



wabi-sabi moe Japan 2016 by Monica Dengo

The deepest memory I carry with me from this first Wabi-Sabi Moe workshop in South Japan, is the sound of the waves while we worked in the classroom. Large windows stretching from one end to the other of the front wall, offered us great light throughout the day and the constant calming view over the Genkai Sea.

My encounter with Japan began many years ago in San Francisco. One of my first students was a collector of Japanese and Chinese art, her home looked to me like a fine museum. I was delighted every time I went to give her lessons. In particular I was fascinated by her Suiseki and Scholar's Rocks collection but also by a Japanese style home she was building in Mill Valley, whose developments I followed with delight. In 2000 I was invited to teach in Tokyo and that's how my love began.

I've known Satsuki for more than twenty years. We met in San Francisco at the home of a common friend, Emiko Kinebuchi, and have kept in contact since then. We have been several times in each other's countries, but perhaps this workshop has been possible because we share a certain view of the world. I wanted this event to share with my students a love that cannot be understood unless it is experienced, and Satsuki embraced the idea with enthusiasm.



The idea to use Wabi-Sabi in the title came to me from Leonard Koren's book (*). According to Satsuki the term Wabi-Sabi, sometimes described as a beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete", seemed complex or difficult to explain. In the end though, it turned out a good choice.

The week program was shared between work in class and many visits to the less known Japan, the one you normally don't get to see as a tourist. Only a couple of days were fully spent in the classroom, although students had access to the room at any time, so many people stayed up late, especially on the last few days.

Paper in Japan is an immensely versatile material: used for doors, walls and windows in traditional architecture, it even becomes a substitute for fabric when treated with konnyaku paste, made from konnyaku potato. We visited a kozo paper making shop in Akizuki, where we saw all the stages of production. A number of different kinds of papers were also given to the students in class, so they could experience all the possibilities offered by Oriental papers. An initial exercise, suggested by the Japanese calligrapher Horio Shigemasa was also essential: dotting various papers with different kinds of sumi, changing progressively the proportion between ink and water to see the effects on the sheet.



Paper making in Akizuki



Drawers at Paper Road shop in Fukuoka

Students pasted Oriental papers on to their Western paper sketchbooks, sometimes along with notes, other times in the form of a true artist book. The many ways students translated their inducements into marks, images and compositions was extremely interesting and surprising. Everyone worked having the words Wabi-Sabi and Moe as companions, lifting their fear of mistakes and elevating imperfections to the beauty of an unexpected detail. Students had the opportunity to observe refined design in any object, and how simplicity and strength are applied to composition. Comparing a Japanese Zen garden with a Renaissance Italian garden, as Fosco Maraini suggested in his book *Giappone-Mandala*, might be a good way to look at Eastern asymmetry versus Western symmetry.

Paper Road in Fukuoka, a shop fully dedicated to Oriental papers, was one of the gems of this trip. The shop was so well furnished, it even carried the papers developed by Tim Berrett at the University of Iowa - Center for the Book, combining Western and Eastern techniques.

On our visit to the 1800 years old Raizan Sennyoji Daihioin Temple the happy and welcoming Buddhist monks told us we were the first large international group to visit them. I'll never forget the spectacular afternoon light entering from the adjacent forest into the room where we copied the Heart Sutra, retracing over the logo-grams which almost nobody could read.



Copying Sutra at Raizan Sennyoji Daihioin Temple

Karatsu is one of the most important areas for pottery, which we admired in some of the most beautiful galleries of the city. It was only Chris McDonald though, who accepted our guide Masako's offer to go visit the Ryu Tagama pottery studio. The week after the workshop Satsuki and I visited that same studio and decided we'll definitively put this trip in next year's program for the whole group.

The studio is in the mountains and the master potter works in a location that feels as precious and spiritual as a Zen garden. The subtleties of Karatsu pottery and the philosophy underlying this art, are one of the best ways to be introduced to Japanese aesthetics and its relation to nature and life. I hope we can have Masako again with us next year, she was very good and enthusiastic and I understand she is a serious collector of Karatsu pottery.



Karatsu pottery



Ryu Tagama pottery studio

All the Japanese people we met, were extremely kind and helpful. With their dedication and attention they taught to the group an important aspect of Oriental people: Anything you ask them, they'll do all that is possible to meet your needs. Of course, if you are not used to such generosity, you may exaggerate in asking, so often mine has been a work of mediation. On our field trips, this was perhaps my biggest role, while Satsuki was our guide, translator and model of tradition (she almost always dressed with a kimono).

In a short article like this is, I cannot express all the many experiences we had in this workshop, but I felt the need to tell at least a few, for those who might be thinking to come next year, but also for those who may prefer to stay in Italy and still take on the challenge of opening up a dialogue with the East (see workshop in Turin, Italy: <http://www.turineducational.org/educational-trips/sign-and-space-calligraph/>).

(*)Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets, Philosophers, by Leonard Koren. Image below by Annamaria Rocca



