Chinese Calligraphy

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CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

A CHINESE author whose name seems not to have been preserved has written this about calligraphy: "The essence of beauty in writing is not found in the written word but lies in response to unlimited change; line after line should have a way of giving life, character after character should seek for life-movement."[1] If "life-movement" is understood to imply order, these words contain the substance of all Chinese theory about what is of value in the art of calligraphy. Life is continuous energetic change; but life is also equilibrium, dynamic adjustment. And a well-written character is a symbol of the life-process. Although it lies static upon the silk or paper, to the perceiving mind it is a dynamic experience. The brush strokes rise and fall, they stretch and sweep, crouch and spring; ink tone swells and diminishes; shapes expand and contract. These modalities of movement have their differences in speed and intensity: they may be slow or swift, heavy or light. Their changing force suggests the terms used to symbolize the dynamics of music—accelerando and ritardendo, crescendo and diminuendo.

A well-written character gives the impression not merely of movement but of organized movement. It is a matter of relation. Strokes may lean or press, yield or resist, according to the inner tension. The Chinese have a very live conception of the equilibrium of forces in such a whole. They dislike the static balance of symmetries. The ideal seems to be an equilibrium so delicately adjusted that repose is only temporary, and one is thrown back into the movement to live again in the developing form. Or the balance may deliberately be broken by a stroke suggesting that the force (*shih*) goes on and on. This is especially clear when groups of characters form new wholes. There is a feeling of rhythmic continuity of uneven interval, an equilibrium achieved, lost, regained—a "way of giving life."

In this sense of continuing life-movement lies the calligraphic ideal. It is difficult to describe without giving the Chinese expression a too

modern and sophisticated tone, for today all terms of energy have such wide and meaningful connotation. But when Chinese calligraphists analyze what "would look better," they talk always in terms of change, force, tension, interaction, organization. They describe effects of transmission of energy, resolution into new wholes. The entire conception is dynamic.

Calligraphy has such a hold on the imagination of the Chinese, it is so revered as embodying in a very pure and uncomplicated form their aesthetic values, that it rivals painting as the major art of China. This is a familiar fact in the Western world, and the dominating rôle played by calligraphy in the art of painting is scarcely less familiar. But Western writers still treat the subject in very general terms, being satisfied for the most part with the mere label "calligraphic." Chinese writers, on the other hand, being themselves practicing calligraphists and often masters of the art, discuss the matter with all the concrete and lively simplicities of the artist's point of view. Upon such Chinese sources the present study is based.

Chinese writing on calligraphy proceeds along three lines: the dynamic content, the form or organization of that content (two aspects, of course, of one whole), and the requisite technique. By technique we mean the knowledge of instruments and materials, and the skill in practical action, that permits the gesture with the brush to create freely the expressive symbol. The earlier writers stress "life-movement" and make comparatively few remarks about organization. They recognize the need of unity and equilibrium, but given the life-qualities they are content to let order take care of itself as a natural spontaneous development. In actual practice, calligraphists continued to do this, but a more analytical spirit also developed, apparently from the fourteenth century, and began to investigate the properties of organization, with resulting "laws" and "principles." Our discussion will follow the Chinese sequence in considering first the dynamic content and then the problems of organization, together with such incidental remarks of a technical nature as have a way of creeping into theoretical discussions by practicing artists.

Calligraphy is, of course, not an unrestricted expression of perceived, imagined, or felt movement. Meaning dictates the major arrangement. There is a further control exerted by the form of the character, by the traditional columnar arrangement, reading from top to bottom and from right to left, and by the accepted styles of writing. In each of these cases the restriction is in the nature of an auspicious start. For the Chinese character in its typical state has developed as a "good" pattern, a stable and enduring form. Calligraphy, reduced to its essentials, consists of taking this particular form, or complex of forms, enriching the dynamic content, and more finely ordering the pattern. A calligraphic result may be obtained by line alone, but the flexible writing-brush made possible unlimited richness of complication in changing forms of stroke and tone of ink.

The various styles, which developed largely as products of utility, improvement in the instrument, and consequent new aesthetic values, act as a further control of the pattern. These styles range from formal modes of great precision, in which the artist works within very definite limits (Illustrations 1 and 2), to the extreme freedom of the *ts'ao* or cursive form (Illustrations 3 and 4). The *ts'ao* began in everyday use merely as an abbreviated and hasty method of writing, but in the hands of the calligraphist it became an aesthetic mode of flowing forms and softened angles, a style of such free expression that often the pattern of the character was distorted out of all resemblance to its original self. In such cases the character furnished only the emotional starting-point for a new adventure in movement that prescribed its own development. Although satisfying as a dynamic symbol, it is often almost illegible as a character. Between this and the formal style there are modes showing every degree of variation from freedom to close restriction.

Although all Chinese calligraphists are obsessed with the idea of vitality as a value, they do not all approach their expression of "life-movement" in the same way. The incentive may be objective in that the movement appears to reside in the pattern of the character to be written, and the writer sees the little drama of movement that he is to symbolize with his brush strokes forming in the character itself. On

the other hand, he may be more conscious of the feeling aspect of his perception. The form seems to resolve itself within his own body, and his gesture is the spontaneous extension of the pattern of movement that he feels within himself.

