14th century Japan as a reaction to the rich materials, brilliant colors and lavish ornamentation displayed by the Chinese culture. Today the popularity of wabi-sabi could be viewed as a response to our high tech mass-produced world where exactness and duplication are so prized, where designer logos are worn front and center on clothing to identify it as being a perfect match to all others produced by that same designer. Something so exact and mass-produced is definitely not wabi-sabi.

Natural and crafted objects are wabi-sabi because they so often display an individuality that cannot be duplicated. A handknit sweater would definitely qualify as wabi-sabi. Yes, many knitters may knit the same sweater from the exact same pattern instructions, even using an identical yarn, but each resulting sweater will likely have subtle differences. An individual knitter's tension, which can sometimes vary from day to day, will certainly vary from knitter to knitter. Slubs and bumps even in the same brand of yarn will appear in different places in the garment and differences in needle-holding technique can sometimes be evident in the twist of the finished knitting. This is wabi-sabi. In contrast, a mass-produced knit sweater, created with the same computer-controlled machinery will guarantee that all the sweaters will look exactly alike - definitely not wabi-sabi.

Wabi-sabi also prizes the dented and scratched, the bumpy and irregular, the weathered and worn. Perfection is sterile. Imperfection is beautiful. So here's a different way to look at those dropped stitches that were recovered onto the needle with that ever so slight a twist of the yarn or at the variance in a dye lot that results in a line across your back that only you can see. It is these imperfections that give the sweater its unique beauty.

The concept of wabi-sabi embraces the passage of time. The slightly felted but dearly loved old woollen sweater you cannot part with and the knitted teddy bear, torn and ragged from a child's love, all embody wabi-sabi. These characteristics suggest that the object has a history. No brand name or high price tag could change what these objects mean to the owner. It's value is gauged on a very personal and private level.

So take pride in your wabi-sabi knitting. Be proud of that noticeable slub in the yarn, the slightly stretchy neckline or the twisted picked-up stitch. You have seen a simple strand of yarn develop into a unique garment knowing that it stands on its own unmatched but best of all prized by you- that's wabi-sabi.

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