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.

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 parroting 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.
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.

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 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.
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.

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 gold, 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
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, courtiers, 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.

**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.
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.

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.
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.

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.