

wabi-sabi

ART WORKSHOP



MIXED MEDIA TECHNIQUES
for EMBRACING IMPERFECTION and
CELEBRATING HAPPY ACCIDENTS

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GALLERY: Zeitgeist – Mixed media on wood panel

finding inspiration and beauty in the ordinary

When I first heard the term *wabi-sabi*, the sound of the words intrigued me. I set out to find out what the term meant. After finding some clues in books, photographs and, yes, the Internet, I realized the term refers to a kind of philosophy, aesthetic and feeling I had already internalized. I was excited by this realization and was inspired to begin creating paintings and mixed-media pieces that embodied my understanding of wabi-sabi.

The term *wabi-sabi* comes from two Japanese words and refers to that which is imperfect, impermanent, aged, humble and authentic. Both nature- and human-made objects may have wabi-sabi qualities. Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic that values the passing of time, the seasoning of time and the elements, the handmade and the simple. Wabi-sabi is a way of being open to emotion and acceptance. Wabi-sabi is a state of mind and a state of feeling. I find this state of being expressed in traditional haiku poetry, which can express a world of seeing, listening, smelling, tasting and feeling in the recording of a single moment.

In these pages, I'll share my understanding and inspiration with you. Together we'll explore the meaning and beauty in the ordinary objects we see every day. We'll honor the humble and the worn, the imperfect and the transitory. I'll give you tools, techniques and ideas that you can use to enter into the essence of wabi-sabi. More than anything, I'll encourage you to work from your heart. When you make wabi-sabi art, you allow the process to unfold and to envelop you in the moment. Wabi-sabi embraces serenity, joy, solitude, surprise and whatever else you may experience in the moment.

When I was in my twenties, an acquaintance who had lived in Japan told me that the Japanese ideal of beauty was a flower just past its prime, a flower beginning to turn brown at the edges of its petals. Back then, this seemed a strange idea to me, but now I understand it better.

We mixed-media artists and art lovers are drawn to objects that speak of the passage of time. We may feel bittersweet emotion as we think of those who lived before us, and we may wonder what their lives were like. We like nature in its wilder states. The wabi-sabi outlook accepts that we are all impermanent on this earth and that the most important

thing in life is to be fully present in the moment. We are open to any and all of our emotions in this moment and accept them with serenity.

I am also drawn to the ideal of the handmade and the imperfections that make an object singular and meaningful. My wabi-sabi work is experimental and interactive. Rather than planning out a piece before I create it, I work with the materials and let them guide me. I make a lot of "mistakes" and have a lot of "accidents" while I'm working. And that's excellent! In this book, I will talk about the beauty of imperfection and some of the wonderful effects of unintended elements. I'll show you ways to redo pieces you've put aside, and I'll let you in on some accidental discoveries that have inspired me to use materials and techniques in new ways.

This book covers how to use your own photographs for inspiration and how to create wabi-sabi texture and color on your piece. You'll start with simple landscape compositions in acrylic and re-inker glaze and end with complex layers of mixed-media elements. Wabi-sabi can embody the "less is more" aesthetic as well as "more is more." In my work I often combine simplicity of composition with complexity of layering. The projects in this book have in common the qualities of asymmetry, a seasoned look and a sense of contemplation.

To me, wabi-sabi is like a garden that is somewhat overgrown. Maybe a secret garden that is all the sweeter for not being perfectly manicured. Wabi-sabi is subtle; it doesn't hit you over the head. It's mysterious and complex. Creating wabi-sabi work is freeing—there are no real mistakes and no wrong way to do it. The process of interacting with your materials in an open and exploratory way is as important as the finished product.

Being a visual person, I believe one of the best ways I can convey my wabi-sabi outlook is through photographs I've taken and through my artwork. Your work will be filtered through your essence as my work is filtered through mine.

The more you can remain in the process, the more you'll enjoy the pieces you make. One of the lovely paradoxes of art is that the more we play and experiment and don't try too hard to get a certain result, the more satisfied we are in the end, when we view what we've created.

