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An Analysis of the Relationship Between Kintsugi and Wabi-Sabi in the Context of Contemporary Thought: From the Aesthetics of Imperfection to the Philosophy of Impermanence

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between kintsugi as an embodiment of the aesthetics of imperfection and wabi-sabi as a philosophy of impermanence within the framework of contemporary thought. In Japanese tradition, kintsugi demonstrates that fracture and imperfection can become a source of beauty, while wabi-sabi emphasizes the acceptance of transience, simplicity, and insufficiency as the foundation of aesthetics. Despite their fundamental commonalities, the relationship between these two perspectives has rarely been examined from a philosophical standpoint. Adopting an analytical–philosophical approach, this research argues that kintsugi and wabi-sabi are not only complementary within the Japanese aesthetic tradition but can also be reinterpreted in dialogue with contemporary thought, such as existentialism and the aesthetics of absence. The findings of this reinterpretation may offer responses to contemporary crises, including consumerism, disposability culture, and excessive perfectionism. Thus, this study seeks to demonstrate how analyzing the relationship between kintsugi and wabi-sabi can lead to a renewed understanding of beauty, fracture, and impermanence in both art and life.

Keywords: Kintsugi, Wabi-sabi, Impermanence, Aesthetics of imperfection, Contemporary art.

1 | Introduction

The concept of beauty in the history of thought has always been defined in connection with the notions of perfection, wholeness, and harmony. From ancient Greece to the modern era, most aesthetic theories have been grounded in the ideals of proportion, symmetry, and flawlessness. However, Eastern aesthetic traditions, particularly within Japanese culture, propose a different horizon: one in which imperfection,

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impermanence, and insufficiency are not negated but instead become the very core of the aesthetic experience [1].

Two prominent examples in this regard are the art of kintsugi and the philosophy of wabi-sabi, which together construct an alternative perspective on beauty and existence. Kintsugi, the art of repairing broken objects with gold, serves as a profound metaphor for transforming fracture into beauty. In this practice, cracks and breaks are not concealed but accentuated, revealing that imperfection and restoration are integral parts of the history and identity of an object.

On the other hand, wabi-sabi, as a foundation of Japanese aesthetics, envisions a world where transience, simplicity, and insufficiency are the sources of beauty. This philosophy regards the acceptance of impermanence not as a weakness but as a fundamental insight. Despite their conceptual proximity, existing studies have primarily addressed these traditions separately, and the relationship between the “aesthetics of imperfection” in kintsugi and the “philosophy of impermanence” in wabi-sabi has rarely been examined analytically. Yet revisiting this relationship can open new perspectives on the understanding of beauty within the framework of contemporary thought. In a world dominated by consumerism, disposability culture, and overshadowed by excessive perfectionism in lived experience, reflecting on the possibility of beauty within imperfection and impermanence acquires new significance.

Accordingly, the central question of this research is: what is the relationship between kintsugi and wabi-sabi, and how can this relationship be reinterpreted in light of contemporary thought, including existentialism and the aesthetics of absence? This article aims to demonstrate that combining these two perspectives not only opens a new horizon in the philosophy of art but also offers a response to contemporary crises in both aesthetics and human existence.

1.1| Research Background

Existing scholarship on kintsugi and wabi-sabi has primarily focused on their historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions rather than their philosophical interrelation. Leonard Koren’s *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* situates wabi-sabi within the broader field of Japanese aesthetics and its artistic manifestations, while Thomas Navarro’s *Kintsugi* approaches the subject from a psychological perspective, framing it as a metaphor for resilience and personal growth. Similarly, Du Xi Xi and Salwa Ayoub, in their article *From Aesthetics to Design: The Sustainability of Wabi-Sabi in Contemporary Ceramic Product Design*, highlight the transformation of wabi-sabi from a traditional Japanese philosophy into a global design paradigm. Kaori Mochinaga’s *The Kintsugi Reference: The Wabi-Sabi Art of Japanese Ceramic Repair* further underscores the practical and conceptual connections between the two traditions, explicitly linking the practice of kintsugi to the philosophical tenets of wabi-sabi. Despite these contributions, there remains a critical gap in the literature: the lack of a sustained philosophical and aesthetic analysis of the relationship between kintsugi and wabi-sabi within the framework of contemporary thought. Addressing this gap is essential for rethinking the notions of beauty, imperfection, and impermanence as conceptual resources in both art theory and human experience.