Related imagery may possibly play a part. Critics in describing writing and the attitude of calligraphists use an extraordinary number of similes. Writing is like the breaking of ice in a crystal jar, light as floating gossamer, or clouds drifting across a clear sky, violent as an attack of wild beasts, or raging flames sweeping the prairie. Such expressions do not necessarily involve the active imaging they suggest. Usually nothing specific is meant by the extravagant flow of images; it is an emotive use of words that symbolize directly the writer's excited response to the dynamics of the calligraphy. But in the case of the practicing calligraphist it is possible that experiencing a character may rouse some former experience of similar dynamic aspect, with the result that the new image strengthens and reinforces his excitement. Teachers of the art recognized this, and were in the habit of deliberately fostering such imagery in order to increase the vitality of their students' work. They say that a particular stroke should have the movement of a whip, or the quick staccato of a bird pecking. Others should have the force of a line of clouds stretching a thousand miles, a rock falling from a high peak, a shot from a mighty crossbow. And the student, with this new "idea in mind," spontaneously puts into his conception and gesture a new and specific energy.

So far we have been considering calligraphy as inspired by the movement pattern of the character to be written. But we sometimes hear of calligraphists who express in their writing all human emotions and the whole panorama of the visual world. Obviously they could express with abstract brush strokes only certain dynamical aspects of such experiences. Probably what really happens in such cases is that the trained calligraphist, stirred by his inner feeling, or excited by some experience of the outside world, turns to his writing as an outlet for his emotion; or deliberately takes advantage of his emotional tension in order to strengthen his response to the specific movement of the character. But, after all, response to the character is his real subject.

A story of Chang Hsü, the eighth-century poet and master of the *ts'ao* style (Illustration 3), is a case in point. Tu Fu, the great poet of

THE DYNAMIC IDEAL

One of the earliest descriptions of the dynamic ideal in Chinese calligraphy is given by Ch'ên Ssŭ as having been written by Ts'ai Yung (A.D. 133–92), a famous calligraphist of the Later Han dynasty.

> In writing first release your thoughts and give yourself up to feeling; let your nature do whatever it pleases. Then start to write. If pressed in any way, even if one had [a brush of] hair from hares of Chung-shan, one would not do well.
>
> In writing first sit silently, quiet your mind and let yourself be free. Do not speak, do not breathe fully; rest reverently, feeling as if you were before a most respected person. Then all will be well.
>
> In its forms writing should have images like sitting, walking, flying, moving, going, coming; lying down, rising; sorrowful, joyous; like worms eating leaves, like sharp swords and spears, strong bow and hard arrow; like water and fire, mist and cloud, sun and moon, all freely shown—*this* can be called calligraphy.[7]

The writer's terms of movement cover a wide range—different modalities of actual movement, of movement in static shapes, various emotional states, different speeds and intensities. Over and over again Chinese writers emphasize the non-intellectual character of the art and advise as the proper attitude a preliminary relaxation of the whole organism followed by an untroubled concentration on the work at hand. The artist has complete faith in the power of his own nature, providing he makes no intellectual effort and is not "pressed in any way," to accomplish spontaneously the desired result.

EDOARDO FAZZIOLI

CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

From Pictograph to Ideogram: The History of 214 essential Chinese/Japanese Characters

Calligraphy by
Rebecca Hon Ko

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A living language, six thousand years old

Many great civilizations have punctuated man's presence on earth, but only the Chinese civilization has survived into modern times with its principal characteristics intact. Also – and this makes it unique – it retains a language more than 6,000 years old. This is undoubtedly the outcome of a series of happy coincidences but, first and foremost, it results from the Chinese system of writing: those fascinating, mysterious characters, each of which hides a snatch of history, literature, art and popular wisdom.

Never has the word calligraphy been so aptly used as here, even though it is still difficult for the Western eye to appreciate the full beauty and depth of this writing or to understand the aesthetic message contained in its lines. The nature of the written language and the use of the same instruments, brush and ink, have ensured that the writing of characters has formed an integral part of the history of Chinese painting.

Wáng Xī Zhī (321–379), the "calligrapher sage" who lived under the Eastern Jīn (317–420), is regarded as the greatest master of all time and the model for all those wishing to become engaged in the art of character-writing. His rich poetical and imaginative style is conveyed in his portrayal of writing as a real battle. In his work *The Calligraphic Strategy of the Lady Wèi*, he writes: "The sheet of paper is a battleground; the brush: the lances and swords; the ink: the mind, the commander-in-chief; ability and dexterity: the deputies; the composition: the strategy. By grasping the brush the outcome of the battle is decided: the strokes and lines are the commanders' orders; the curves and returns are the mortal blows." An exciting battle, but fortunately a bloodless one: one of the few that mankind can enjoy and be proud of.

The first characters were incised, using wooden sticks, pointed stones, jade knives or bronze styli. These are the marks we find on ceramics, on bones, inside vases and on bronze artefacts. The graphic transformation of characters was caused by changes in the implements used for writing or the introduction of new writing surfaces such as wood, silk and paper. On a

Shāng bronze (16th–11th century B.C.) we find a design for a pen with a reservoir; it takes the form of a cup-shaped container attached to one end of a hollow straw which deposited the colouring liquid on strips of bamboo. The result was a thick, uniform line. Around 213 B.C. widespread use appears to have been made of brushes with a fibrous tip suitable for writing on silk: these worked faster, but were still too rigid and gave a thick, square line.

During the same period a further advance was made by replacing the fibrous tip with one made of leather, which was softer and more flexible. It is to a general in the imperial army of the Qín dynasty (229–206 B.C.), however, that we owe a marked improvement in the quality of writing instruments. Méng Tián, who wielded the sword as skilfully as the brush, replaced the leather tip with a tuft of soft animal hairs. His intuitive innovation was linked to the discovery of a new writing material: paper. This quickly absorbed the water, making it possible to create lines of varying intensity. He maintained that the brush, with its very soft, pliable tip, could create every sort of effect when placed in the hands of a skilled calligrapher: everything from a thin, thread-like line to a thick one; from a full, rich stroke to a broken, fading one; from a squared line to a rounded one with either a sharp or blunted point. This moment marked the birth of calligraphy, which now entered the history of Chinese painting and was treated with the same honour and dignity accorded to figurative works.