A Wabi-Sabi Photo Gallery



Tintoretto House

Crumbling brick, peeling paint and disintegrating wood characterizes the former home of a Venetian Renaissance painter.



Red Branches

A tangle of trees in my neighborhood.



Mary's Kettle

My great-grandmother's dented teakettle sitting on a hand-built pottery stand. A monkey-puzzle pod completes the image.



Cemetario

On the cemetery island in Venice. An air of peaceful wildness—human creation intersecting with the natural world.



On the Street

In Oaxaca City, Mexico. A fascinating abstract created by time and neglect.



Fresco

A decaying fresco, passed daily by shoppers on one of Bologna, Italy's main streets.



Incarnations

An art or history student may have been the one to document the layers of paint on the wall of this building belonging to the University of Bologna. The building dates back to medieval times and was originally a monastery.



Rifugio

A World War II bomb shelter sign in Bologna takes us back to a time when, for most people of the world, hope was fighting with dread.



Mystery House

A deserted house on the coast—weathered and mysterious.

Use Your Photo for Inspiration



I took this picture on my first wabi-sabi walk around the outside of my house. On my back porch, two broken pots sat atop a paint-stained table. The burnt orange stucco area at the top of the picture is part of an exterior wall of the house.

The pot directly on top of the table has some potting soil in it. Or maybe it's just plain dirt! Really, this is a picture of junk. Or is it? There's still beauty in the shards of handmade pottery and in the glistening colors of what used to be my paint table.

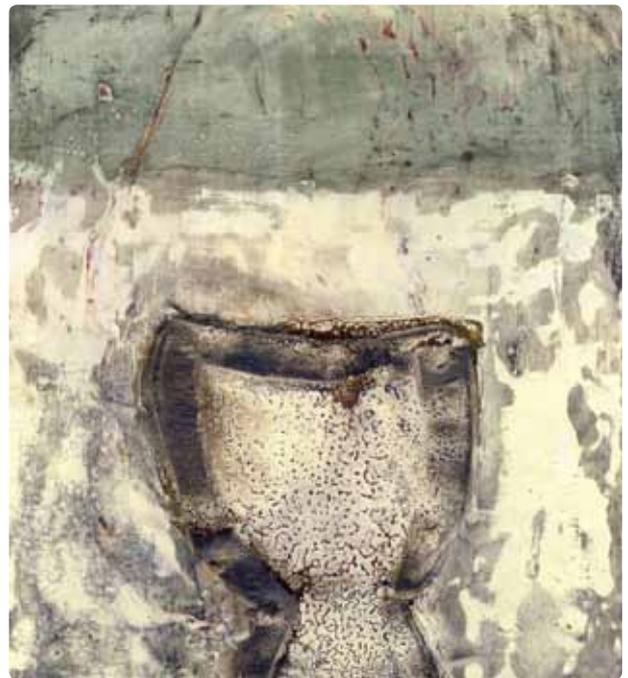
To me the way the colors, shapes and designs are juxtaposed gives me wabi-sabi inspiration. The colors of this photo have inspired several of my autumn pieces. I had put this arrangement together before I'd ever heard the term *wabi-sabi*. But I knew the arrangement spoke to me of accidental beauty arising from imperfection and even decay.

Take your own photo of an arrangement that inspires you. Choose a color scheme from the arrangement. From the photo above I chose terra-cotta red, turquoise and Burnt Umber for one of the pieces below, *Between*, and the shape for the other piece, *Chalice*. Which colors and shapes might you choose?



GALLERY: Between – Encaustic on wood panel

This piece borrows colors and an aged look from the pottery shards photograph.



GALLERY: Chalice – Encaustic and mixed media on wood panel

In this piece I borrowed the roundness of the broken bowls, creating the top part of the chalice.

Scraping and Incising

I love the term for etching marks into a painted surface: *sgraffito*. This is an Italian word for a technique that dates at least back to the Renaissance. You'll recognize this term as the parent of our modern word, *graffiti*. This technique mimics the process of wear and tear over time.