1.2| Theoretical Framework

Kintsugi, as an art form, is a philosophical representation of “fracture” and “repair.” Here, imperfection is not eliminated or compensated for, but instead highlighted and transformed into beauty. This perspective can be illuminated through concepts such as the aesthetics of absence, which provides a new analytical tool for understanding kintsugi and wabi-sabi not merely as Japanese traditions but as universal philosophical models for grasping fracture and impermanence. Within this framework, beauty is not necessarily defined by perfection and presence; instead, it may emerge from lack, rupture, and absence of meaning. In doing so, a more profound sense of beauty is revealed, one that resonates with the idea of “imperfection as the possibility of meaning” in contemporary philosophy of art. Likewise, wabi-sabi emphasizes three fundamental principles: simplicity, impermanence, and insufficiency [1]. This philosophy constitutes a worldview in which existence

is understood through its transience and incompleteness. At this level, wabi-sabi can be compared to existentialist notions of accepting failure, or even to postmodern thought concerning the instability of meaning. Taken together, these levels construct a theoretical framework through which the relationship between kintsugi and wabi-sabi can be analyzed, and their implications for the contemporary world can be revealed, particularly in how consumerism, disposability culture, and excessive perfectionism have eroded the possibility of a centered and tranquil life for modern urban humans. This innovative perspective thus introduces a new theoretical concept as the linking element within the article.

1.3 | Research Methodology

The present study is organized based on a descriptive–analytical approach. Within this framework, data were first collected from diverse and credible sources, gathering historical evidence as well as philosophical and artistic reflections related to kintsugi and wabi-sabi. These data were then interpreted and re-examined through an analytical process. The analysis is qualitative, as the goal of the research is not statistical measurement but rather the exploration of meaning, concepts, and their philosophical and aesthetic implications. Data collection relied primarily on library and documentary research, including books, scholarly articles, and specialized texts in Japanese aesthetics and philosophy of art. In addition, credible online sources were consulted to complement the data and capture contemporary perspectives. Consequently, the study draws upon a diverse and interdisciplinary body of data. The originality of this research lies in its interdisciplinary emphasis. The approach moves from the artistic level (kintsugi as a material and experiential manifestation of the aesthetics of imperfection) to the philosophical level (wabi-sabi as a worldview emphasizing impermanence), and finally to contemporary theoretical concerns (the aesthetics of absence and its implications for critiquing consumerism and modern thought). In this process, the study integrates philosophy of art, comparative aesthetics, and contemporary thought to establish a connection between traditional aesthetic experience and current theoretical inquiries. Thus, the research methodology is neither purely descriptive nor purely theoretical; rather, it constitutes a combined approach that, grounded in historical and artistic data, provides a philosophical analysis and enables a rethinking of the concepts of “imperfection,” “absence,” and “beauty” within the broader horizon of contemporary culture.

2 | Kintsugi: The Aesthetics of Imperfection

The Japanese art of kintsugi, or “golden joinery,” involves repairing broken ceramic or porcelain vessels using lacquer mixed with powdered gold or silver. This technique first emerged in the 15th century during the Ashikaga shogunate [2]. It is reported that Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, after one of his favorite tea bowls broke, sent it to China for repair, but was dissatisfied with the poor quality of the restoration. Subsequently, Japanese masters developed an innovative method of repair that not only preserved the cracks but also highlighted them with gold [2]. What distinguishes kintsugi from other forms of restoration is its philosophical approach to imperfection and fracture. Rather than concealing damage, it celebrates it, transforming breaks into a focal point of beauty and a testament to the history and identity of the object. In Western aesthetic traditions, there has historically been a tendency to “conceal cracks” and restore an object to a state of “completeness and flawlessness.”

In contrast, in kintsugi, fracture is considered part of the object’s identity, and repair is not a return to its previous state but a creation of something new and aesthetically meaningful. A restored vessel, adorned with golden lines, does not appear “more flawed” but rather “more unique.” From an aesthetic perspective, kintsugi embodies the acceptance of imperfection: flaws are not negated but transformed into sources of beauty. In this art, cracks are as valuable as the intact portions of the vessel [3].