Apart from the instrument and the writing surface, another important element was India ink, in fact a Chinese discovery, obtained from soot, or lampblack, mixed into a paste with glue and perfumed with camphor and musk. Shaped into tablets or small sticks, it was decorated with figures or extracts from famous calligraphers written in gold characters. It is one of the "treasures of the literate," together with the brush, the paper and the "ink-stone" (a type of Chinese ink-pot). These stones were carefully selected, then carved and finely decorated, with two wells hollowed out in their surface: one to act as a container for water; the other, larger, in which to rub the ink tablet to produce a fine black powder. This would then be diluted with water. Using the best stones, and skilfully mixing the powder with water, it is possible to obtain the shades known to the Chinese as "the five shades of black."

The history and mythology of a script

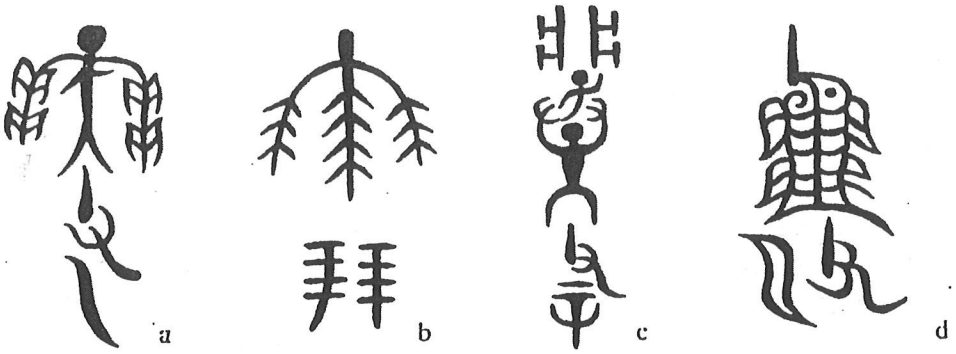
Knots tied in lengths of vegetable fiber, which represented a sort of calendar, marked the first attempts by Chinese man to establish records. Later on, notches scored on wooden laths acted as a means of recording harvests and other events; later still, sticks, stones and bones were used to

make marks on clay objects. The Neolithic village of Bànpō, more than 6,000 years old – discovered in 1953 near Xiān and the largest and most complete human settlement so far excavated – represents one of the most important sources of information on ancient Chinese writing. Two types of signs appear on red clay pots found there: the simplest ones are probably numerals, while other, more complex ones indicate names of clans and tribes (see page 12).

These are the forerunners of the characters as they are known today, even though they anticipate pictographs by several millennia; the latter require a degree of skill and manual dexterity those early Neolithic Chinese appear not to have possessed. The development of Chinese characters can be loosely subdivided into four chronological stages: the *primitive period* (8000–3000 B.C.), during which man expressed himself first in conventional signs that had a mnemonic function and later in designs that reproduced the world around him: pictographs. The *archaic period* (3000–*c.*1600 B.C.) includes the pre-dynastic period and the Xià dynasty, during which there was a transition from pictographs to ideograms, from direct to indirect symbols, thus filling the gap left by early Chinese man when faced with abstract concepts. The *historic period* spanned 18 centuries – beginning with the Shāng or Yīn dynasty and ending with the fall of the Eastern Hàn (A.D. 220) – during which writing completed its evolution and took on its definitive form: the determinative characters and phonetics were born, the main styles were developed and form and meaning were established. Over the centuries that followed, the Chinese merely made use of what had already been invented and codified during the earlier period. Finally we come to the *contemporary period*, which began in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China. This is an important age for the changes made to the writing and structure of characters, the result of a campaign to eradicate illiteracy. These modifications had three main aims: to simplify characters that were difficult but in common use; to achieve a common national pronunciation by means of the *Pǔtōnghuà* (common language); to be able to transcribe the characters in alphabetical letters in accordance with a system known as *Pīn yīn*, that is, combining the sounds with syllables, which gave uniformity to the earlier differences in transliteration. This programme of intensive "alphabetization" has clearly favoured a quantitative rather than qualitative knowledge of the written language, which is regarded as an inalienable part of the Chinese national heritage.

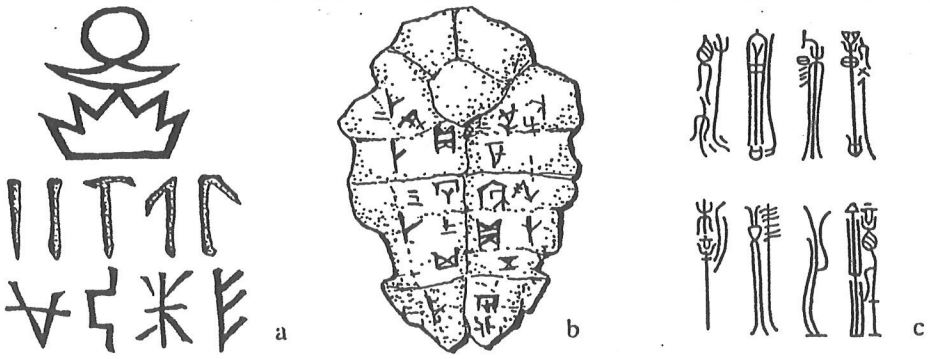
The mythological account is altogether more romantic and mysterious. This tells how the notion of progressing from knots tied in a piece of rope to drawings of words and ideas to a quicker and easier graphic sign belongs to the mythical Fú Xī, the first of the Five Emperors of the legendary period. Living 5,000 years ago, he is credited with the invention of rope,

THE FIRST CHARACTERS



Four examples of pictographs taken from ritual bronzes of the Shāng dynasty (c. 1300 B.C.).
a) Poured wine (a tongue below), cooked meat (a hand, smoke rising) and offerings of money (a man carrying two strings of shells on a pole).
b) Offerings of money, portrayed in a stylized form that is the forerunner of characters.
c) Ritual vessel with wine and cooked meat, and a man presenting his son to his ancestors through the pillars of the temple.
d) Ritual sacrifice of wine, cooked meat and fresh meat (represented by the fish).