There's something both playful and powerful about using a carving tool, a dental tool, an awl or other sharp tool to scratch the surface of your piece. You can use this tool to create a representational design, to add text or to give your piece a "street" look.

In this project, you're going to use sgraffito to make a framed image in the center of the piece. For this project I suggest that you make your lines and drawings simple and even primitive, in keeping with the wabi-sabi style. You'll be using re-inker glaze and acrylic paint to add to the seasoned look. You'll add touches of PanPastels, small containers of pure pigment that are pressed like face powder in a compact.



Waiting to Be Filled – Acrylic paint, re-inker glaze, PanPastel, graphite and ink on wood panel



1 Layer Micaceous Iron Oxide acrylic paint onto a pre-gessoed surface.



2 When the layer of Micaceous Iron Oxide acrylic paint is dry, add a layer of Nickel Azo Yellow acrylic paint.



3 Add one more layer of the Micaceous Iron Oxide and of the Nickel Azo Yellow.



4 Add touches of Viridian acrylic paint and wipe.



5 Brush down a layer of Ginger re-inker mixed with glaze medium.



6 Squirt black acrylic paint onto the support in a square shape. Flatten the paint down and take up any extra with a paper towel.



7 Incise into the black lines with a carving tool.



8 With a pencil, draw a design, such as a cup. Incise around the drawing, adding incisions for shading.



9 Add a layer of Payne's Gray and gold to the background of the incised square, and rub a little Burnt Sienna PanPastel into the drawn area. Incise again—or scrape incised areas—for definition.



10 Paint another area of Ginger re-inker mixed with glaze below the incised area. Wipe the area and finish by blackening the edges and corners of the panel with a stamp pad.

wabi-sabi wisdom

- You can fill in the incisions you make with PanPastels (as I did here), re-inkers, permanent dark ink or acrylic inks.
- The more layers of color you have put on your piece, the more color will show in the incisions.



GALLERY: Salmon Sky – Acrylic and re-inker glaze on wood panel

This piece reminds me of sunset and mist. I rubbed the re-inker glaze into the support for a soft effect. I used my brush handle to incise lines in the center of the piece, and I added rubber stamping in the lower right corner as a finishing touch.

CHERRIES BLOSSOM
AND THEN FALL DOWN—
ALL THIS IS THE WAY OF THINGS ...
~Enomoto Seifu-Jo

Using Stained Shop Towels

I acted on impulse the first time I used this technique. The paint- and ink-stained paper shop towel lying next to me looked so pretty and interesting that I just thought, *What if...?* I added the shop towel courtesy of a thick application of gel medium, and it worked just fine. When I use a thicker towel, I like to add other thick elements as well. This piece is called *Kabuki*, named after a highly stylized form of drama and dance theater in Japan. The stained shop rag used here reminds me of a highly patterned kimono.

RIGHT AT MY FEET—
AND WHEN DID YOU GET HERE,
SNAIL?
~Issa



Kabuki – Stained shop rags, pen, Mexican Amate Bark Marble Lace paper and acrylic on wood panel



1 Paint a layer of white acrylic paint over a light-colored wood panel. Pat with a paper towel. Tear a stained shop towel and use gel medium to collage a piece near the center.



2 Tear off a piece of Mexican Amate Bark Marble Lace paper and loosen the threads. Secure the Amate paper with gel medium.



3 Go over the paper areas randomly with a wash of blue acrylic paint and glaze medium. Then brush on a mixture of pink and beige acrylic paint to make a partial square in the upper left of the collaged area.



4 With a fine-point marker, draw a horizontal line across the piece, about a quarter of the way from the bottom of the panel.



5 Write a small amount of text with the same marker in the middle of the area and under the horizontal pen line.



GALLERY: Contemplative Chaos – Mixed media on wood

In this piece, stained paper shop rags form a rich frame around the central images.