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The Influence of Zen on Contemporary Aesthetics in Decorative Arts and Interior Design

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The Influence of Zen on Contemporary Aesthetics
in Decorative Arts and Interior Design

by

Ronit Lee

A thesis submitted in conformity
with the requirements for the Master Degree in Fine and Decorative Arts & Design
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The Influence of Zen on Contemporary Aesthetics in Decorative Arts and Interior Design

By Ronit Lee

This paper aims to explore a select number of Zen concepts which form the basis of the teachings of Zen Buddhism since its introduction to Japan in the seventh century, and highlight their continued influence on contemporary aesthetics in the decorative arts and design in Japan and elsewhere. These Japanese aesthetic concepts, developed over the centuries, take their cues from the sensitivity to and appreciation of the ephemerality of life and nature, and the popularity of the ritual of the Tea Ceremony, which has been aligned with Zen Buddhism early on. These ideals of beauty have gone beyond religion and spirituality, and have been woven into the very fabric of daily life of the Japanese. Some of the concepts of Zen may be familiar to Euro-American audiences, yet a reevaluation of their influence on design and theories of beauty, and a review of design objects and interiors of the twenty-first century that illustrate Zen aesthetics is timely.

Zen may have become a byword for minimalism and tranquillity, however it offers much more depth than just a veneer of simplicity and purity. Zen is a pursuit of spirituality, aesthetic expressions and designs of Zen principles within our homes can remind us to appreciate the fleeting nature of life, and may elevate not just the beauty of our homes, but also our minds.

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Japanese Eras

Early Japan	up to 710 CE
Nara	710 - 794
Heian	794 - 1185
Kamakura	1185 - 1338
Muromachi	1338 - 1573
Momoyama	1573 - 1603
Edo	1603- 1867
Meiji	1868 - 1912
Taisho	1912 - 1926
Showa	1926 - 1989
Heisei	1989 - 2019
Reiwa	2019 -

Introduction

Home to silent rock gardens of individual self-reflection, and futuristic neon bright cities for millions of people. A country of demure *geishas* in silk kimonos, and *yakuza* members covered in full body tattoos. A culture that has given us mindful tea ceremonies and nighttime *karaoke*, Japan evokes contradictory images. It is within these paradoxes that the country and its people reveal a highly developed aesthetic culture that goes back centuries and can be traced to Japan's indigenous religion of Shintoism, Zen Buddhism and appreciation of nature. To the Japanese, the aesthetic experience is intrinsic to the spiritual journey, and rituals have been elevated to the status of art. Since its initial arrival in the sixth century, the teachings of Zen Buddhism and its aesthetics have been assimilated into the cultural and spiritual history of Japan.

The objective of Zen is to attain enlightenment and self awareness, with the belief that Buddha nature is inherent to everyone. Through rituals which encourage self awareness, the Japanese have elevated daily chores to an art form and have woven them into the very fabric of their lives. Zen may have become ubiquitous in European and American thinking with its prevalence in self-help books for the mind, home and business, as most recently seen in the decluttering method of Japanese author Marie Kondo Zen who advises to only hold on to things which spark joy. However, it is without doubt that the ideals of Zen and its aesthetics may have positive effects on our homes and objects around us, and potentially enhance our daily lives, our well being and our view of the world around us.

Aesthetics may not be a rational system of thought, however, within Zen, aesthetics can provide an intuitive experience that can play a role in our awareness and appreciation of the world around us. Potentially aesthetics can elicit a profound attainment of enlightenment.

This thesis considers the aesthetic ideals of Zen and its influence on contemporary design. Chapter I aims to review the history of Zen and its arrival on the shores of Japan and summarise scholarly studies of its aesthetic attributes. Chapter II traces the evolution of the traditional Tea Ceremony, considered to be the embodiment of Zen, from its appropriation of the

extravagant Chinese ritual in the Palaces of Japan to the revolutionary sixteenth century contemplative ceremony in the Tea Garden, Tea Hut and utensils, and its continued significance to designers and makers. Chapter III considers the aesthetic of *wabi sabi* arising from the Tea Ceremony and its enduring appeal to contemporary interiors and decorative arts. Chapter IV focuses on the unique concept of *ma*, an aesthetic of space time which highlights emptiness. Finally, Chapter V delves into the Zen notion of *mu*, without, and *mushin*, no mind, which is at the core of Zen and its physical expressions. The objective of this paper is to reiterate the enduring influence and relevance of Zen ideals on contemporary aesthetics in decorative arts and interior design.

A few items to note. Traditionally, and as seen in this thesis, those practicing *chanoyu* were men, though women outnumber men in the Art of Tea today. Throughout the research for this paper, it has been evident that whilst there are some women designers and makers at the highest level, they are far and few between. This in itself is a fitting subject for a thesis. The writer of this paper has focused on highlighting contemporary design and decorative objects that showcase the aesthetics of the selected Zen concepts, without any intended focus on the gender of the maker. The subject matter, and objective for this thesis is design.

Per Japanese usage, for historic figures, the author of this paper has listed Japanese last names first. For Japanese figures of the modern era and all international names, the first name is followed by last name.

Lastly. It cannot be omitted to acknowledge the dichotomy of exploring aesthetics in material objects that are not for functional use alone, particularly when viewed through the lens of a set of beliefs that teach wealth and materiality are fleeting, and everything evolves from, and to nothingness. Material culture is not foreign to Zen, ultimately it is through the ritual of the Tea Ceremony and the use of tea utensils, that Zen Buddhism has spread throughout and gained hold in Japan. Philosopher of Indian art and interpreter of oriental art to Western Audiences, Ananda K. Commaraswamy (1877 - 1947), has taught that authentic art forms and

objects embody spiritual meanings.¹ Zen is a spiritual path, and the aesthetics arising from its teachings, offer lessons of awareness and mindfulness for anyone willing to learn to attain enlightenment. It is with this consideration that the author invites you to explore a world of beauty in simplicity and awareness.

¹ Sophie Walker, *The Japanese Garden*, (London, 2017), 121.

Chapter I. The Origins of Zen and Japanese Aesthetics

禅

During the third century CE, the archipelago of Japan was known in China by the word *Wa*, the oldest recorded name for Japan. The original meaning for the kanji ideogram of *wa* (和) is harmony, which later the Japanese chose to also describe themselves. Influenced by Chinese Confucianism and Buddhist philosophy, legendary Regent Prince Shōtoku (574 - 622CE) wrote *wa* into his ethical code for the Japanese people, establishing the moral framework for the nascent nation state with emphasis on the value of harmony and equality for all. A good citizen is one who contributes to the *wa* of the community, bringing *heiwa*, peace, and *chōwa*, accord.

Whilst *Nippon* is used as an endonym today for Japan, *wa* is still used as a prefix in kanji compounds to signify things that are Japanese, such as *washi* (Japanese paper), *wafū* (Japanese style) and *washitsu* (traditional Japanese style room), carrying the notion of harmony into all Japanese things. To this day, *wa* in design refers to simple form, natural materials and approach of craftsmanship, concepts that will be reiterated throughout this paper.

Japan was a country long dominated by outside influences from Korea, and particularly China in advancement in language, religions and culture. During each era in the history of Japan, the adopted attributes of the arts gradually subsided as Japan “assimilated and regenerated,”² instilling their own sensibilities into the aesthetics of their daily lives. During the Edo period (1615- 1868), Japan entered *sakoku* (closed country), shutting its borders and withdrawing into seclusion for over two hundred and fifty years. The rulers at that time, the Tokugawa Shogunate, sought to eliminate any foreign influence or military interference by the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries and colonial expansionists as in the rest of Asia. Contact with other countries was limited to trade with the Dutch and the Portuguese in the port of Nagasaki, and on a smaller scale with China. This isolated, yet politically stable and peaceful

² Hirokaze Arakwa, *Traditions in Japanese Design*, (Tokyo 1975), 12.

time allowed Japan's culture to mature and blossom, to revere their own land and country, encouraging an epoch of naturalists,

Shintō, the way of the gods, is the quintessence of the Japanese spirit. Based on nature and devotion to *kami*, spirits, which inhabit all things, it is the indigenous religion of Japan, going back to 10,000BCE. Without an independent philosophy or monotheism, *Shintō* believes in the sacred power of all things, and due to its focus on ritual rather than belief, it can coexist with other religions.

Various Buddhist beliefs influenced the spiritual life of the Japanese, but Zen Buddhism has gone deeper to permeate all aspects of Japanese life and its aesthetics. Arguably, this proliferation of Zen ideology, a thousand years after the life of Buddha (567- 480 BCE), into the arts and culture in particular, can be attributed to the scholarly and artistic monks in the Zen Monasteries who traveled widely outside of Japan from the seventh century. Patronised by the politically influential classes of Japan who not only supported this exchange of ideas and materials, but were content to follow Zen teachings which follow simplicity, austerity, discipline and action above thought. The *Shogun* (Commander in Chief) and *Samurai* (military nobility) found these compatible to their military ideology of *Bushidō* (Warrior's Way), the 'ethic of willingness to self-sacrifice so that the self was eliminated,'³ and pre-existing *Shintō* beliefs that intrinsically all beings are good. With the influence of Buddhist monks, and their publications of popular education texts helped⁴ Zen became pervasive both with the social elite and the great masses who practiced Zen, becoming truly established by the late twelfth century. Whilst Shintoism is Japan's indigenous religion, Buddhism is still today one of the major religions in the country, with most Japanese practicing both religions or more. It is said that the Japanese turn to *Shintō* for help in life, and to Buddhism in death.⁵

³ Mira Nakshima, *Nature, Form & Spirit*, (New York, 2003), 62.

⁴ This system of Zen publications to educate the masses was only replaced after the 1868 Restoration

⁵ Nancy Hume, *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, (Albany, 1996), 28.

Zen is a translation of the Sanskrit word *dhayāna*, and the Chinese word *ch'an*, which means meditation. The Japanese absorbed various religious and spiritual ideas from Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism and made Zen Buddhism all their own. Zen places great emphasis on the possibility of precipitous awakening, the "realisation when one sees the illusory construct of one's ego and grasps one's Buddha nature."⁶ Artistic engagement and appreciation is an effective vehicle for truth in Zen; art can be a potent way of communicating spiritual truths. The developing aesthetic principles of Zen reached beyond religion and influenced Japanese arts and culture.

Along with Zen ideology, Buddhist monks brought tea to Japan in the sixth century, used as a stimulant to stay alert during long periods of meditation. The first record of tea drinking was monk Kūkai serving tea to Emperor Saga in 814CE. The tea ceremony was initially derived from China's "conspicuous consumption"⁷ for the mercantile and upper class with priceless Chinese ceramics, extravagant paintings and the most refined *matcha* (powdered green tea leaves). By the late ninth century, *Chadō* (the Way of Tea) was fully embedded into the culture of Japan. In opposition to this lavish pastime, religious figures cultivated a more humble ceremony using simply made tools in a rustic tea house to remind the ruling Shogunates of humility. Whilst Sen no Rikyu (1522 - 1591), a merchant's son and a Zen Buddhism student, although not the first to establish the humbler tea ceremony, he introduced the simple teahouse to the grand palaces, and codified the way of the tea. *Wabi-cha*, the humble tea ceremony, was a reminder of the modesty and compassion of life, and with its exacting but humbling ceremony it was elevated to the status of art. It is a philosophy, a way of practicing and relaying Buddhist teachings. Today, the tea ceremony as well as religion, culture, arts and aesthetics are all interwoven in Japan.

The word Zen entered the English vocabulary as early as 1727CE⁸ but its full significance can be traced to philosophers and intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century.

⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-zen/>

⁷ Glenn Adamson, Getting to Noh, (Hyperallergic, May 2020)

⁸ According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, Zen means a state of calm attentiveness in which one's actions are guided by intuition rather than by conscious effort

With the arrival of USA's Commodore Perry and his ships in 1853, Japan reluctantly resumed trade with the West. In response to the accelerating Westernisation of Japan following the resumption of trade with the West, Japanese discourses began on preservation of the uniqueness of the Japanese character and national aesthetics. In the start of the twentieth century, prominent Zen scholars such as Okakura Kakuzo (1863 - 1913), who linked the role of Chadō to the aesthetics of Japan in his *Book of Tea* (1906), greatly contributed to the development of artists in Japan. Philosopher Kuki Shūzō (1888 - 1941) lectured on the nature of Japanese character, and Professor of Buddhist Philosophy, Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870 - 1966) published the book '*Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*' (1938) in English, propagating that 'zen is an antidote to acceleration and acquisitiveness.'⁹ Suzuki later moved to New York City and taught Zen Buddhism at Columbia University 1950 - 1957. The lectures, open to the public, contributed to the growing popularity of Zen in the USA.

The Japanese philosopher, Zen Buddhist scholar, Tea Ceremony Master and Kyoto University Professor, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1889 - 1980), wrote articles in the influential intellectual journal *Shisō* exploring the role of Buddhism in Japanese culture, and developed a set of pillars in an attempt to identify and appraise Zen aesthetics.

i. *Fukinsei* 不均齊

Fukinsei means asymmetry or irregularity. It is epitomized by the *Ensō* (Fig. 1), the Zen circle, where "uniformity is undesirable,"¹⁰ and therefore, is truer to nature. An embrace of the perfection of imperfection, it applauds the spontaneity of an artist in opposition to the calculated approach of reworking and refining art to fit ideals of symmetry, beauty and perfection as seen in classical art and architecture. *Fukinsei* is a notion of embracing one's irregularities and non-judgmental acceptance. It can be seen as self compassionate as opposed to seeking impossible standards. Most commonly, it is an informal style that can be seen in *ikebana* (flower

⁹ Glenn Adamson, *Getting to Noh*, (Hyperallergic May 2020)

¹⁰ Hume, *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, 32.

arranging) or *shodō* (calligraphy) and through the use of odd numbers when arranging objects. This informal asymmetry is unconcerned with perfection and grace, arguably transcending beyond holiness.

ii. *Kanso* 簡素

Kanso is simplicity and sparseness, the essence of things. Plainness of form and unobtrusive use of colour as seen in a tea room or a *sumi-e* (simple ink drawing), where light and shade can both originate from a single colour. The absence of clutter and elimination of the non-essential allows one to live simply and is intrinsically linked to the Buddhist notion of non-attachment and non-longing. This simplicity can translate to a world without limits, as in "a cloudless sky."¹¹

iii. *Koko* 考古

Koko can be phrased as austere sublimity, "a discernment of beauty and depth in phenomena that are aged or seasoned,"¹² a beauty found in the faded. *Koko* has been aligned with *wabi sabi*, the beauty of imperfection and impermanence. This acceptance of ephemerality and aging can be seen in Zen art which seeks to capture a withered tree, or fallen leaves.

iv. *Shizen* 自然

Shizen is nature, and translates literally as "self created."¹³ Viewed in an artistic context, it is avoidance of pretense, or refrain from premeditation. A resonance with western notions of being "in the flow" or being "in the zone" when approaching one's work. It is the optimal experience of one's being; a full immersion in an activity with a focus on the present moment without any

¹¹ Shinichi Hisamatsu, *Zen Aesthetics*, (Tokyo, 1971), 31.

¹² T. Lomas, *Zen and the Art of Living Mindfully*, (2017), 1729.

¹³ Walker, *The Japanese Garden*, 10.

conscious effort or force and can be compared to the notion of *mushin*, no mind, which will be discussed further in Chapter V.

v. *Yūgen* 幽玄

Yūgen describes profound depth, subtlety and mystery. An idea which developed in the Kamakura period (1185 - 1333), it conveys “those things which cannot be easily grasped in words.”¹⁴ A pertinent example is the abstract rock garden of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto which offers many perspectives for viewers, and invites one to meditate on its dry landscape surrounded by the ever changing seasons. “Unlike most works of art, no amount of familiarity with this Zen Rock Garden can provide one with any solid assurance as to what it is that one will meet in experiencing it, for the work drives one into oneself. It is not a finished thing, it manifests *yūgen* and is thus an open invitation to contemplative being.”¹⁵ *Yūgen* can provide a boundless meditation that does not reveal all of the answers, bound in melancholy.

vi. *Datsuzoku* 脱俗

Datsuzoku is freedom from attachment, rule, routine. Not being bound to things or a habitual construct, allowing one to view the world with complete clarity. The rule of no-rule allows unrestrained freedom, ensuring that each moment is unique and without any repetition. To live in the moment is to truly experience the world, without allowing past experiences to overshadow one’s view or thinking.

vii. *Seijaku* 静寂

The final pillar of Hisamatu’s Zen aesthetics is one of serenity, purity, silence and inward orientation. Made of the characters *sei*, absence of turbulent emotions, and *jaku*, tranquility of an untroubled mind, *seijaku* is calmness of body, mind and soul.

¹⁴ Donald Keene, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, (New York, 1958), 365.

¹⁵ Eliot Deutch, *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics*, (Hawaii, 1985), 26 - 27.

Hisamatsu emphasised that these seven attributes are not independent of each other, but rather “each is of equal significance.”¹⁶ A work of art or a decorative object may have one or more of these aesthetics and can be simple, tranquil and natural, yet if it is lacking any of the other characteristics, it does not meet the all of these requirements.

Himsamatsu determined all seven of the characteristics were to be found in a *Raku* tea bowl by Nonkō (1599- 1659), the abstract rock garden of Ryoanji in Kyoto; and the thatched-roof Shōkin-tei tea house in the Katsura Imperial Villa, outside Kyoto. (Figs. 2 - 4)

These attributes can also be appreciated in the Akari light sculptures, designed by Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904 - 1988). Made in Gifu, Japan, the resilient mulberry bark paper and bamboo lights are “poetic, ephemeral and tentative.”¹⁷ Initially made in 1951, these beloved and iconic design objects are made to this day, used ubiquitously in homes and commanding high auction prices for original mid century pieces. The natural materials and simplicity of the Akari designs evoke the aesthetics listed above and lend themselves to a multitude of interpretations, which continue to inspire collaborations with contemporary makers, and inevitably, many reproductions as well. (Figs. 5 - 7)

Japanese aesthetics are not limited to those arising from Zen Buddhism. Japan’s native religion of *Shintō* contributed to aesthetics by emphasis on sensitivity to beauty of nature and its spiritual power in architecture and sacred spaces, focus on pure forms and the act of creating, a spiritual vocation honouring craft makers. Other ideals of beauty which influenced the arts in Japan are *shibui* which refers to unobtrusive and authentic beauty originating in the Nambokuchō Period (1336 - 1392). Philosopher and founder of *mingei*, the Japanese craft movement, Soetsu Yanagi (1889- 1961) wrote “the world abounds with different aspects of beauty... Each person, according to his disposition and environment, will feel a special affinity to one or another aspect. But when his taste grows more refined, he will necessarily arrive at a

¹⁶ Shin’ichiro Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, (Tokyo, 1971), 29.

¹⁷ <https://shop.noguchi.org/collections/akari-light-sculptures>

beauty which is *shibui*. Many a term serves to denote the secret of beauty, but this is the final word.”¹⁸

Miyabi, a fine elegant aesthetic of the Heian period (794 - 1185), can be appreciated in simple yet poignant pleasures such as a branch of a plum blossom or the delicate colours of a silk kimono robe. Finally, the contemporary aesthetic of *kawaii*, which began in the 1970s and is used extensively in popular culture to describe apparel, toys, and personal appearance as cute and adorable, as evidenced by Hello Kitty.

Hisamatsu believed these principles of Zen aesthetics are not solely for the appreciation or pursuit of art, craft and architecture, but can be a way of being and leading one’s life, thereby emphasising that Zen is a Way of life. These pillars provide insight into the Japanese ideals of aestheticism and encapsulate the Japanese sensitivity to beauty. The selected designs in this thesis may not necessarily embody each of these pillars, but they are all a creation that resonate with the tenets of Zen and its beauty.

¹⁸ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, (New York, 1972), 183.

Chapter II. The Timelessness of *Chadō* (The Way of the Tea)

茶道

Initially imported from China, the cult of tea took hold in the imperial court during the Heian Period (794 - 1185), as a pastime enjoyed outdoors in the gardens by the noblemen of the time, whilst listening to the sounds of the strings of *koto*, the Japanese instrument. 'Palace tea' used 'brick tea', where tea leaves were pounded into a paste and molded into small dumpling shapes, which were then brewed and seasoned, enjoyed in imported Chinese porcelain cups. This pursuit of tea was not limited to drinking the hot beverage, but included taste competitions and thereby gambling, an extravagant and rowdy hobby for the upper class.

The *cha-no-yu-dana*, a lavishly decorated Chinese style tea cabinet, stored the various utensils for the ceremony. Considered as a basis for the tea room, the cabinet was initially stored in pantries or in an anteroom to ready the ceremony. The prepared tea was served in a separate room dedicated to audiences to where it was prepared, a key characteristic of 'palace tea'. The tea bowls and utensils used in the elaborate tea gatherings were brought from mainland China and became symbols of power and wealth. *Daisu*, stands to display the extravagant utensils, were added later into the setting. This era of spectacle and excess is symbolized by the erection of the Golden Pavilion villa in Kyoto (1397), now a Zen temple. With increase in trade and import of Chinese wares without any oversight or discernment, works of little value arrived into Japan. Subsequent eighth Shogunate Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435 - 1490), comparable to the Medici of Japan, and is remembered for his Silver Pavilion (1490), sought to remedy this through the promotion of *doboshu*, also known as the *Amis*, expert connoisseurs, to oversee the purchase and valuation of all art and craft objects.

In response to the excessive rituals practiced in the palaces, the Tea House and the ceremony were revolutionised in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, first by Zen priest Murata Jukō (1422 - 1502), whose aesthetics can be discerned from this quote "the moon is not pleasing unless partly obscured by a cloud."¹⁹ Jukō sought to reunite tea with spirituality and

¹⁹ Hume, *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, 247.

simplicity, restraint and muted beauty. Takeno Jōō (1502 - 1555), a merchant and heir of a wealthy tanner, persisted with change to the Tea Ceremony, and designated a dedicated smaller informal tea ceremony room inside the palace, of just four and a half tatami mats, with the belief that a small space without any airs would promote calmness within the ceremony.

The most drastic and notable changes to the Tea Ceremony are attributed to Sen no Rikyu (1522 - 1591), grandson to one of the *Amis*, and son to a merchant, who rose to become Tea Master, equivalent to a Minister of Cultural Affairs. Rikyu relocated the tea ceremony from the grand palace halls to a more humble stand alone structure in the manner of a home of a hermit. The build of this new tea house differed greatly to other Japanese architecture. Not only was it isolated from the other buildings of the palace, it was built as a structure with fixed walls and with humble materials such as split bamboo. A small space of just a single *tatami* (Japanese straw mat of five by three feet, based on human dimensions), with a low door so one had to set aside their sword and bow to enter as reminder of humility and encourage equality amongst the guests. Small irregularly spaced windows were cut in to allow natural light. Tea utensils were everyday objects of muted colours, or those made by local artists, to be treated with respect. The *daisu*, tea utensil stand, was removed, and the utensils placed directly on the tatami mat without any decorum.