The bronze strip from which these 12 signs are taken dates from c. 2000 B.C.: it is the earliest calligraphic discovery made so far. They are stylized drawings of animals killed during the hunt. The process of stylization that leads ultimately to modern writing has already begun.



a) Signs found on pottery vases or sherds. They date from c. 6000 B.C. and probably represent numbers and names of tribes or clans.
b) Oracular incisions on the undershell of a tortoise dating from the Shāng dynasty (16th–11th century B.C.). Some of these signs are still legible today.
c) Fascinating and highly imaginative characters incised on a bronze ritual wine-vessel from the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.) found in the grave of the noble Zēng at Síuxiàn in 1978.

fishing- and hunting-nets, musical instruments and the eight trigrams. He taught man how to use fire to cook food and how to raise and tend livestock, becoming the protective deity of nomadic life. Legends clearly pay little heed to archaeology.

In a commentary to the *Book of Changes* (*Yì Jīng*), one of the world's oldest books, there is a passage that reads as follows: "When Fú Xī governed everything under the sky, he looked upward and admired the splendid designs in the heavens, and looking down he observed the structure of the earth. He noted the elegance of the shapes of birds and animals and the balanced variety of their territories. He studied his own body and the distant realities and afterwards invented the eight trigrams in order to be able to reveal the transformations of nature and understand the essence of things." In this way, it was alleged, characters were born.

But Fú Xī is not alone; Huáng Dì, who lived 4,700 years ago, is also believed to have been the father of writing. The legendary Yellow Emperor is said to have been given the characters by a dragon that emerged from the waters of the Huáng Ghé, the Yellow River. Another legend attributes the invention of the characters to Cāng Jié, a learned minister of the Yellow Emperor. He was struck by the tracks left by animals on the ground, particularly those of birds, whose claw marks gave him the idea for the lines that make up the characters. Two thousand years later, a style of writing was born known as *niǎo zhuàn*, bird character. Finally, there is talk of a third claimant, who was given the characters as a token of gratitude by a tortoise saved from drowning. He was the third of the Five Emperors, the Great Yǔ, founder of the Xià dynasty (21st–16th century B.C.), the same person who taught man how to channel water and cultivate the land, the patron of farming life.

THE STROKES THAT FORM THE CHARACTER

	Strokes	*Names*	*Examples*
1	丶	Dot	不
2	一	Horizontal	不
3	丨	Perpendicular	不
4	丿	Downstroke to the left	八
5	丶	Downstroke to the right	八
6	亻	Tick	汉
7	乛	Horizontal hook	你
8	亅	Perpendicular hook	小
9	乚	Oblique hook	我
10	丨	Perpendicular with tick	很
11	冂	Perpendicular with fold	口
12	匚	Perpendicular with fold	画

	Strokes	*Names*	*Examples*
13	𠂉	Downstroke to the left with dot	好
14	𠂇	Downstroke to the left with fold	去
15	𠂆	Horizontal with downstroke to the left	汉
16	𠃌	Perpendicular with turn	忙
17	𠃍	Horizontal with fold and hook	习
18	𠄎	Horizontal with fold and hook (variant)	也
19	𠃎	Perpendicular with turn and hook	儿
20	𠃏	Horizontal with fold and tick	语
21	𠃑	Perpendicular with fold and turn with tick	吗
22	𠃋	Horizontal with fold and turned downstroke to the left	这
23	𠃊	Horizontal with fold and turned hook	那
24	𠃐	Horizontal with fold and turned hook (variant)	九

The strokes are in the left hand column; in the right hand column they are shown as a component of a complete character. The relevant numbers (1-24) are given in red on each page from p.24 to p.247, to denote the strokes employed in writing the radical (from *Elementary Chinese Readers* Book One *Chinese Character Exercise Book*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1980).

Brush Meditation

A Japanese Way to Mind & Body Harmony

H. E. Davey

Stone Bridge Press • *Berkeley, California*

Certain philosophical and artistic ideals are universal and apply to all methods of Japanese art. From the martial arts to Japan's fine arts to the traditional tea ceremony, particular aesthetic codes are historically held in common. Shodo and sumi-e are no exception to this rule.

Among the most significant artistic ideas in Japan are the concepts of wabi, sabi, *shibumi*, and *shibui*. These aesthetic ideals, and others, have had a profound influence on the evolution of Japanese calligraphy. I believe that if you do not understand these aesthetic principles, no great appreciation of any Japanese cultural art, whether it be shodo or *shakuhachi* flute, is possible.