This approach, in contrast to perfectionist traditions, constitutes a shift in aesthetic criteria: imperfection as history, where the cracks indicate that the object has lived and possesses a past; repair as meaning, where the addition of golden lines transforms the history of fracture into part of the vessel’s beauty; and uniqueness, in which each repaired vessel, due to its specific fractures, becomes singular and without an identical counterpart. Kintsugi is not merely a method of restoration but a philosophical metaphor for the human experience. Like

a vessel, humans encounter fractures, losses, and cracks throughout the course of life. From the perspective of this art, the value of life does not lie in returning to an “original wholeness,” but in accepting one’s wounds and integrating them into one’s identity. In this sense, kintsugi closely resonates with existentialist thought, which emphasizes authentic confrontation with human imperfection and existential impermanence. As the German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) notes, the unaware individual attempts to live without acknowledging death, because it evokes anxiety, as if death were not real, seeking to escape reality. Instead, we must integrate the awareness of death into life and confront it sincerely [4].

Kintsugi also gains significance in connection with the aesthetics of absence. Here, absence refers to the lack of the vessel’s original perfection; however, this absence is not a negative void but rather a fertile ground for the creation of meaning and beauty. The cracks reveal the presence of absence, while the golden lines respond to that absence, transforming absence into presence. From this perspective, kintsugi can be understood as the material and tangible embodiment of the aesthetics of absence within Japanese art. Analyzing kintsugi as an aesthetics of imperfection provides a foundation for understanding its relationship with the philosophy of wabi-sabi. If kintsugi exemplifies an artistic acceptance of imperfection, wabi-sabi offers a broader philosophical horizon, viewing impermanence and insufficiency as sources of beauty. In the following section, this connection will be examined in greater depth.

3 | Wabi-Sabi: The Philosophy of Impermanence

The concept of wabi-sabi is one of the most fundamental yet enigmatic notions in Japanese aesthetics. The term combines two words: wabi, originally referring to the hardship of living alone in nature, away from society, and connoting a sense of desolation, melancholy, or spiritual emptiness; and sabi, which originally meant cold, thin, or withered. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both terms underwent a transformation, evolving toward more positive aesthetic values [5].

In the subsequent centuries, it came to signify a worldview in which impermanence, imperfection, and insufficiency are not seen as flaws, but rather as sources of beauty and meaning. Wabi-sabi emerged from the Zen Buddhist tradition and the Japanese tea ceremony [5]. In the 16th century, tea masters such as Sen no Rikyū, the founder of the wabi-cha tradition, emphasized simplicity and the use of rough, handmade vessels as a contrast to the aristocratic and ornate aesthetic of the time. They believed that true beauty does not lie in symmetry or luxury, but in simplicity, rawness, and impermanence. This worldview is rooted in the Buddhist principle of anitya, or “impermanence” [8]. Everything in the world is transient and constantly changing, and the awareness of this impermanence is part of spiritual awakening.

The aesthetics of wabi-sabi can be identified through several key characteristics:

- I. Impermanence: everything is subject to decay, and this very decay is considered part of its beauty.
- II. Insufficiency: perfection is an illusion; beauty lies in incompleteness and openness to change.
- III. Simplicity and humility: value is found in unadorned modesty, not in complexity or luxury.
- IV. Aging and patina: the marks of time on objects—rust, cracks, erosion—are not signs of destruction, but testimonies to authenticity and vitality [6].

Wabi-sabi is not merely an artistic style or visual aesthetic, but a philosophical worldview. This perspective teaches us that, rather than insisting on durability and perfection, we should embrace impermanence and imperfection and regard them as sources of tranquility and meaning. In a world increasingly driven by consumerism and the insistence on novelty and flawlessness, wabi-sabi reminds us that value lies in living with absence and impermanence. If kintsugi serves as a metaphor for accepting personal wounds and failures, wabi-sabi operates on a broader scale, encompassing the entirety of the human condition. Human life, like nature, is continuously changing and decaying. Beauty and meaning arise when we accept this decay and find calm within transient moments. Here, wabi-sabi becomes, in a sense, an “art of living”—the art of perceiving beauty in that which is old, incomplete, and transient. Wabi-sabi can be seen as the philosophical counterpart to what kintsugi materializes artistically: the aesthetics of absence. In wabi-sabi, absence is not a negative lack

but a foundation for experiencing beauty and meaning. This absence may be the lack of perfection, durability, or luxury. Thus, wabi-sabi provides a broad theoretical horizon in which imperfection and impermanence are transformed into positive values. By presenting wabi-sabi as a philosophy of impermanence, we can more clearly understand its relation to kintsugi. If kintsugi exemplifies the artistic manifestation of the aesthetics of imperfection, wabi-sabi offers the philosophical framework that regards such imperfection not as an exception but as a fundamental principle of existence. The interplay of these two, within the framework of the aesthetics of absence, will be explored in the next section of the article.