Rikyu sought to create a place so modest so as to reveal the beauty of a single flower, and despite its obvious simplicity, the Tea Hut is thoughtfully designed in every single detail to craft a tea ceremony that symbolises harmony, respect, purity and tranquility. This tea ceremony was not just a novelty that sought to return to the humble roots of Zen, it presented an opportunity for the merchant class to elevate itself to that of the nobility and the warrior class through authority over the Tea Ceremony. Rikyu's profound legacy can be summed up by contemporary historian Kumakura Isao's "Rikyu ignited explosions in every aspect of *chanoyu*."²⁰

²⁰ Sen Sōshitsu XV, *The Japanese Way of Tea*, (Hawaii, 1998), vii.

The new tea house was not conceived as a space but as a moment to be experienced. The experience of each ceremony was perceived as an intense and precious moment that could never be recreated, summed up in Japanese as *ichi-go, ichi-e* (each meeting, only once), similar to the saying of Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “you cannot step in the same river twice.” Rikyu’s discernment of *wabicha* is best illustrated by the anecdote of his son having swept the leaves off the garden path in the Tea Garden prior to the arrival of guests, leaving the ground immaculate and pristine. Rikyu, surveying the garden, shook the tree so leaves would fall to the ground, reiterating there is no perfection in nature.

Kakuzo Okakura (1863 - 1919), wrote ‘The Book of Tea’ whilst in Boston, working as Advisor to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, to educate his fellow scholars as to the traditions of tea in Japan. “Tea with us became more than an idealisation of the form of drinking; it is a religion of the art of life.”²¹ Every object chosen for the ceremony plays a role to engage all of the five senses. The sound of boiling water; the scents of burning incense and the fragrance of tea; its flavour and the accompanying *wagashi*, confection; sensation of a tea bowl in one’s hands, a scroll chosen for the alcove and the movements of the Tea Master which can be interpreted as a dance. This contemplative and grounding experience is not dissimilar to a Zen meditation, creating an experience of mindfulness where all the senses are engaged and the mind is emptied.

Tea houses and tea ceremonies are an inspiration to this day, both in the traditional and contemporary style. Japanese Designer, Tokujin Yoshioka (1967 -) works with light and nature, as seen in the contemporary glass Tea House initially debuted at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. The Kou-an *chashitsu* (tea room), beside a Kyoto Buddhist Temple in 2015, allows guests to view a Temple built during Heian Period (794 - 1185). Whilst there is no traditional garden attached to the tea room, a view of the Temple’s gardens and the mountains beyond can be contemplated from the glass Tea Room. In lieu of the traditional scroll or flower arrangement, the sunlight coming through the prism glass roof provides a rainbow at certain hours of the day.

²¹ Michael Freeman, *Mindful Design of Japan*, (London, 2015), 9.

Glass inherently is the very antithesis to a hermit's home, but its use in this interpretation of the traditional tea room allows the connection to the Temple and the surrounding nature, bringing a modern material to a traditional concept. (Fig. 8)

The Japanese artist, Hiroshi Sugimoto (1948 -), is renowned for his black and white photographs which explore time and memory using a traditional large format camera. Following various architectural commissions in the early 2000s, Sugimoto established an architecture firm in 2007 with fellow Japanese architect Tomoyuki Sakakida (1976 -). Named *Shinsoken*, New Material Research Library, in nod to “new materials is old materials, forgotten,”²² the aim of the practice is to give form and expression to a lost ancient spirit. Sugimoto explains this natural evolution of his art in that “architecture is getting close to art and vice versa.”²³

Greatly inspired by the Sen no Rikyu, Sugimoto speaks of the tea ceremony as a ritual which has been elevated to a work of art and has designed several tea houses and rooms around the world. For the Fourteenth Architectural Biennale in Venice, 2014, Sugimoto designed a glass tea house without any pillars, allowing the “inside and outside as distinct places to vanish.”²⁴ Named ‘Mondrian’ in homage to the Dutch artist, Sugimoto realised the pursuit of reduction has been part of the tea ceremony for three hundred years prior to Piet Mondrian (1872 - 1944). (Fig. 9)

In New York City, the art collecting owners of a full-floor apartment in a newly built Upper East Side Manhattan skyscraper invited Sugimoto to design a ‘total work of art’ in the “Japanese style,” with custom made furniture, lighting fixtures and artworks exclusively by the artist. The inspiration for the design was the view of the sky from the ten-by-ten-feet windows which provide a 360 degree view of the city. Installing bespoke window blinds modeled after traditional Japanese *shoji* screens (latticed wood frame with paper used as room divider or door) designed to cover the upper or lower horizontal section of the windows, the views focus on the clouds

²² Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Old is New*, (Ennetbaden, 2021), 19

²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/t-magazine/hiroshi-sugimoto-photograph-architect-enoura-observatory.html>

²⁴ Sugimoto, *Old is New*, 327.

above, or the city below. A “transportive experience of both time and space,”²⁵ reminiscent of Sugimoto’s monochromatic Seascapes, the meditative works of the sea and its horizon, which the artist has been photographing since 1980.

In contrast to the man-made contemporary high rise home, Sugimoto and his team were determined to use premodern methods and natural materials brought over from Japan. Materials such as Towada stone, used in *onsen* (Japanese hot bath house) that turn blue-green when wet, can be seen in one of the master bathrooms. An irregular oval-shaped cypress bathtub sits on top of old stones salvaged from a disused Kyoto tram station. Coloured slabs of Komatsu stone can be seen in an additional bathroom; the dining room floor is laid with ancient cedar from Yakushima Island; the hallway floor is clad with custom made black tiles by a Nara ceramic artist.

A *roji* (*path*) was created from the guest entrance to a traditional tea room, *chashitsu*. With a thousand feet view of Manhattan, the room is made up of four and a half tatami mats; *ro*, a sunken hearth to boil water; *tokonoma*, viewing alcove, with a *kakeomono*, a hanging scroll, of black and dark green, and a vase with a single branch which reflect the colours of the scroll. According to Sugimoto, traditionally, the name of a tea house is to be “a poetic evocation of space.”²⁶ Aptly, the tea room was given the name ‘*Ukitsuho*’ (floating inner garden) in homage to the classic eleventh-century Japanese novel ‘The Tale of Genji’ (c. 1000 - 1012).²⁷ Sugimoto’s concept was to create a space of contrast and harmony of a peaceful traditional tearoom in an apartment floating above the busy exterior cityscape, and the contemporary building architecture. This tension between natural and man made materials, nature and the urban scape, tradition and contemporary living is at the heart of the Japanese approach to bringing the old to the new. (Fig. 10)

²⁵ Thessaly La Force, In This Manhattan Apartment, Every Room is a Testament to Japanese Tradition, *New York Times T Magazine*, Feb. 6, 2019.

²⁶ <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/the-glass-tea-house-mondrian/>

²⁷ Written by Lady Murasaki (c. 973/978CE - c. 1014/1031), the novel recounts tales from the Heian Court and is considered the first novel ever written

A crucial aspect of the Tea House is the garden surrounding it. The Japanese garden is a man-made miniaturisation of nature, a concentration of the elements of nature into one small space - rocks, trees, rivers, mountains. It is highly artificial whilst still natural, demonstrating the skills and abilities of the Japanese to balance the natural elements of chance and human element of control without any evident conflict.²⁸ The garden is a tool for practice of rumination and contemplation, the very act of tending the garden can be viewed as a form of Buddhist practice, a daily life practice to cultivate inner growth.

The *Sakuteiki*, the world's first written guide to garden-making by a court noble written in the late eleventh century, preserves oral traditions and provides guidance on the art of following the 'desire' of the stone when being set in. Some dry gardens, *karesansui*, are designed to be viewed from a distance and contemplated from afar, others to stroll through as if traveling through a world of waters, hills and bridges. *Kaiyu shiki* gardens are promenade for leisurely strolling. *Shakkei* gardens borrow scenery of the existing landscape, framing a distant mountain within the garden walls. The Japanese garden is a balance between nature and man, earth and heaven, being and non-being.

Tea Gardens, developed during the Momoyama Era (1573 - 1603) by Sen no Rikyu, were a radical departure from gardens of the time. Designed as a physical and spiritual experience with a cerebral purpose, the Tea Gardens were a meticulously choreographed journey leading to the Tea House. Bruno Taut (1880 - 1938) wrote the gardens "achieve a beauty that is completely non-decorative but functional in the spiritual sense. This beauty makes the eye a transformer of thought. The eye thinks... in that it sees."²⁹ Walking through the tea gardens promotes "an inward reaching journey.. a contemplative passing of time,"³⁰ preparing the visitor to the inner cleansing and meditative tea ceremony that is to follow.

²⁸ Sophie Walker, *The Japanese Garden*, (London, 2017), 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

The *roji*, dewy path, is a fundamental part of the garden design, and is considered the first stage of meditation in the ritual of the *chadō* (way of the tea). *Roji*, named after the purity and temporality of dew, is a transitional space from the chaotic world outside the entry gate through to the humble tea house. Different stone paving is used to navigate the path, straight line formations, patterns or individually laid stones such as *nori-no-ishi* (guiding stones), *yaku-ishi* (purpose stone) or *tobi-ishi* (floating stone) guide visitors along. Selected for their irregular shapes, subdued colours and subtle textures, the stones add to the rusticity of the garden, providing passage to “walk with the mind.”³¹ Encouraging visitors to calm their minds and allow the atmosphere of tea to be absorbed and cleanse all of the senses. It is both an actual and an emotional path to inspire humility and help achieve enlightenment.

Tobi-ishi, in particular, have been a great inspiration to visitors to the Tea Garden. Sized to allow just one person to navigate at a time and spaced at two stones per metre, the pace of walking slowed, guests are obliged to take their time, pay closer attention to their surroundings. This regulation of the rhythm of walking is intentional to remove any distraction and allow the guest to the Tea Ceremony to be more mindful.

Japan has always been intriguing for Edward Barber (1969 -) and Jay Osgerby (1969 -) of Barber Osgerby, a British design duo who met at the Royal College of Art studying architecture. Having found their industrial design studio in East London in 1996, Barber Osgerby's collective work spans disciplines from industrial and product design to public commission and limited editions. A 2012 table design for B&B Italia, a modern furniture company established in 1966, the *Tobi-Ishi* is a functional and sculptural piece. The design takes its name from the ornamental and utilitarian stepping stones used on *roji* through the Japanese Tea Garden. The dining table design - and later addition of a low cocktail table - departs from traditional four legs or a central pedestal with a design of two vertical trapezoidal supports set at right angles under a cantilevered top. The table has sculptural silhouette that

³¹ Walker, *The Japanese Garden*, 30.

changes according to the angle of view, and appears both ancient and modern in both the stone and wood materials. (Figs.11, 12)

Axel Vervoordt, the Belgian antiquarian and art collector and a proponent of *wabi* aesthetic, has designed a 'Floating Stone' table, offered in limestone and slate. This table is made to sit low to the ground and is shaped by hand so each one is unique. Vervoordt elaborates on the process, "[I do] not give it the shape that I want, but to respect the shape the stone has already - like its hidden soul - and to use this as a guide in the design,"³² reminiscent of the eleventh century garden keeping book, *Sakuteiki*. Embracing the irregularities of the stone and inherent respect to the material are emblematic of Vervoordt's *wabi* design philosophy, which we will explore further. (Figs. 13, 14)

It is not just the design of the tea hut and tea garden that are influencing contemporary makers. The tea ceremony itself and the utensils used are also interpreted for modern times. Murase Jihei III (1957 -) is a third generation woodworker and *urushi*, lacquer craftsman, whose family traditions date back to the Edo period (1615 - 1868). In addition to creating lacquer objects that Murase personally oversees at every stage of the production, from woodworking to applying lacquer, he has trained in the Way of the Tea at the Urasenke School of Tea.³³ A deep interest in the use of utensils in the tea ceremony, Murase researches the history, objects and aesthetics of the tea ceremony with a look to keep the tradition alive and demonstrate how the borders between utensils and artwork has blurred.