WABI AND SABI

"Wabi" actually means "poverty." This has no negative implications but hints at the innocent contentment that can be found when you listen to a gentle springtime rain tap-tapping on the roof of a simple cabin. Wabi is outside of intellectual complexity and all forms of self-importance and artificiality; it relates to the discovery of the simple truths of nature. Just as nature is asymmetrical, irregular, and imperfect, wabi is the flawlessness of natural imperfection. Asymmetrical balance is vital in shodo:

> Every time I teach, I explain that art is balance. This principle can be understood throughout the world.
>
> —Kobara Ranseki Sensei

Also important is the understanding of when to use light or dark versus heavy or light lines of ink. When writing *waka* (a form of poetry), the placement of every stanza, or line of characters, in relationship to every other line on the paper is crucial. All the lines must form a balanced and artistically correct design as a whole. Kobara Ranseki teaches that "unbalance of balance" is beautiful in Japanese art.

In a way, wabi is the elegance of artlessness and even ugliness. When this artless, imperfect beauty is coupled with a particular uncultured antiquity, or even the illusion of this aged attribute, Japanese artists employ the word "sabi" to describe it. "Sabi" is literally "solitude" or "lonesomeness," but in specific instances it can also suggest an effortless quality. (Like wabi, it is almost impossible to describe directly. It can only be truly found through bona fide instruction in one of Japan's cultural arts.) Sabi can be discovered while you sit alone in

the peaceful silence of an old fishing town on an autumn nightfall or when you view a bright patch of green peeking through the snow in a mountain village.

A martial arts expert who throws his opponent with a single, almost imperceptible, effortless action is displaying sabi. (As opposed to achieving the same objective via numerous less efficient movements. The originator of judo, Kano Jigoro Sensei, expressed sabi through his principle of "maximum efficiency with minimum effort.") The same expert's humble, plain uniform, with a black belt worn all but white from age, declares a sort of beauty that cannot be detected in a Westernized gold lamé uniform and a new satin black belt. (Sometimes would-be American "experts," in an attempt to impress others with their depth of experience, will try to mimic this "worn" effect by scraping their belts with a wire brush. Unfortunately, this is simply silly, not sabi.) The natural beauty embodied by wabi and sabi can be seen in all Japanese arts, including calligraphy and painting.

Author Leonard Koren defines what he terms "the wabi-sabi universe" in the following way:[2]

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 the 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

SHIBUMI AND SHIBUI

Balanced imbalance, artlessness, solitariness, antiquity—all of this connects to wabi and sabi, which in turn have a connection with the terms "shibumi" (elegance) and "shibui" (elegant). "Shibumi" calls forth the image of something astringent in taste, while "shibui" suggests that which is unaffected or refined. In kado (flower arrangement, also known as *ikebana*), a shibumi flower arrangement evokes a feeling of coolness during a sizzling summer and warmth on a frosty day. That which is shibumi is quiet in refinement and soothing and satisfying to the heart in a manner that is not shaped exclusively by logic. It is the sentiment of "not too much," the use of aesthetic restraint in the finest sense.

Shibui indicates something that is not flashy (in color, for example), but ample in quality. Unpolished silver or gold and the color of ashes or bran can bring about a subdued yet elegant and serene shibui effect. The classical color scheme of a woman's kimono, a traditional martial artist's apparel of quilted *gi* (cotton uniform) and *hakama* (wide, skirtlike pants), the color layout of a Japanese guest room, the clothing and utensils in the tea ceremony—all evoke the attribute of shibui.

Zen has always placed emphasis on "Zen in daily life," or relating the meditative state to everyday activities. As a result, Zen monks have been expected to be able to display their enlightenment graphically through their brush writing.

Wabi-Sabi

for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers

Leonard Koren

Stone Bridge Press
Berkeley, California

A History of Obfuscation

When asked what wabi-sabi is, most Japanese will shake their head, hesitate, and offer a few apologetic words about how difficult it is to explain. Although almost every Japanese will claim to understand the *feeling* of wabi-sabi—it is, after all, supposed to be one of the core concepts of Japanese culture—very few can articulate this feeling.

Why is this? Is it because, as some Japan chauvinists suggest, one needs the right genetic predisposition? Hardly. Is it because the Japanese language, or the conventions of its use, is good for communicating subtleties of mood, vagueness, and the logic of the heart, but not so good for explaining things in a rational way? In small part, perhaps. But the main reason is that most Japanese never learned about wabi-sabi in intellectual terms, since there are no books or teachers to learn it from.

This is not by accident. Throughout history a rational understanding of wabi-sabi has been intentionally thwarted.

Zen Buddhism. Almost since its inception as a distinct aesthetic mode, wabi-sabi has been peripherally associated with Zen Buddhism. In

many ways, wabi-sabi could even be called the "Zen of things," as it exemplifies many of Zen's core spiritual-philosophical tenets.[4] The first Japanese people involved with wabi-sabi—tea masters, priests, and monks—had all practiced Zen and were steeped in the Zen mindset. One of the major themes of Zen is strident anti-rationalism. Essential knowledge, in Zen doctrine, can be transmitted only from mind to mind, not through the written or spoken word. "Those who know don't say; those who say don't know." On a pragmatic level this precept is designed to reduce the misinterpretation of easily misunderstood concepts. As a consequence, a clear, expository definition of wabi-sabi has, for all intents and purposes, been studiously avoided.

The *iemoto* system. Since the 18th century, the organization and merchandising of cultural information in Japan about "arts" such as tea ceremony, flower arranging, calligraphy, song, and dance have been franchised out by what are essentially groups of family businesses. The chief family member in each group is called the *iemoto*.[5] Primary text sources, artifacts, and other materials needed for scholarly research are often controlled by *iemoto* families who, as in Zen Buddhism, insist that such essential information be shared only with those of their choosing. The concept of wabi-sabi, a vital part of *iemoto* proprietary intellectual property (particularly in the world of tea), was not to be elucidated—given away—unless in exchange for money or favors. Artfully obscured "exotic" concepts like wabi-sabi also made good marketing bait. Obscuring the meaning of wabi-sabi, but tantalizing the consumer with glimpses of its value, was the most effective means of *iemoto*-style entrepreneurism.