4 | The Aesthetics of Absence

The aesthetics of absence is a concept that can illuminate the connection between kintsugi and wabi-sabi as two sides of the same coin. This theoretical framework is grounded in the acceptance of imperfection, transience, and the lack of perfection, allowing instability and flaws not to be seen as deficiencies but as sources of meaning and beauty [2]. In traditional Western aesthetics, beauty is often measured by symmetry, perfection, and completeness, while absence or imperfection is naturally associated with ugliness or deficiency. In the framework of the aesthetics of absence, absence is not a negative void but a generative potential. Every flaw or crack carries a narrative of life and time. In kintsugi, cracks are highlighted with gold, and this absence, within this perspective, conveys identity and experience, serving as a foundation for the creation of meaning. Absence provides the possibility for reinterpretation and renewal. The aesthetics of absence considers imperfection and impermanence as fundamental concepts. In impermanence, all objects and phenomena undergo change and decay over time; acknowledging this truth enables a deeper understanding of beauty. In insufficiency, wholeness is not the goal; incompleteness and openness to change generate value and aesthetic significance. These two features are simultaneously evident in both kintsugi and wabi-sabi: a restored vessel, in the wabi-sabi spirit, constantly reminds us of the passage of time and history, and imperfection itself becomes beautiful [7].

4.1 | Kintsugi, Wabi-Sabi, and the Aesthetics of Absence

If kintsugi represents the material and tangible manifestation of the aesthetics of imperfection, wabi-sabi embodies its philosophical and worldview dimension. The aesthetics of absence provides a coherent theoretical framework that unites the two: a combination of experience and philosophy. Kintsugi represents the tangible experience of imperfection and creative restoration, while wabi-sabi offers the intellectual and philosophical context for accepting imperfection and impermanence. Within this framework, beauty is not defined by completeness but by the response to absence, impermanence, and fracture. Every flaw, every crack, and every passage of time is unique and possesses intrinsic value. This is the very concept that kintsugi adorns with gold and that wabi-sabi seeks to perceive in everyday life [2].

4.2 | The Aesthetics of Absence and Human Experience

This theoretical framework also offers important lessons for human life:

- I. Acceptance of flaws and failures: just as a cracked vessel is valued, personal failures and imperfections are an integral part of human identity.
- II. Beauty in transience: life, experiences, and emotions are constantly changing; by embracing this transience, one can cultivate tranquility and meaning.
- III. Creating meaning from absence: absence and impermanence are not threats, but rather the foundation for generating beauty, meaning, and authenticity.

4.3 | Analyzing the Relationship between Kintsugi and Wabi-Sabi in Light of the Aesthetics of Absence

Kintsugi and wabi-sabi are both prominent manifestations of Japanese beauty that emphasize the acceptance of imperfection, impermanence, and absence. However, they exhibit apparent differences at the levels of practice and philosophy. Analyzing the relationship between these two concepts within the framework of the aesthetics of absence allows for a deeper understanding of the role of imperfection in both art and life. Kintsugi, in a tangible and material sense, highlights imperfection; the broken and repaired vessel carries symbolic significance. In fact, kintsugi transforms flaws into an element of beauty, accentuating imperfection physically and visually [6]. Wabi-sabi extends beyond objects and art, bringing impermanence and imperfection to the level of life and worldview. The aesthetics of absence provides the theoretical framework that unites kintsugi and wabi-sabi: in both concepts, imperfection is not viewed as a weakness, but as an opportunity to create beauty and meaning. Kintsugi represents the tangible experience of imperfection, while wabi-sabi embodies the philosophy of accepting imperfection. Beauty, therefore, does not reside in completeness, but in the response to absence, impermanence, and the unity emerging from imperfection [8].

By examining the relationship between the two, it can be said that kintsugi embodies wabi-sabi: the art of repairing with gold enacts the philosophy of wabi-sabi at a tangible and visual level. Wabi-sabi provides philosophical depth to kintsugi, while kintsugi transforms wabi-sabi from theory into lived experience. Together, they demonstrate that imperfection, whether in objects or human life, is not a threat but a source of meaning and beauty. Analyzing the relationship between kintsugi and wabi-sabi through the lens of the aesthetics of absence reveals that imperfection and impermanence are not only realities of art and life but also central to beauty and meaning. This perspective allows humans and objects alike to regard flaws and decay not as deficiencies, but as opportunities for creating beauty and experiencing authenticity.