A 2019 exhibition in the Embassy of Japan in the United Kingdom, curated by Murase, reflected on the modern culture of tea. Murase hosted a tea ceremony with artworks and utensils from his collection and of other contemporary Japanese artists and craftspeople. The purpose of the show was to demonstrate the relevancy of the tea ceremony to contemporary life whilst respecting most of traditional aspects of the tea practice. In lieu of a tea hut, the ceremony took place on a verandah which allowed appreciation of the outdoors, with a selection

³² Axel Vervoordt, *Stories & Reflections*, (Paris, 2017), 202.

³³ One of the three tea school branches to have been established from Sen no Rikyu's family

of art pieces and tea utensils to reflect current times. The ceremony was in the *ryuurei* style, where guests sit on chairs rather than kneeling, in the hope that such small adaptations would encourage further interest in the Way of the Tea. (Fig 15)

A lacquered *natsume*, tea caddy (2017) by Murase illustrates his fine balance between old tradition and contemporary. Made of *keyaki*, Japanese Zelkova, with a rich brown and semi-glossed lacquered wood, it is made to look to have a natural grain, with an irregular shape and organic rugged texture that seems to be a chopped piece of wood. The receptacle is at once both primitive for its rough finish and contemporary for its brutalist shape, a fine balance for a functional object with aesthetic value that would not look out of place in a traditional setting or a contemporary one. (Fig 16)

Japanese architect, designer and restaurateur, Shinichiro Ogata is a proponent of Japan's unique hospitality. Ogata seeks to suffuse beauty into every detail and showcase the best Japan has to offer in craftsmanship and artisanship as can be seen in his latest venture, Ogata Paris. Housed in a seventeenth century building in the Marais quarter is a Japanese restaurant, houseware boutique, a tea counter with a roaster on site, and tea salon where tea is served in a modern yet exacting manner.

A contemporary fountain, reminiscent of a *tsukubai*, (*stone basin to wash hands*) placed in front of a temple or a Tea House, carved from *daté kan* volcanic stone, greets visitors in the entry. The houseware and tea boutique on the main floor offer Japanese-made wares of ceramic, porcelain, wood, lacquer and metal, and various teas, all stored in a wall cupboard of paulownia wood. A lobby with a greeting desk and a large modern expressionist painting by a Japanese artist is displayed for a short time before the next artwork is shown. Leading downstairs to the large and discreet tea room is a limestone stairwell where a cavernous space is outfitted with seventeenth century stone wall and a central table made of *jindaitamo* wood. Tea is prepared by the Tea Masters in a modern outfitted kitchen and brought to the table to be served to guests. The lighting is low, the atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

The design ethos of Ogata Paris balances Japan with France, suggestive of *shakkei*, borrowed scenery in a Japanese garden. “France is outside, and we are sharing some space to bring Japan within.”³⁴ The aspiration for this endeavour is to showcase Japanese dining culture in which tea tasting, utensils and contemplation are all key elements. For Ogata, tea is a way of fostering human encounters, “a medium [through which] to meet people and share our sensitivity... [and] seek beauty.”³⁵ (Fig.17)

The Japanese have a saying, *chazen ichimi*. Tea is one with Zen. Okakura wrote, “tea with us became more than an idealization of the form of drinking; it is a religion of the art of life.”³⁶ Tea drinking is a highly visual, spatial and dynamic art, an experiential art form. The continual innovation of *chanoyu*, the tea gardens, the tea house and ceremonies is emblematic of the Japanese approach to their culture, continuous evolution rather than dissolution, maintaining a respect and simultaneously providing longevity for their traditions. In sharing this tradition and all it encompasses, the gospel of tea is spreading and providing inspiration to partake in the ritual in whatever small way, and experience the beauty and the mindfulness of Zen. This method of renewal and sustained creativity based on tea and its aesthetics demonstrates not only appreciation to history, but also forms a bridge from the past to the future, making the way of the tea a welcome and relevant art form in the world today.

³⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/t-magazine/ogata-paris.html>

³⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/18/t-magazine/stanley-whitney-ogata.html>

³⁶ Kakuzo Okakura, *Book of Tea*, (Nevada,2021), 23.

Chapter III. Living with Wabi Sabi (Imperfection and impermanence)

侘寂

The Japanese aesthetic concepts to most gain popularity in the West are the Zen ideas of *wabi* and *sabi*. *Wabi sabi* is a sensibility, an awareness, an ideal focused on immateriality and impermanence, considered central to the Zen ideology. Made of two separate words, originally with negative connotations, was formed during the 'Golden Age' of the Heian period (794 - 1185), a period when high arts imported from China were refined and cultivated to create a Japanese culture. During *sakoku*, the imposed self isolation of Japan in the fourteenth century, the significance of these two separate words evolved as the beauty of nature was greatly appreciated and spiritual richness of the hermit and ascetic were regarded as virtues in the daily life of *chanoyu*.

Wabi is personal and subjective, it is inward and spiritual, a philosophical construct which means fading, contentment with simplicity, subdued taste and acceptance of impermanence. It is the appreciation of poverty. *Wabi* is to be satisfied with little, quietly content with the contemplation of nature. Independent of any outward distinction such as wealth or prestige, there is rich inner articulation. Buddhist priest and Sen no Rikyū's grandson, Sen Sōtan (1578 - 1658) poignantly summed up that a life of *wabi* is "self sufficiency with insufficiency of things."³⁷ *Sabi* is objective and outward, an aesthetic ideal which means "withered and aging."³⁸ Equivalent to the Sanskrit word *śānta*, meaning tranquility, peace and serenity,³⁹ *sabi* within the tea ceremony context means poverty, simplification and aloneness. In order to quietly contemplate nature, one needs a tranquil and passive mind. The overall sentiment is of simple, unpretentious beauty where material insufficiency is transformed to

³⁷ Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, (Princeton, 1959), 288.

³⁸ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi*, (Point Reyes, 2008), 23.

³⁹ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 284.

spiritual freedom, unbound by material things. The rough and humble exterior hides rich spirituality, emphasizing the internal is superior to the external, thereby transcending.

Today, used interchangeably without much distinction and usually together, *wabi sabi* is concerned with the passage of time and traces of life, the transience of nature and life itself. It is an appreciation for the beauty of the patina of age, and the cognisance that everything comes from and is always moving towards nothingness - the core of Zen Buddhism belief.

Japanese scholars have attempted to distill the aesthetic of *wabi sabi* to its simplest. In 'The Book of Tea', Okakura describes it as "beauty of imperfection." Hisamatsu goes further to call it "a rejection of perfection." Yet it is Soetsu Yanagi, the founder of Mingei (folk craft), who distilled it further to an "expression of freedom."⁴⁰ Not clinging to lack of perfection or striving for imperfection, not beholden to a way of making things, and certainly not seeking to destroy a perfect object. It is utter freedom to create without any attachment; and living amongst such objects and within such homes can be interpreted as an "expression of love of unhindered freedom."⁴¹

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886 - 1965), a prominent author in modern Japanese literature wrote in his meditative and influential essay on traditional Japanese aesthetics 'In Praise of Shadows' (1933), "we [the Japanese] prefer a pensive luster to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity..."⁴² and "we begin to enjoy [it] only when the luster has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina."⁴³

With the popular dissemination of the ideals of Zen in the 1950s in the West, it was not long before the aesthetic concept of *wabi sabi* followed the those in spiritual pursuit of Zen. The appreciation for a more aesthetic life originating from nature greatly resonated in contrast to the rise of the corporate lifestyle in America of the Post War boom, and in Japan which emulated all

⁴⁰ Soetsu Yanagi, 149.

⁴¹ Ibid, 149.

⁴² Jinichiro Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows, (Connecticut, 1977), 11.

⁴³ Ibid, 10.

things American. Today, *wabi sabi* is used in all manners of aesthetics in Euro-American marketing, mostly incorrectly, to depict decorative objects, interiors and lifestyles.

Wabi-sabi, according to Koren, “exemplifies many of Zen’s core spiritual-philosophical tenets... they could even be called the ‘Zen of things.’”⁴⁴ The wabi aesthetic has three aspects which can be traced back to Hisamatsu’s pillars: simple unpretentiousness, imperfection or irregularity, and austerity, or starkness, reminiscent of *yūgen*. The aesthetic of *wabi sabi* is appreciation of beauty not at its momentary peak of fulfillment, but rather the fleeting passage of receding and waning. *Hanami*, the annual spring viewing of the cherry trees blossoming in Japan, is poignant of the Zen teaching that everything is evolving from, and devolving into nothingness. The pink flowers are breathtaking in their beauty; but it is the blossoms being blown away by the wind, or falling to the ground in the rain that evoke the *wabi sabi* aesthetic. *Wabi sabi* accepts that nothing is perfect and nothing is complete, everything is impermanent and will fade into oblivion. Appreciating the beauty of objects requires slowing down and taking the time to pay attention to simple things - be it a peeling wall, a wooden stump or a crack in a ceramic cup.

The ideal embodiment of *wabi* can be most appreciated in the traditional Japanese ceramics of *raku*-ware used in the Tea Ceremony presided over by Sen no Rikyū who sought to bring the wabi aesthetic to the ceramics used in lieu of the perfect Chinese porcelain tea bowls. In collaboration with the tile-maker Chōjirō (1515 - 1592), the lump of clay was hollowed and shaped by hand, not thrown on a potter’s wheel, each pieced fired individually in a charcoal fueled kiln on a low temperature, the unglazed red or black clay designed to be rough, thick, low and wide to stand firmly on a tatami mat. Chōjirō and his descendants were given a seal of *Raku* (enjoyment) by Emperor Chief Advisor of the time. *Raku* is the first collaboration between potter and patron, and the first to be branded with a seal, still used fifteen generations later by the present Head of the Raku family, Raku Jikinyū, Kichizaemon XV (1949 -).

⁴⁴ Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 16.

The irregularity, imperfection, density, uneven surface, subdued colours and lack of perfection or even notion of completion can be gleaned in Kichizaemon's 'Shūgiku' *raku* bowl (2000), who carries on the traditions of his family's legacy. The robust bowl with dynamic shape and rippling edge, the black glaze dripping down with just a hint of an earthy moss green at the bottom of the bowl as if growing from underneath, this is a contemporary example of the traditional yet radical *raku*-ware embodying the three aspects of *wabi*. (Fig. 18)

Kenta Anzai (1980 -) handcrafts ceramic pieces which exemplify simplicity. Anzai completed an apprenticeship under Taizo Kuroda (1946 - 2021), continuing a remarkable lineage of artisans. Kuroda apprenticed to second Japanese Living National Treasure, Tatsuzo Shimaoka (1919 - 2007), who trained under first National Treasure, Shoji Hamada (1894 - 1978). Anzai's porcelain vessels are glazed in black, infused with small amount of *urushi*, lacquer from the Japanese Sumac tree, a material conventionally used with wood. Anzai's process looks back to the Jōmon pots, a 5000 year old tradition.⁴⁵ Each piece takes months to complete, as the aged surfaces go through continuous sandpapering, polishing and refining. The simple forms contrast with details surface patterns that take time to appear. The small earthenware vessel explores *ensō*, the Japanese interpretation of the circle. The delicate opening of Vessel 5 is emphasised by a tight linear pattern, and small scattered marking on the upper part of the jar accentuate its moon shape. (Fig. 19)

Axel Vervoordt (1947 -), the renowned Belgian antiquarian, art dealer, curator, interior architect and designer who has worked on interior projects and art installations throughout the world has leaned towards Eastern thinking early on. Vervoordt's oeuvre is in creating living spaces by bringing pieces of furniture, design objects and art from various centuries and geographies in an unexpected yet sublime manner. On a visit to Japan in the 1970s, Vervoordt learnt of the Japanese Zen philosophy of *wabi and sabi*, seeking beauty in imperfection and simple, even rustic objects. Working with Belgium based, Japanese architect Miki Tatsuro, Vervoordt adopted the term *wabi* to characterise his work "embrac[ing] the essence of materials