Aesthetic obscurantism. Most revealing about the meaning of wabi-sabi is the fostering of the myth of inscrutability for aesthetic reasons. Some Japanese critics feel that wabi-sabi needs to maintain its mysterious and elusive—hard to define—qualities because ineffability is part of its specialness. Wabi-sabi is, they believe, a teleological benchmark—an end in itself—that can never be fully realized. From this vantage point, missing or indefinable knowledge is simply another aspect of wabi-sabi's inherent "incompleteness." Since ideological clarity or

transparency is not an essential aspect of wabi-sabi, to fully explain the concept might, in fact, diminish it.

Maybe these critics are correct. In the realm of aesthetics, reason is almost always subordinate to perception. Japanese sword makers and appraisers have traditionally talked about the aura-enshrouded "soul" of a blade in only the vaguest, most mystical terms. Nowadays, however, younger sword makers have studied and become quite clinical about the exact furnace temperatures, metal/chemical admixtures, and moment when the "nature"—the flexibility, rigidity, hardness, etc.—or "soul" of the blade is actually created. Perhaps this new-found candor deromanticizes something better left to the imagination. Yet if the ability to create the aesthetic is to be preserved, some guideposts need to be placed for future generations.

A Provisional Definition

Wabi-sabi is the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty. It occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West.[6] Wabi-sabi can in its fullest expression be a way of life. At the very least, it is a particular type of beauty.

The closest English word to wabi-sabi is probably "rustic." Webster's defines "rustic" as "simple, artless, or unsophisticated . . . [with] surfaces rough or irregular." While "rustic" represents only a limited dimension of the wabi-sabi aesthetic, it is the initial impression many people have when they first see a wabi-sabi expression. Wabi-sabi does share some characteristics with what we commonly call "primitive art," that is, objects that are earthy, simple, unpretentious, and fashioned out of natural materials. Unlike primitive art, though, wabi-sabi almost never is used representationally or symbolically.

Originally, the Japanese words "wabi" and "sabi" had quite different meanings. "Sabi" originally meant "chill," "lean," or "withered." "Wabi" originally meant the misery of living alone in nature, away from society, and

suggested a discouraged, dispirited, cheerless emotional state. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both words began to evolve in the direction of more positive aesthetic values. The self-imposed isolation and voluntary poverty of the hermit and ascetic came to be considered opportunities for spiritual richness. For the poetically inclined, this kind of life fostered an appreciation of the minor details of everyday life and insights into the beauty of the inconspicuous and overlooked aspects of nature. In turn, unprepossessing simplicity took on new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty.

Over the intervening centuries the meanings of wabi and sabi have crossed over so much that today the line separating them is very blurry indeed. When Japanese today say "wabi" they also mean "sabi," and vice-versa. Most often people simply say "wabi-sabi," the convention adopted for this book. But if we were to consider wabi and sabi as separate entities, we could characterize their differences as follows:

wabi refers to	sabi refers to
▪ a way of life, a spiritual path	▪ material objects, art and literature
▪ the inward, the subjective	▪ the outward, the objective
▪ a philosophical construct	▪ an aesthetic ideal
▪ spatial events	▪ temporal events

The Metaphysical Basis of Wabi-Sabi

What is the universe like?

Things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness. As dusk approaches in the hinterlands, a traveler ponders shelter for the night. He notices tall rushes growing everywhere, so he bundles an armful together as they stand in the field, and knots them at the top. Presto, a living grass hut. The next morning, before embarking on another day's journey, he unknots the rushes and presto, the hut de-constructs, disappears, and becomes a virtually indistinguishable part of the larger field of rushes once again. The original wilderness seems to be restored, but minute traces of the shelter remain. A slight twist or bend in a reed here and there. There is also the memory of the hut in the mind of the traveler—and in the mind of the reader reading this description. Wabi-sabi, in its purest, most idealized form, is precisely about these delicate traces, this faint evidence, at the borders of nothingness.[19]

While the universe destructs it also constructs. New things emerge out of nothingness. But we can't really determine by cursory observation whether something is in the evolving or devolving mode. If we didn't know differently we might mistake the newborn baby boy—small, wrinkled, bent, a little grotesque looking—for the very old man on the brink of death. In representations of wabi-sabi, arbitrarily perhaps, the devolving dynamic generally tends to manifest itself in things a little darker, more obscure, and quiet. Things evolving tend to be a little lighter and brighter, a bit clearer, and slightly more eye-arresting. And nothingness itself—instead of being empty space, as in the West—is alive with possibility. In metaphysical terms, wabi-sabi suggests that the universe is in constant motion toward or away from potential.

Wabi-Sabi Spiritual Values

What are the lessons of the universe?

Truth comes from the observation of nature.[20] The Japanese have tried to control nature where they could, as best they could, within the limits of available technology. But there was little they could do about the weather—hot and humid summers, cold and dry winters, and rain on the average of one out of every three days throughout the year, except during the rainy season in early summer when everything is engulfed in a fine wet mist for six to eight weeks. And there was little they could do about the earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, fires, and tidal waves that periodically and unpredictably visited their land. The Japanese didn't particularly trust nature, but they learned from it. Three of the most obvious lessons gleaned from millennia of contact with nature (and leavened with Taoist thought) were incorporated into the wisdom of wabi-sabi.