5 | The Context of Contemporary Thought and Its Implications

Just as Kintsugi highlights cracks, contemporary artists can turn the change and decay of objects or the human body into the central theme of their works. Accepting imperfection and incompleteness, whether intentional flaws or natural processes such as wear and decay, can enhance the beauty and authenticity of the piece. Artworks that embrace imperfection and transformation emphasize the unity and personal experience of both the artist and the audience. This framework is not limited to art alone; it can also extend to lifestyle and contemporary philosophies of living [7].

Acceptance of limitations and failures, of personal flaws and constraints, can, instead of being seen as threats, become sources of growth and meaning. Recognizing the value of fleeting moments and worn, aged objects draws one toward living in the present and appreciating what one has. Wabi-sabi reminds us that complexity and luxury are not necessary for beauty; rather, simplicity, imperfection, and authenticity can be more valuable. Within the context of contemporary thought, Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi can be understood as a bridge between tradition and modernity. In traditional art and Japanese philosophy, they demonstrate how imperfection can be a source of beauty and meaning. In urban life, contemporary art, and health psychology, these concepts become practical tools for living better, accepting change, and creating meaning. Contemporary thought shows that the aesthetics of absence is not merely a historical or philosophical framework, but a practical tool for modern life and art. Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi teach the contemporary human to accept imperfection, decay, and transience as natural and valuable parts of life; to seek beauty and meaning in response to loss and change; and to experience everyday life, art, and human experience with greater authenticity, calm, and depth [7].

6 | Critique of Consumerism and the Teachings of Imperfection

Japanese aesthetics, particularly Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi, offer an indirect yet profound critique of modern consumer culture. In a world where the standards of value and beauty are often based on objects being new, perfect, and consumable, these traditions present a different and alternative perspective. In consumerist

societies, value is frequently measured by novelty, luxury, and perfection; old, damaged, or broken objects are often considered worthless. Change and transience are seen as flaws and problems, and the social pressure to own new and perfect items consistently generates feelings of dissatisfaction and lack. Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi, as an indirect critique, assert that broken objects are not discarded but repaired with golden lines, gaining even greater value. In contrast to consumer culture, imperfection becomes a source of beauty and authenticity. Similarly, in Wabi-sabi, incompleteness and transience are appreciated; not only does this reduce the emphasis on luxury and novelty, but it also shifts attention toward authenticity, experience, and meaning. The social and cultural implications of this critique promote sustainability, repair, maintenance, and the acceptance of imperfection instead of disposal, benefiting the environment and encouraging responsible consumption. Moreover, value and beauty are no longer limited to being new and perfect; they also encompass experience, transience, and authenticity. Acceptance of flaws and limitations enhances a sense of satisfaction and meaning in life, contrary to consumerism, which is associated with fleeting satisfaction and constant dissatisfaction [6].

7 | Conclusion

The study of Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi in light of the aesthetics of absence shows that imperfection, impermanence, and transience are not threats to beauty and meaning, but their foundation and source. Each concept, from its distinct perspective, conveys the message that Kintsugi, as the tangible art of imperfection where a broken vessel is repaired with golden lines, offers a concrete representation of accepting flaws and transforming them into beauty. Every crack and break reveals the history and experience of the object, enhancing its authenticity and unity. Wabi-sabi, as a philosophy of life embracing imperfection, presents a broader perspective, encompassing not only objects but also human life and the world. Impermanence and incompleteness can be sources of calm, meaning, and beauty. Wabi-sabi guides individuals toward the art of living with loss and transience. Within the framework of the aesthetics of absence, the connection between Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi is established, interpreting imperfection not as a deficiency but as an opportunity to create meaning and beauty. Acceptance of flaws and transience provides a foundation for authenticity, creativity, and a deeper life experience.

In contemporary applications, this framework can serve as a practical tool in art and modern life to reduce the anxiety of perfectionism, enhance meaning, and foster authentic experiences, while promoting sustainable living in contrast to consumerism. Imperfection and impermanence are not merely limitations; they enable creativity and beauty in everyday life. In summary, Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi demonstrate that flaws, breaks, and transience, instead of being threats, can be the core of beauty and meaning. The aesthetics of absence guides us to accept this reality and offers a fresh perspective for art, philosophy, and life, a way of living in which imperfection, transience, and failures are not burdens, but sources of value, authenticity, and beauty.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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