⁴⁵ Pottery found from the Jōmon period (14,000 - 300 BCE), comparable to pre-Colombian culture, shows use of lacquer in the interior of vessels

and valuing everyday human interaction. The qualities [that are] the most Wabi - simplicity, humility, purity, nobility without sophistication, and the beauty of imperfection and incompleteness.”⁴⁶

Vervoordt’s *wabi* design philosophy can be seen in a commercial downtown Manhattan project, The Greenwich Hotel. Taking a cue from the nineteenth century industrial heritage along with the artistic sensibilities of the last half century of the neighbourhood of Tribeca and layering with *wabi* aesthetics, Vervoordt created a serene retreat in a penthouse overlooking the bustling city. The materials “poor in [value], rich in spirit”⁴⁷ of stone, steel and reclaimed wood were salvaged from upstate New York, made by hand in Belgium or sourced in Europe and Japan. The materials add to the rusticity, age and patina of the atmospheric interior that embraces humility within a newly built urban building. All the elements may appear simple, but selected with care, they are each a reminder of the beauty of imperfection and ephemerality of all things. (Fig. 20)

The open floor plan penthouse includes 2,800 square feet of interior space, three bedrooms, four working fireplaces and a full sized open layout chef’s kitchen. There is an additional 4,000 square feet of exterior gardens spread over two floors, with outdoor dining for eighteen guests. Various stone elements were brought in such as the granite rimmed roof deck spa, the bluestone shower floor with concealed drain and the monolithic seventeenth century stone farm trough soaking tub and double basin sink, both in the main bathroom. Wooden tabletops salvaged from Union Square Farmers Market line the ceilings of the smaller bedrooms. A nineteenth century walnut tabletop was repurposed for the main bedroom headboard. The iron fire grates in the living rooms are made from joist hangers from in the original structure of the Louvre Museum in Paris. Outdoor hanging lanterns of copper gourds were crafted from original roofing of the building. The organic forms and re-use of natural

⁴⁶ Axel Vervoordt, *Stories and Reflections*, (Paris,2017), 230.

⁴⁷ Vervoordt, greenwichhotel.com/penthouse

materials offers an opportunity to “recycle and [give] rebirth,”⁴⁸ further adding to the imperfections and patina of the the space.

“The twentieth century was a period of making and throwing away and making again... Today there is no room anymore to throw away and there are not enough forests to destroy for new wood,” Vervoordt says of his choice to salvage materials. “The twenty-first century is a period of recuperation. We have to reuse what is already used...” and “make jewels of what is thrown away.”⁴⁹ Vervoordt approaches sustainable design with a deep understanding of Zen teachings, “time adds a new dimension. To accept the roughness and beauty of patina is to understand that time is the ultimate artist.”⁵⁰

Wabi sabi embraces the truth of nature, “it does not attempt to tame but allows the true nature of the material to be.”⁵¹ The shape, colour, form are dictated by the inherent nature of the material itself rather than the forcing of artistic or decorative design - most importantly, *wabi sabi* allows time to reveal itself within a space or an object, rather than trying to hide or elude and pretend to be something other than its true self. “*Wabi* is accepting that time is both an observer and a creator. *Wabi* is return to nature.”⁵²

Wabi sabi is imperfect and incomplete, allowing room for contemplation, imagination and most importantly, oneself. This appreciation and seeking of beauty in decay is parallel to the Western philosophical and religious symbol of *memento mori*, the reminder of inevitability of death. *Wabi sabi* aesthetics in contemporary design can be construed as an acceptance of what an object is, an acceptance of time, space and most importantly, as acceptance of oneself and others. It is an aestheticism of existentialism and spirituality. A secular idea that can elevate our

⁴⁸ Tatsuro, greenwichhotel.com/penthouse

⁴⁹ Vervoordt, greenwichhotel.com/penthouse

⁵⁰ Vervoordt, *Stories and Reflections*, 274.

⁵¹ Walker, *Japanese Garden*, 201.

⁵² *Ibid*, 230.

daily lives, as Vervoordt believes "a key aspect of *wabi* is the effect a well-designed spaced has on the psychological well-being of an occupant."⁵³

⁵³ David Netto, The Luxury to Humility, *New York Times T Magazine*, May 7, 2014

Chapter IV. Designing *Ma* (Gap, Negative Space)



A core philosophy of Japanese design and culture, *ma* is a concept that is related to both space and time. *Ma* means a gap, a pause or an interval. Defined as the “natural distance between two or more things existing in continuity,”⁵⁴ it is a unique concept without equal in other languages. In Japan, space and time are not separated, but rather thought of as “correlative and omnipresent.”⁵⁵ *Ma*, the space in-between, it can be a bridge, it can divide and connect, it is a moment of silence and stillness. *Ma* could be said to follow from the ancient Buddha scripture, the Heart *Sutra* (Sanskrit for ancient collection of short aphorisms), first written down in the seventh century, that states “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” In Buddhist thought, the void is an expression of an intangible individual experience, comprehensible only to a person practicing meditation.

Ma may be a void, but it is not empty. It is not separate but rather part of the whole, and as such contributes to the meaning of the whole. It is not waiting for what is to follow, it is a blank to be filled by the imagination, the potential or the promise of something, and where the true interest may lie. French designer, Charlotte Perriand (1903 - 1999), who was invited to Japan in 1940 as an Official Advisor for Industrial Design the Ministry of Trade, observed “in Japan, which was 100% traditional at the time, I discovered emptiness, the power of emptiness, the religion of emptiness, fundamentally, which is not nothingness. For them, it represents the possibility of moving. Emptiness contains everything.”⁵⁶

Spatially, *ma* defines the architectural measurements and the proportions of a room. However, visually, *ma* goes beyond architecture and can be seen in the art of calligraphy, where mastering the characters is just one aspect, the relationship of the form to the surrounding non-form is the true artistry. “It can be seen in the negative space created by placement of a flower

⁵⁴ Iwanami Dictionary of Ancient Terms.

⁵⁵ Isozaki Arata, MA: Japanese Time Space Concept (New York, 1979), 13.

⁵⁶ <https://pen-online.com/culture/charlotte-perriand-and-japan/>

in *ikebana*, or the pruning of a *bonsai* tree.⁵⁷ *Ma* goes beyond the spatial or visual, temporally it can be heard in the compositions of John Cage (1912 - 1992). It is the “moment of no action, the stillness and silence filled with more powerful energy than the moment of action.”⁵⁸

The *Kanji* character for *ma*, 間, combines the two characters of ‘gate’ above with the ‘sun’ or ‘moon’ below, depicting a moment of light radiating through an empty doorway, it is “an opportunity for illumination.”⁵⁹ This ‘inbetween’ is *ma*; the sense of possibility within space and time, and within the human perception. *Ma* goes beyond space and time to the realm of experience, to express a personal or subjective notion.

The modernist Japanese architect, winner of Pritzker Architecture Prize 2019, and architect of Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Arata Isozaki (1931 -), brought this Japanese idea to western consciousness in an exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Collection (1978) titled *MA: Japanese Time-Space Concept*. “Things fading, flowers falling, flickering movements of mind, shadows falling on water and ground - these are the phenomena that have most impressed the Japanese. This view of nature is naturally reflected in Japanese architectural space; it is expressed in a conception of indefinite space in which, for example, the permeation of light or of lines of vision is determined by a layer of flat boards so thin as to be almost transparent. What appears from the space is a flickering of shadows - a momentary shift between the reality and a world of unrealities. *MA* is an empty moment of waiting for this change,”⁶⁰ Isozaki wrote in the exhibition booklet.

According to Isozaki, architecture is the art of *ma*, where form defines space, rather than the space serving form. Traditionally, Japanese architecture sought to “create a sense of place,”⁶¹ *ma-dori o tsukuru* (literally grasp of place). Houses were built as a large single room,

⁵⁷ Kyoto Journal, (2021), 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁶¹ Ibid, 19.

with adaptable temporary arrangements for space allocation, such as *shoji* (sliding screens with paper to allow some light) and *fusu-ma* (sliding opaque doors) to adapt the home to the changing of seasons and social needs. The *tokono-ma* (alcove) is a literal empty space, with the recessed area used as a display alcove that is both a spatial and aesthetic concept. Here a family would display their most prized possessions, or a selection of objects to express the seasons for artistic appreciation, whereas the rest of the room was virtually devoid of decoration.⁶² In contrast, the tea house (*cha-shitsu* - as designed by Sen no Rikyu) diverged from the architecture of Japan, built as an isolated structure with four fixed surrounding walls and small windows in various heights cut into the walls to allow in diffused natural light. The tea house was not conceived as a space but rather as a moment to be experienced, which allowed the mind to experience *ma*, and be open to attain enlightenment.

In the Japanese garden, *ma* is omnipresent. In *karesansui* (dry landscape) gardens, *ma* is the dynamic play created by asymmetrical placement of stones.⁶³ The most famous of these rock gardens is Ryō-anji in Kyoto (1499) which requires to be viewed from a fixed vantage point, the verandah of the temple. The natural rocks, which depict islands, are surrounded by finely raked white sand, which portrays the sea. The viewer ceases to be aware of these elements separately, experiencing *ma* - arguably "a garden of emptiness."⁶⁴ It may look or feel like a void, but it is not nothingness. (Fig.3)

In the tea garden, with no centre or panoramic views, a visitor follows a *roji* (path) which reveals the hidden vignettes. The *tobi-ishi* (stepping stones) of the *roji* leading to the teahouse determine the way one should walk, the space in-between the stones - *ma* - regulate the rhythm of walking to allow a pause for a particular view to be enjoyed. The garden space is a complex design of visual points that determine the movements of the visitor, encouraging moments of *ma*.

⁶² It is worth noting that nowadays, the architectural art of *ma* is termed *dizain* (design) in Japan

⁶³ Kyoto Journal, 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 42.

Tadao Ando (1941 -), winner of the 1995 Pritzker Architecture Prize, is known for the use of smooth and powerful concrete surfaces in simple geometrics in his work which can be seen at Naoshima Art Island, Chateau Lacoste in France and most recently at the Pinault Collection at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris. However it is expressions of nature that Ando seeks in his work, be it a "delicate yet dramatic plays of light and shadow"⁶⁵ or a gentle breeze.

In a Manhattan 1913 building, Ando designed a residential duplex penthouse with lighter building materials (2013 - 2019). Structural constraints did not allow for the use of the architect's preferred material of concrete and due to the location in the Upper East Side Historic District, the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission rules did not allow tempering with the existing windows. The lower level of the residence is wrapped in gypsum board with exacting attention to detail to avoid any superfluous framing, wide oak Dinesen floorboards line the floor, the ceiling is suspended. The beveled edge window openings are angled inwards, creating the illusion of a two dimensional framed opening, lined with translucent glass to allow natural light in whilst blocking the busy city views. Ando equates light as an architectural material and by diffusing both visually and aurally the outside cityscape, the interior feels suspended in time and space- *ma*.

The only curvilinear elements against the rectilinear geometric space is the spiral staircase of pietra forte stone and floating glass balustrade which ascends to partially enclosed upper level. The partial outdoor space boasts a long south facing wall with a vertical garden designed by French Botanist, Patrick Blanc (1953 -). This open air living room extending upwards against a backdrop of a spanning green wall further accentuates the inner sanctum of the residential area on the lower level.

The penthouse is "an ode to the natural light that filters into the main living space through partially covered windows"⁶⁶ and the sculptural stairway that leads to the apartment's roof terrace. The client, a contemporary art dealer, selected quiet yet powerful pieces by artists

⁶⁵ Philip Jodidio, Tadao Ando: Living with Light, (New York, 2021),12.