1. *All things are impermanent.* The inclination toward nothingness is unrelenting and universal. Even things that have all the earmarks of substance—things that are hard, inert, solid—

present nothing more than the *illusion* of permanence. We may wear blinders, use ruses to forget, ignore, or pretend otherwise—but all comes to nothing in the end. Everything wears down. The planets and stars, and even intangible things like reputation, family heritage, historical memory, scientific theorems, mathematical proofs, great art and literature (even in digital form)—all eventually fade into oblivion and nonexistence.

2. *All things are imperfect.* Nothing that exists is without imperfections. When we look really closely at things we see the flaws. The sharp edge of a razor blade, when magnified, reveals microscopic pits, chips, and variegations. Every craftsman knows the limits of perfection: the imperfections glare back. And as things begin to break down and approach the primordial state, they become even less perfect, more irregular.

3. *All things are incomplete.* All things, including the universe itself, are in a constant, never-ending state of becoming or dissolving. Often we arbitrarily designate moments, points along the way, as "finished" or "complete." But when

does something's destiny finally come to fruition? Is the plant complete when it flowers? When it goes to seed? When the seeds sprout? When everything turns into compost? The notion of completion has no basis in wabi-sabi.

"Greatness" exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked details. Wabi-sabi represents the exact opposite of the Western ideal of great beauty as something monumental, spectacular, and enduring. Wabi-sabi is not found in nature at moments of bloom and lushness, but at moments of inception or subsiding. Wabi-sabi is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold landscapes. Wabi-sabi is about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral: things so subtle and evanescent they are invisible to vulgar eyes.

Like homeopathic medicine, the essence of wabi-sabi is apportioned in small doses. As the dose decreases, the effect becomes more potent, more profound. The closer things get to nonexistence, the more exquisite and evocative they become. Consequently to experience wabi-sabi means you have to slow way down, be patient, and look very closely.[21]

Beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness. Wabi-sabi is ambivalent about separating beauty from non-beauty or ugliness. The beauty of wabi-sabi is, in one respect, the condition of coming to terms with what you consider ugly. Wabi-sabi suggests that beauty is a dynamic event that occurs between you and something else. Beauty can spontaneously occur at any moment given the proper circumstances, context, or point of view. Beauty is thus an altered state of consciousness, an extraordinary moment of poetry and grace.

To the wealthy merchants, samurai, and aristocrats who practiced tea, a medieval Japanese farmer's hut, which the wabi-sabi tea room was modeled on, was a quite lowly and miserable environment. Yet, in the proper context, with some perceptual guidance, it took on exceptional beauty. Similarly, early wabi-sabi tea utensils were rough, flawed, and of undistinguished muddy colors. To tea people accustomed to the Chinese standards of refined, gorgeous, and perfect beauty, they were initially perceived as ugly. It is almost as if the pioneers of wabi-sabi intentionally looked for such examples of the conventionally not-beautiful—homely but not excessively grotesque—and created challenging situations where they would be transformed into their opposite.

The Wabi-Sabi State of Mind

How do we feel about what we know?

Acceptance of the inevitable. Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic appreciation of the evanescence of life. The luxuriant tree of summer is now only withered branches under a winter sky. All that remains of a splendid mansion is a crumbled foundation overgrown with weeds and moss. Wabi-sabi images force us to contemplate our own mortality, and they evoke an existential loneliness and tender sadness. They also stir a mingled bittersweet comfort, since we know all existence shares the same fate.

The wabi-sabi state of mind is often communicated through poetry, because poetry lends itself to emotional expression and strong, reverberating images that seem "larger" than the small verbal frame that holds them (thus evoking the larger universe). Rikyu used this oft-repeated poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) to describe the mood of wabi-sabi:

All around, no flowers in bloom

Nor maple leaves in glare,

A solitary fisherman's hut alone

On the twilight shore

Of this autumn eve.[22]

Certain common sounds also suggest the sad-beautiful feeling of wabi-sabi. The mournful quarks and caws of seagulls and crows. The forlorn bellowing of foghorns. The wails of ambulance sirens echoing through canyons of big city buildings.

Appreciation of the cosmic order. Wabi-sabi suggests the subtlest realms and all the mechanics and dynamics of existence, way beyond what our ordinary senses can perceive. These primordial forces are evoked in everything wabi-sabi in much the same way that Hindu mandalas or medieval European cathedrals were constructed to emotionally convey their respective cosmic schemes. The materials out of which things wabi-sabi are made elicit these transcendent feelings. The way rice paper transmits light in a diffuse glow. The manner in which clay cracks as it dries. The color and textural metamorphosis of metal when it tarnishes and rusts. All these represent the physical forces and deep structures that underlie our everyday world.

Wabi-Sabi Moral Precepts

Knowing what we know, how should we act?

Get rid of all that is unnecessary. Wabi-sabi means treading lightly on the planet and knowing how to appreciate whatever is encountered, no matter how trifling, whenever it is encountered. "Material poverty, spiritual richness" are wabi-sabi bywords. In other words, wabi-sabi tells us to stop our preoccupation with success—wealth, status, power, and luxury—and enjoy the unencumbered life.