⁶⁶ Jodidio, Living with Light, 25.

such as Taizo Kuroda, Ellsworth Kelly and Lucas Arruda which accentuate the soulful void of the interior architecture, which is contrasted with massive *hinoki*, Japanese cypress, table surfaces. (Fig. 21)

In a 2020 interior architectural project of Axel Vervoordt, the concept of *ma* can be observed in a South California home. The interior of the suburban house was reduced to “seductive simplicity” to feel like a “futuristic Belgian monastery.”⁶⁷ The interior walls of the house are plastered in luminous off-white, with a focus on large proportions to create contrast and intrigue. Natural material furnishings are desaturated and kept to a minimum with varying different sizes of Vervoordt’s floating stone tables, as seen in a previous chapter, in limestone. Iconic furniture design pieces such as the organic shaped white upholstered 1940s Ours Polaire sofas (1947) and an Oeuf armchair (1954) from luminary French designer Jean Royère (1902-1981),⁶⁸ and a wall mounted sculpture by British Indian artist Anish Kapoor (1954 -) of approximate sixty inches curved fibreglass and paint piece, White Dark VIII (2000). Kapoor’s work triggers the experience of the void, though in this particular piece there is no black hole. In contrast, a bright luminous white void plays with natural light where upon contemplation, a viewer feels parts of a larger whole, attracting one to the unknown, a further affirmation of *ma*.

This monochromatic approach is evocative of Junichiro Tanazaki’s short novel, ‘In Praise of Shadows’ that delves into the Japanese sensitivity to light. “We do our walls in neutral colours so that the sad, fragile, dying rays can sink into absolute repose... A lustre here would destroy the soft fragile beauty of the feeble light. We delight in the sight of the delicate glow of them. We never tire of the sight, for to us this pale glow and these dim shadows far surpass any ornament. And so, as we must if we are not to disturb the gloom we finish the walls with sand in a single neutral colour.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/kim-kardashian-kanye-west-home>

⁶⁸ Interestingly, Royère said in his later years “I’m against furniture, I think we should eliminate it as much as possible.”

⁶⁹ Junichiro Tanazaki, In Praise of Shadows, (Tokyo, 1933), 18.

Vervoordt explains his approach to the design of the house as “a kind of philosophy about how we live now and how we will live in the future. We changed the house by purifying it, and we kept pushing to make it purer and purer.”⁷⁰ This diligent practice in reduction and refinement of an interior space, both spatially and tonally, has created a restrained but ample home that is far from bare or desolate. The home is a receptacle of mindfulness, a bridge from a busy exterior world to a calm interior mind, a space for experiencing familial relationships and creating memories, it is a canvas for one’s life. Vervoordt elaborates “you can call it religion, but this is perhaps beyond religion, a search for cosmic values of peace and positive energy... profound conversation about the space of the mind and the importance of silence.”⁷¹ The silence in this home is *ma*. (Fig.22)

John Pawson CBE (1949 -) is a British architectural designer who found minimalism listening to the music of Philip Glass (1937 -). Pawson’s architectural and object design focus on minimalist aesthetic and basic challenges of space, light, proportion and materials in projects such as the Calvin Klein retail stores around the world, the Cistercian monastery of Lady of Nový Dvůr in Bohemia, and his own farmhouse in the Cotswolds in England, as well as housewares designed for Italian marble company, Salvatori, and Belgian company When Objects Work.

The art of minimalism may seem simple, but reduction to the essentials whilst keeping line, scale and proportion in harmony without austerity is a delicate exercise. Creating interior architecture that is intrinsic, pure and serene requires balancing of materials, light and volume. Pawson has showcased his restrained approach designing various pieces for When Objects Work including picture frames, vases and cutlery. The warm minimalism can be appreciated in Pawson’s small wooden plate, ‘Piatina’ (2005), made of ebony at a diameter of just 4 3/5 inches with a shallow central dimple. This small and subtle *vide poche* is representative of the the

⁷⁰ <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/kim-kardashian-kanye-west-home>

⁷¹ Ibid.

reduction process where “perfection cannot be improved by subtraction.”⁷² It is misleading to think that this process of elimination in design leaves spaces and objects bare or banal. Any further subtraction would render this object perhaps aesthetically pleasing but potentially not as functional. Pawson describes his work as “lyricism in restraint.”⁷³

“The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is potent because [it is] all containing.”⁷⁴ Arguably, this shallow dimple is the precise reduction that gives form to the no-form, it is this void that is *ma*, providing an opportunity for a tangible object to be placed on the plate, or perhaps the idea of one. (Fig. 23)

Ma can be seen as analogous to *sabi*, the beauty of fading colours, patination due to the passing of time, “the sense of dissolution of things.”⁷⁵ The Japanese view that all things exist temporarily in their approach to extinction, elevating every moment, and every object so it can be appreciated before it disappears into oblivion. The Japanese belief that the void is not empty is patently in stark contrast to the Aristotelian principle of ‘nature abhors a vacuum.’ It is in the gaps of space or the intervals of time that the imagination soars and spirituality is grasped. *Ma* is all around us whether temporal, spatial, aesthetic or spiritual - it can be heard or seen all around us but essentially it is felt and it is our own individual experience which defines the quality of *ma*, a quality that can be appreciated in our daily lives and homes, whether in the shadows of the afternoon or the empty vessel on a table. Ultimately, a recognition that it is not necessarily materiality and an accumulation of possessions that provide satisfaction, it is the space and imagination that is the ultimate richness, two basic but crucial elements of design, and absence can be a most powerful presence.

⁷² John Pawson, *Minimum*, (London, 1998), 7.

⁷³ <http://www.johnpawson.com/works/tableware>

⁷⁴ Okakura, *Book of Tea*, 41.

⁷⁵ Isozaki, *MA*, 44.

Chapter V. Appreciating Mushin (No mind)

無心

In Japan, prized ceramics that incur damage, particularly those used with *chanoyu*, were repaired with decorative techniques using *urushi* (lacquer). This mending practice which dates back to the sixteenth century, reconceived broken vessels with the use of shards, patches and lacquer as glue. This lacquer repair, *urushi naoshi*, more commonly referred to as *kintsugi* (repair with gold metal), restores the functional purpose of the piece and adds to its aesthetic value, by not only emphasizing the breakage, but also offering rebirth to the object.

The visual of a restored fracture is an expression of *mu-shin* (no mind): non-attachment and acceptance of circumstances. A key part of the Zen art and practice, the term is taken from the Buddhist expression *mushin no shin* (mind without thinking). In Japanese, *mu* means emptiness, *shin* is body / mind, as there is no distinction between the two (as in space / time discussed in chapter VI of *ma*). A state of mind, *mushin* denotes existing within the moment, without any attachment to one's ego, thoughts or the outside world. *Mushin* is practiced in Zen meditation and martial arts, where one seeks to unlearn all that has been learnt so as to become intuitive. "A mind unconscious of itself is a mind that is not disturbed by affects of any kind,"⁷⁶ writes Daisetz Suzuki (1870 - 1966), Japan's foremost authority on Zen Buddhism. "When *mushin* is realised, there's no obstructions, no inhibitions, and [one] is emancipated from the thoughts of life and death."⁷⁷ *Mushin* is acceptance of the given circumstances, without resistance and without effort, and its physical expression can be appreciated in *kintsugi*.

The technique of lacquer repair uses sap, a natural adhesive, harvested from the trunk of a fifteen year old Japanese Sumac tree. A single tree yields just two hundred grams of sap and can only be harvested for one year. There are three artistic restoration approaches to ceramic breakage that are still used to this day. *Kintsugi* refers to lacquer repair with metal finish, *tomotsugi* includes insertion of original fragments from the broken piece, and *yobitsugi*

⁷⁶ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 111.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 133.

includes use of fragments for repair from other ceramic pieces, not original to the vessel. The lacquer repair may include black or red lacquer, not just gold or silver metal powder. The initial glue stage requires for the piece to repose up to three months. Excess lacquer is then removed with charcoal, before cleansing, an application of a coloured lacquer and final polishing. Some fractures require layering of lacquer to fill in the damage, with each layer requiring up to a week to dry. Repairing utensils and ceramics is a lengthy and costly process, therefore a broken piece to be worth the investment would hold some value, be it aesthetic, personal or other.

Not all objects that have undergone repair are an expression of *mushin*. The spirit of no-mind is embracing accidental fracture, part of life's mishaps; the visible repair is an expression of overcoming such hurdles. It is the acceptance of such breakage which highlights the impermanence of all things that allows one to practice no-mind.

An anecdote of how *kintsugi* came to be dates back to Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537 - 1598), a sixteenth century military leader and feudal lord, who was gifted a Korean Ido (fifteenth century) tea bowl, from an elder leader. The greatly prized tea bowl broke into five pieces during a tea ceremony. The much loved vessel was sent back to China for repair, however Hideyoshi was not happy with the rough use of staples, the common technique of mending porcelain at the time. A local lacquer artist in Japan mended the vessel with lacquer and gold powder which not only added to the beauty of the vessel, but also highlighted its fragility, recalling the spirit of *mushin*. The vessel, handed down over the years, is an Important Cultural Property in Japan, designated by the Japanese government for Agency of Cultural Affairs to objects of particular importance to protect the cultural heritage of Japan, from architecture to gardens to tea vessels.

Another anecdote highlighting the significance of *kintsugi*, involves Sen no Rikyu and a Chinese *chaire* (thick tea jar). A Teaman debuted this exquisite vessel at a tea ceremony, seeking Rikyu's approval of it, which did not come forth. The Teaman, disappointed that no praise was given to the magnificent shape and glaze of the vessel, threw it, shattering it into pieces. A fellow guest salvaged the pieces and repaired it with *kintsugi*, displaying it at a

subsequent tea ceremony. The moment Rikyu saw the mended piece, he exclaimed “Now, the piece is magnificent.” Rikyu has been quoted “it is good for the utensils of a small [tea] room to be lacking... suitable utensils such as Song Dynasty⁷⁸ tea jars that have been repaired with lacquer become all the more fit for use.”⁷⁹ The intention for objects used in *chanoyu* is not to embody perfection; it is precisely their lacking that adds to the *wabi* atmosphere and the appreciation of the flaws. Mending objects that have seen disrepair elevates them further by emphasising the ephemerality of the objects and of life itself. *Mushin* allows us to accept impermanence, fragility and resilience. *Kintsugi* is a tangible token of these hardships.

The spirit of *mushin* can be seen in the work of Japanese American woodworker George Nakashima (1905 - 1990) and his daughter, Mira Nakashima (1942 -), who continues her father’s legacy in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Nakashima worked directly with the material at hand “allowing forms to evolve through the hands, allowing the material to speak for itself with a minimum of drawing and intellectual intervention.”⁸⁰ This approach can be appreciated in Nakashima’s use of dovetail keys in wood, not only to support cracks, but highlight flaws of the material, and give emphasis to its natural beauty. Mira shares how her father subscribed to the Zen Buddhism concept of beauty “which embraces both conventional beauty and ugliness, to the point where there is no longer any difference between the two. It is not through conscious effort or willful artistry, but through non-conceptualisation or *mushin*, that true beauty is achieved.”⁸¹

An object that has been cherished and worn with time, may be revived through repair, conveying the passage of time, and can be appreciated as part of the *sabi* aesthetic discussed in chapter III, embracing the “insufficiency of physical attributes.”⁸² In lieu of invisible mending in an attempt to strive for near-perfection of the object, visible repair simultaneously conveys a

⁷⁸ Song Dynasty 960 - 1279CE.

⁷⁹ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 323.

⁸⁰ Nakashima, *Nature Form & Spirit*, (New York, 2003), 9.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 23.

⁸² Christy Bartlett, *Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics*, (New York, 2008), 10 - 11.

sense of the object's rupture and its endurance. This highlights transience and reincarnation of an object, showing empathy and placing value in a broken object. A compassion that can be applied to people, not just ceramic vessels.