Obviously, leading the simple wabi-sabi life requires some effort and will and also some tough decisions. Wabi-sabi acknowledges that just as it is important to know when to make choices, it is also important to know when *not* to make choices: to let things be. Even at the most austere level of material existence, we still live in a world of things. Wabi-sabi is exactly about the delicate balance between the pleasure we get from things and the pleasure we get from freedom from things

Focus on the intrinsic and ignore material hierarchy. The behavior prescribed for the wabi-sabi tea room is a clear expression of wabi-sabi values. First, as a symbolic act of

humility, everyone either bends or crawls to enter the tea room through an entrance purposely designed low and small. Once inside, the atmosphere is egalitarian. Hierarchical thinking—"this is higher/better, that is lower/worse"—is not acceptable. The poor student, the wealthy business person, and the powerful religious leader—distinctly different social classes on the outside—are equals within. Similarly, to the sensitive observer, the essential qualities of the objects inside the tea room are either obvious or they are not. Conventional aids to discernment, like the origins and names of the object makers, are of no wabi-sabi consequence. The normal hierarchy of material value related to cost is also pushed aside. Mud, paper, and bamboo, in fact, have more intrinsic wabi-sabi qualities/value than do gold, silver, and diamonds. In wabi-sabi, there is no "valuable," since that would imply "not valuable." An object obtains the state of wabi-sabi only for the moment it is appreciated as such.[23] In the tea room, therefore, things come into existence only when they express their wabi-sabi qualities. Outside the tea room, they return to their ordinary reality, and their wabi-sabi existence fades away.

The Material Qualities of Wabi-Sabi

What objects/motifs/juxtapositions express our understanding of the universe, or create that understanding in others?

The suggestion of natural process. Things wabi-sabi are expressions of time frozen. They are made of materials that are visibly vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human treatment. They record the sun, wind, rain, heat, and cold in a language of discoloration, rust, tarnish, stain, warping, shrinking, shriveling, and cracking. Their nicks, chips, bruises, scars, dents, peeling, and other forms of attrition are a testament to histories of use and misuse. Though things wabi-sabi may be on the point of dematerialization (or materialization)—extremely faint, fragile, or desiccated—they still possess an undiminished poise and strength of character.

Irregular. Things wabi-sabi are indifferent to conventional good taste. Since we already know what the "correct" design solutions are, wabi-sabi thoughtfully offers the "wrong" solutions.[24] As a result, things wabi-sabi often appear odd, misshapen, awkward, or what many people would consider ugly. Things

wabi-sabi may exhibit the effects of accident, like a broken bowl glued back together again. Or they may show the result of just letting things happen by chance, like the irregular fabrics that are created by intentionally sabotaging the computer program of a textile loom.

Intimate. Things wabi-sabi are usually small and compact, quiet and inward-oriented. They beckon: get close, touch, relate. They inspire a reduction of the psychic distance between one thing and another thing; between people and things.

Places wabi-sabi are small, secluded, and private environments that enhance one's capacity for metaphysical musings. Wabi-sabi tea rooms, for example, may have fewer than a hundred square feet of floor space. They have low ceilings, small windows, tiny entrances, and very subdued lighting. They are tranquil and calming, enveloping and womb-like. They are a world apart: nowhere, anywhere, everywhere. Within the tea room, as within all places wabi-sabi, every single object seems to expand in importance in inverse proportion to its actual size.[25]

Unpretentious. Things wabi-sabi are unstudied and inevitable looking. They do not blare out "I am important" or demand to be the center of attention. They are understated and unassuming, yet not without presence or quiet authority. Things wabi-sabi easily coexist with the rest of their environment.[26]

Things wabi-sabi are appreciated only during direct contact and use; they are never locked away in a museum. Things wabi-sabi have no need for the reassurance of status or the validation of market culture. They have no need for documentation of provenance. Wabi-sabi-ness in no way depends on knowledge of the creator's background or personality. In fact, it is best if the creator is of no distinction, invisible, or anonymous.

Earthy. Things wabi-sabi can appear coarse and unrefined. They are usually made from materials not far removed from their original condition within, or upon, the earth and are rich in raw texture and rough tactile sensation. Their craftsmanship may be impossible to discern.

Murky. Things wabi-sabi have a vague, blurry, or attenuated quality—as things do as they approach nothingness (or come out of it). Once-hard edges take on a soft pale glow. Once-substantial materiality appears almost sponge-like. Once-bright saturated colors fade into muddy earth tones or the smoky hues of dawn and dusk. Wabi-sabi comes in an infinite spectrum of grays: gray-blue brown, silver-red grayish black, indigo yellowish-green. . . . And browns: blackish deep brown-tinged blue, muted greens. . . . And blacks: red black, blue black, brown black, green black. . . .

Less often, things wabi-sabi can also come in the light, almost pastel colors associated with a recent emergence from nothingness. Like the off-whites of unbleached cotton, hemp, and recycled paper. The silver-rusts of new saplings and sprouts. The green-browns of tumescent buds.

Simple. Simplicity is at the core of things wabi-sabi. Nothingness, of course, is the ultimate simplicity. But before and after nothingness, simplicity is not so simple. To paraphrase Rikyu, the essence of wabi-sabi, as expressed in tea, is simplicity itself: fetch water, gather

firewood, boil the water, prepare tea, and serve it to others. Further details, Rikyu suggests, are left to one's own invention.

But how do you exercise the restraint that simplicity requires without crossing over into ostentatious austerity? How do you pay attention to all the necessary details without becoming excessively fussy? How do you achieve simplicity without inviting boredom?

The simplicity of wabi-sabi is probably best described as the state of grace arrived at by a sober, modest, heartfelt intelligence. The main strategy of this intelligence is economy of means. Pare down to the essence, but don't remove the poetry. Keep things clean and unencumbered, but don't sterilize. (Things wabi-sabi are emotionally warm, never cold.) Usually this implies a limited palette of materials. It also means keeping conspicuous features to a minimum. But it doesn't mean removing the invisible connective tissue that somehow binds the elements into a meaningful whole. It also doesn't mean in any way diminishing something's "interestingness," the quality that compels us to look at that something over, and over, and over again.