These restored objects are brought out to the tearoom for use only in the last two weeks of October, the "waning days of summer,"⁸³ known as the season of *nagori*. Part of the Japanese way of commemorating the seasons, placing emphasis on the passage and diminishment of things. The scroll in the *tokonoma* sets the tone for the tea room, the last of the tea supply from the year before is savoured and mended vessels are used in *chanoyu* to remind the guests of the vestiges which remain, emphasising their value and meaning.

Contemporary artists and makers are embracing *kintsugi*, both for the subtle beauty it offers and the expression of *mushin*. The porcelain work of British author, artist and master potter Edmund de Waal CBE (1964 -) focuses on the human narrative, exploring themes such as memory and social history. A 2020 show in London's Gagosian Gallery exhibited individual vessels handmade by de Waal during the lockdown of the same year due to COVID-19. Installed to be seen from the street and encouraged to be touched and handled, the show included unglazed white vessels which revealed finger marks from the making process, and black vessels that showed the flux (oxides) of the glaze. Those vessels that broke during the firing, a natural process and hazard of the kiln, were patched with folded lead or gold metal, others repaired with lacquer in the manner of *kintsugi*, or with shards of porcelain. The vessels vary from bowls to jars, shaped for everyday use, in contrast to the installation artworks to be appreciated from afar that de Waal is known for. The artist's intention for this exhibition was to show human touch, a fallout of the novel virus that many people missed, and rather than erase any errors, use the marking of the works and their repair as "a way of marking loss,"⁸⁴ a theme many could relate to in this ongoing pandemic period. (Fig 24)

⁸³ Bartlett, Mended Japanese Ceramics, 12.

⁸⁴ <https://www.edmunddewaal.com/making/some-winter-pots#2>

South Korean artist Hun Chung Lee (1967 -), sees his work as three dimensional landscape painting. The pieces are hand formed and fired in a hand-made kiln with celadon glaze that dates back to the fifteenth century. The unpredictable results make the pieces a collaboration between the artist and nature. Lee embraces the flaws and mistakes, “what happens in the kiln is out of my control. I stoke up the fire, but I cannot do anything about what is going on in the kiln. Ceramic work makes you modest.”⁸⁵

Lee earned bachelor’s and master’s degree in ceramic sculpture in Seoul with a second master’s degree in sculpture from San Francisco Art Institute, and a doctorate in architecture from Kyungwon University, this multi disciplinary approach allows Lee to think of his work in different ways, with different outcomes. Lee’s works in clay, cement, and wood in pottery, sculpture, installation and furniture, use harsh materials that reveal a soft feel with the painterly glazes. An example of the artist’s ‘no-mind’ approach can be seen in a unique low rectangular table with rounded corners (2018) made of separate ceramic pieces, glazed in different colours of celadon, white with subtle pattern of celadon circles, bronzed brown and red brown rectangle at the centre of the table surface. Cracks are visible in the various pieces which are melded together, the imperfections are embraced and filled with bronze lacquer, adding to the effect of a wabi ceramic puzzle, where the whole is greater than the sum of its flawed parts. (Fig. 25)

In a 1957 essay on Japanese perspectives in the book ‘The Beauty of Everyday Things’, Soetsu Yanagi wrote of the beauty of *mu* and the unadorned. The appreciation for simplicity grew out of the tea ceremony along with the aesthetic concepts of *wabi* and *sabi* and can be seen as an expression of the infinite “encompassed by the void of *mu*.”⁸⁶ This “naked beauty without artifice”⁸⁷ is a beauty of poverty.

From the Buddhist concept of *mu*, there is *muji*, which means plain, unpatterned, solid

⁸⁵ https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2021/05/145_300732.html

⁸⁶ Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, 159 - 160.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 161.

ground - and is known the world over for the Japanese no-frills home goods brand Muji, short for *Mujirushi Ryōhin* (no brand quality goods). Started as an in-house brand of a Japanese supermarket in 1980 as an antithesis to excess, Muji started with just forty products and has grown to offer over seven thousand products, a thousand stores worldwide and two hotels in Japan, Muji continues to market lower priced products of food, clothing, stationery and household goods with minimalist aesthetic by cutting waste, using clear cellophane for wrapping and plain brown paper for labels. The brand works with designers such as Shigeru Ban (1957 -), Jasper Morrison (1959 -), and Naoto Fukasawa (1956 -), whose wall-mounted compact disc player minimal design from 1999 is included in the MOMA collection, to create beautiful but uncredited timeless goods which are available year after year.

Kenya Hara (1958 -), the Artistic Director of Muji since 2002, has written and lectured extensively on the 'emptiness' of Muji. Just as the bare tea room is a metaphor for a guest to use their imagination and make associations, such is the brand of no brand. "Through its very emptiness, a vessel can apply a centripetal force, absorbing one's awareness,"⁸⁸ Hara has written, believing that design is a product of humans, and can affect human behaviour. A simple footed rice bowl of wood flour, melanin resin and layer of black lacquer is the synthesis of emptiness and Zen aesthetic for use and appreciation in daily life. Here is *mu* for the everyday, an object that embraces no-mind. (Fig. 26)

Kintsugi, a five hundred year old repair technique, is a dying art form, particularly in a world of mass production and throw away culture where it is cheaper to purchase new items than repair existing ones. Japanese lacquer artists are attempting to revive the practice in Japan and pass on the knowledge with the support of government initiatives, workshops and do-it-yourself kits. The timeless spirit of *mushin*, attaining no mind, is an endeavour that continues to be pursued and is not limited to artists and makers. To be one with the moment, to be amenable to unexpected external circumstances, and go beyond accepting the nature of impermanence to embrace life's transience can be a beautiful way to spend our short time here.

⁸⁸ Kenya Hara, *Designing Japan*, (Zurich, 2011), 50.

Conclusion

The teachings of Zen, which embrace mindful living and appreciation of the beauty of the fleeting moment of life, appealed to the Japanese, and their heightened awareness of nature. The Japanese have successfully assimilated heterogeneous culture and religion, and generated their own traditions. Whilst Zen may play a small part in the daily lives of the Japanese, its ideals are at the core of their being, with simplicity, tranquility, and appreciation of craftsmanship embedded into everything.

In Zen Buddhism, Buddha nature is inherent to all individuals. Scriptures and sutras are taught as 'fingers pointing to the moon,' life lessons to dwell on.⁸⁹ Therefore, there is great emphasis on the aesthetics of Zen, as they are an evocation of a mood to help attain enlightenment. The Zen ideals outlined in this paper all share a commonality - a sensitivity to one's surrounds. The ritual of *chanoyu* asks all those that take tea to have awareness and appreciation of one's surroundings, the warm breeze, the growing shadows, the leaves gently falling from a tree.

Wabi sabi is an appreciation of the passage of time. A phenomenon that is the master of us all. Time leaves a patina in its wake, a visible expression of its presence.

Ma is an appreciation of space and time. The bridge between all things, all people, and the void in-between.

Mushin is appreciation of life itself. The recognition that life is fleeting, and cannot be held onto, but must be appreciated at every moment.

The interiors and decorative objects selected for this thesis all share a quiet design. This provides the space for one self and one's imagination. Whether a meditative space or a contemplative object, these designs are visual cues for meditative absorption, prompts to focus on the present moment and yet, feel infinity.

In 'Western' religion, the objective of architecture and art was to glorify the gods, and impress upon believers the beauty of God's work and power. The ideals of beauty in the

⁸⁹ James Alfred Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press), 161

European American mind have been dominated by Greek art theories of symmetry, proportion and movement, and Christian ideals with emphasis on rational thought and impetus for man to seek salvation before God. A visual doctrine with focus on the external.

In Eastern art, the emphasis is on spirituality and intuition. The objective of Eastern teachings is to expand one's consciousness and reach nirvana, a state of perfect happiness attained by Buddha, a man himself. The Buddhist idea of true beauty holds no distinction between beauty and ugliness, as there is no dualism in Buddhism. The plain, the asymmetrical, the imperfect, are all ideals of beauty. A pursuit of internal spirituality.

Inevitably, based on this dissimilarity, Japanese aesthetics remain an enigma to those in the West. An enigma we are drawn to and continue to learn from, have dialogues and exchange ideas with. The sustained appreciation and interest in Japanese art and design around the world can be inferred from the variety of art exhibitions on Japan and its artists around the world in any given period, the magazines which highlight the design trends of the country from warm minimalism to Japandi,⁹⁰ and the sheer number of books on the subject of Japan and design.⁹¹

As a consequence of population decline outside the metropolises of Japan and automation across the country, Japanese craft-making industries are petitioning their government to invest in local education to ensure the know-how of crafts continues to live on. Most recently, in 2020, UNESCO added traditional skills, techniques and knowledge for conservation and transmission of wooden architecture in Japan.⁹² Internationally, Japan is investing in sharing its traditions with local efforts in embassies and cultural affair organisations, as observed in Chapter II, further supporting local design and craft talent to be appreciated both within and outside Japan.

⁹⁰ A home design trend that combines Japanese and Scandinavian aesthetics that particularly arise from nature

⁹¹ On average, there are eight hundred new books in English on Japan and Design per year according to [WorldCat.org](https://www.worldcat.org) , and over nine thousand titles available on Amazon

⁹² Davies, E.T. Rachel, Heritage Homes, *Storied*, The Cedar Issue, Volume 3, (Kyoto, 2021), 43

Ultimately, Zen is a religio-aesthetic concept of embracing nothingness. Arguably, it defies logic. However, Zen surpasses deification, and lends itself to a secular and universal idea, which can be cultivated by anyone. Studies show 'that embodying the principles of [Zen aesthetics]... in their lives... can help people enhance their psychosomatic well-being, and come to a truer understanding of the essence of mindful living.'⁹³ The focus on Zen aesthetics is on the details. Details which in our home can calm our minds, spirit and provide a meditative approach to life. Using objects of beauty, be it for our daily lives or select occasions, provides satisfaction. Imbuing these objects with Zen aesthetic and sensibilities can give depth to our every day, making the experience of the ordinary be revealed as extraordinary.

⁹³ T. Lomas, *Zen and the Art of Living Mindfully*, (New York, Berlin, 2017), 1720



Fig. 1

Fig. 1 Ensō
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Fig. 2 Raku tea bowl, Nonkō (1599- 1659), Unknown year
Makuyū glazed ceramic
© Raku Yaki Museum, Japan



Fig. 3 Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan
© Japan Journeys



Fig. 4 Shōkin-tei Tea House, Katsura Imperial Villa (1499) Kyoto, Japan
© Spencer Bailey, 2016



Fig. 5 Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Japan
© Yoshihiro Makino, 2021



Fig. 6 Noguchi x Kriss van Asche,
Galerie Downtown-François Laffanour, Paris, 2018
© Archives Steph Simon



Fig. 7 Akari x Futura 2000, New York, 2021
© Noguchi Foundation, New York



Fig. 8 '*Kou-an*' Tea House, Tokujin Yoshioka, 2015
© Yasutake Kondo



Fig. 9 'Mondrian' Tea House, Hiroshi Sugimoto, 2014
© Hiroshi Sugimoto



Fig. 10 Hiroshi Sugimoto, '*Ukitsu*' Tea Room,
432 Park Avenue, New York
© New York Times, Photography by Anthony Costifas



Fig. 11 Watercolour of Tobi-ishi, 2012
© Barber Osgerby



Fig. 12 Tobi-ishi Table, Barber Osgerby, B&B Italia, 2012
© B&B Italia

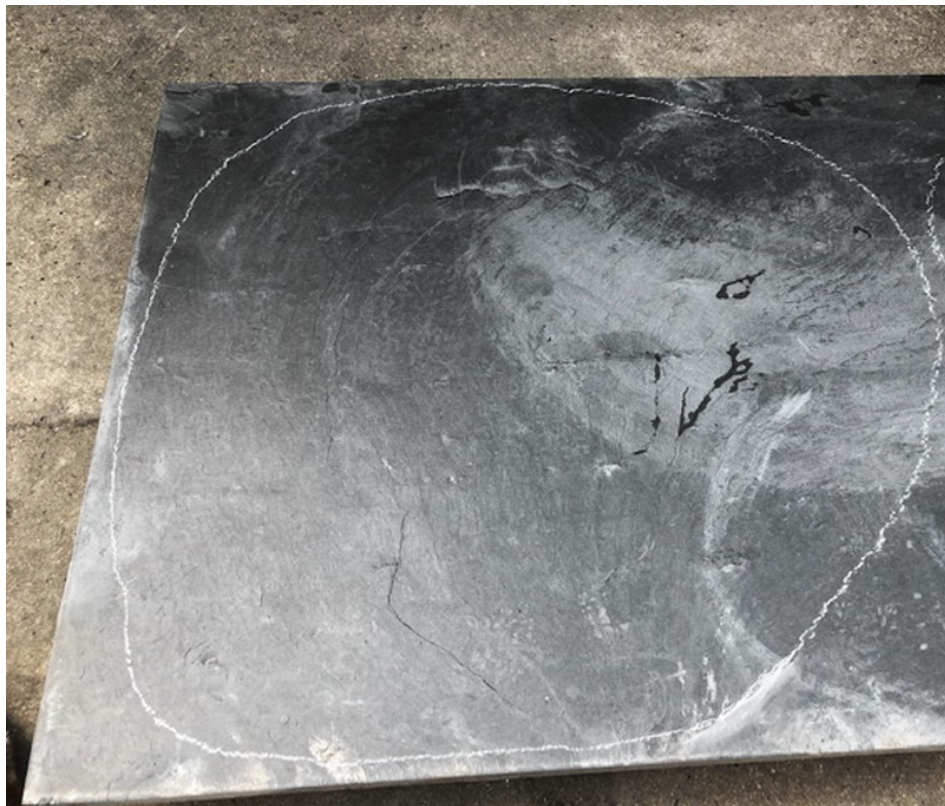


Fig. 13 Chalk Sketch on Slate Stone, 2021
© Axel Vervoordt



Fig. 14 Floating Stone Table, Axel Vervoordt,
Slate, 46 x 48in (117 x 122cm)
Los Angeles, CA, 2021
© Ronit Lee



Fig. 15 The New Look of Tea Exhibition
London, England, 2019
© The New Look of Tea, Embassy of Japan, London



Fig. 16 '*Keyaki*' Tea Caddy, Jihei Murase III (1957 -), 2017
Lacquer, 3 1/2 x 2 3/4 inches (8.9 x 7 cm)
© Ippodo Gallery, New York



Fig. 17 Ogata Paris, Tea Master at Work, 2019
© New York Times, Photography by Joann Pai

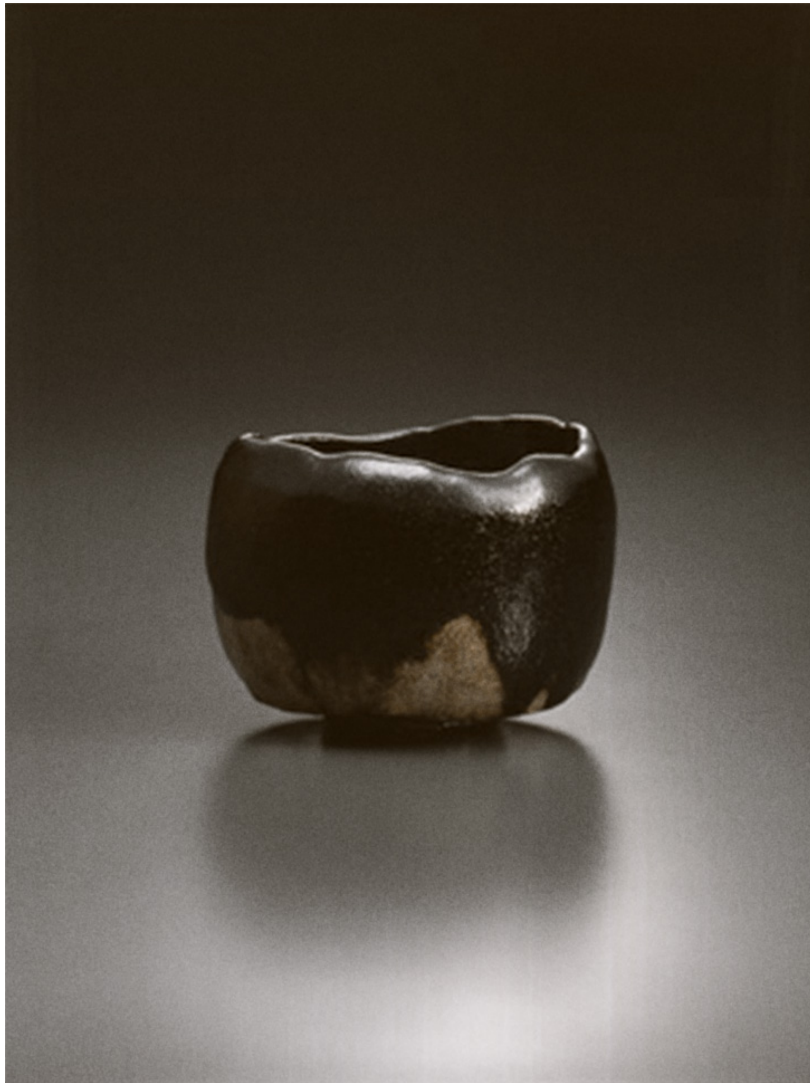


Fig. 18 '*Shūgiku*' Raku Bowl, Kichizaemon XV (1949 -), 2000
Ceramic, black glaze, approx. 3 x 3 1/2 inches (7.6 x 8.9 cm)
© Raku Yaki Museum, Japan



Fig. 19 'Vessel 5', Kenta Anzai (1980 -), 2019
Ceramic and Lacquer, 6 x 7 inches, (15.25 x 17.75 cm)
© Maud and Mabel, London



Fig. 20 Axel Vervoordt, Greenwich Hotel Penthouse
New York, 2014
© New York Times, Photography by François Halard



Fig. 21 Tadao Ando, Manhattan Penthouse, New York, 2019
© Jeff Goldberg / Esto



Fig. 22 Axel Vervoordt, Hidden Hills Home
Architectural Digest, February 2020
© Architectural Digest, Photography by Jackie Nickerson



Fig. 23 John Pawson, Piatina, When Objects Work, 2005
Wood, 4 3/5 inches (11.7 cm)
© Ronit Lee, 2022



Fig. 24 Edmund de Waal, *winter pot* (B10), 2020
Porcelain and lead, 2 5/8 x 6 1/2 inches (6.5 x 16.5 cm)
© Edmund de Waal, Photography by Alzbeta Jaresova



Fig. 25 Hun Chung Lee, Unique Low Table, 2018
Glazed Ceramic
40 1/4 x 24 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches (102.2 x 61.6 x 19.1 cm)
© R & Company



Fig. 26 Muji, Rice Bowl, 2000
Wood Flour, Melamine resin, with Lacquer,
5 3/10 x 2 3/5 inches (13.5 x 6.6 cm)
© Muji

Glossary

<i>Amis</i>	Informal name for the doboshu- all the expert commissioners names ended with <i>Ami</i>
<i>Bonsai</i>	Tray planting which seeks to have small trees mimic the shape of a real life tree
<i>Bushidō</i>	Warrior's Way
<i>Chadō</i>	The Way of the Tea
<i>Ch'an</i>	Chinese for meditation / contemplation
<i>Chanoyu</i>	Translated as hot water for tea, this refers to the Tea Ceremony
<i>Chanoyudana</i>	Chinese style tea cabinet
<i>Chashitsu</i>	Tea room or tea house
<i>Chazen ichimi</i>	Tea and Zen are the same
<i>Chōwa</i>	Accord
<i>Daisu</i>	Display cabinet for tea utensils
<i>Datsuzoku</i>	Freedom from attachment
<i>Doboshu</i>	Expert connoisseurs given role of overseeing purchase and valuation of Chinese imported arts and goods
<i>Dhayāna</i>	Skanskirt for meditation / contemplation
<i>Ensō</i>	A sacred Zen symbol meaning circle
<i>Fukinsei</i>	Asymmetry, irregularity
<i>Fusuma</i>	Sliding opaque doors
<i>Hanami</i>	Flower viewing in spring
<i>Heiwa</i>	Peace
<i>Hinoki</i>	Japanese cypress
<i>Ikebana</i>	Flower arranging
<i>Jindaitamo</i>	Wood from northern Japan, known as Tree of God
<i>Kaiyu shiki</i>	Promenade gardens for leisurely strolling
<i>Takeomono</i>	Hanging scroll
<i>Kanso</i>	Simplicity, sparseness
<i>Kami</i>	Spirits
<i>Karesansui</i>	Dry rock garden
<i>Kawaii</i>	Cute and adorable
<i>Keyaki</i>	Japanese Zelkova Tree
<i>Kintsugi</i>	Repair with gold metal
<i>Koko</i>	Austere sublimity
<i>Koto</i>	Japanese string instrument, the national instrument of Japan
<i>Ma</i>	Gap, interval, space in-between
<i>Madori o tsukuru</i>	Grasp of place
<i>Matcha</i>	Powdered green tea
<i>Mingei</i>	Folk craft
<i>Miyabi</i>	Elegance
<i>Mu</i>	Nothing
<i>Mushin</i>	Short for <i>mushin no shin</i> ; mind without thinking

<i>Nagori</i>	Autumnal season that celebrates the end of the year
<i>Natsume</i>	Tea Caddy
<i>Nori-no-ishi</i>	Guiding stones
<i>Onsen</i>	Japanese hot bath house
<i>Rō</i>	Sunken hearth for a tea kettle in a tea room
<i>Roji</i>	Path
<i>Ryuurei</i>	Tea ceremony style where guests sit on chairs rather than kneel on a tatami
<i>Sabi</i>	Appreciation of imperfection
<i>Sakoku</i>	Closed country
<i>Sakuteiki</i>	Eleventh century garden making guide
<i>Samurai</i>	Military nobility
<i>Seijaku</i>	Calmness, serenity
<i>Sencha</i>	Whole green leaf tea
<i>Shakkei</i>	Gardens that borrow natural landscape for its scenery
<i>Shibui</i>	Unobtrusive beauty
<i>Shizen</i>	Self created, nature
<i>Shodō</i>	Calligraphy
<i>Shogun</i>	Commander in chief
<i>Shoji</i>	Latticed wood frame with paper used as room divider or door
<i>Sumi-e</i>	Ink drawing
<i>Tatami</i>	Japanese straw mat with dimensions based on the human body
<i>Tobi-ishi</i>	Floating stepping stone
<i>Tokonoma</i>	A viewing alcove used to present a scroll or ink drawing
<i>Tomotsugi</i>	Ceramic repair using insertion of original fragments from the broken piece
<i>Tsukubai</i>	Stone basin to wash hands before entering a tea house or temple
<i>Urushi</i>	Lacquer from the sap of the Japanese sumac tree
<i>Urushi naoshi</i>	Lacquer repair
<i>Wa</i>	Harmony, of Japanese origin
<i>Wabi</i>	Acceptance of impermanence
<i>Wabicha</i>	Wabi tea, tea in a humble manner
<i>Wafū</i>	Japanese style
<i>Wagashi</i>	Traditional Japanese sweet
<i>Washi</i>	Japanese paper
<i>Washitsu</i>	Traditional Japanese style room
<i>Yaku-ishi</i>	Purpose stone
<i>Yobitsugi</i>	Use of fragments from other ceramic pieces for repair of broken vessels
<i>Yūgen</i>	Profound depth

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