

The Sankofa Review

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Boots by Vincent van Gogh (The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection)

Wabi-Sabi: The Beauty of Aging

What the best Western Artists Learned From Zen Ideas and philosophy. Jennifer King and Samuel Adoquei discuss Japanese Influences in Modern Art, Fashion.



An old tree in Central Park, Samuel Adoquei oil on panel 16 x 20in



The teacher's view (From Plum Village Monastery. Samuel Adoquei oil on panel 24 x 30in

signature interview

BY JENNIFER KING

Sankofa Review contributors Sam Adoquei and Jennifer King talk about the presence and influence of Japanese concepts on contemporary art.

JK: Not too long ago, you and I discovered that we both have an interest in wabi, sabi, and suki, three of the principle tenets in Japanese art. To be honest, I was a little surprised because in all my years of talking to artists about art, I've never heard anyone else mention



The artist in front of the The Lucky Tree he painted, France. Samuel Adoquei

about them.

SA: I was a little surprised, too. Not that many people know about these concepts.

JK: I first learned about them when I was a teenager. My parents wanted to encourage my interest in art, so my dad bought me a book on Japanese art that explains many of the concepts within the Japanese aesthetic. I just love this book—I still have it. Do you remember how you first learned about wabi-sabi?

SA: Yes, I remember it vividly. As a student, I went through a period when I was studying van Gogh, so I was studying everything that was at the root of his work. That's how I learned that during the time of the Renaissance in Europe, there was also a renaissance going on in Japan. The emperor Yoshimutu encouraged the artists and artisans of the day to develop the ideals that we see expressed in the Japanese tea ceremony, for example—harmony, respect, and tranquility. The ceremony is a ritual that allows one to use meditation and quiet moments to remove oneself from one's mundane surroundings.

Behind the artistic and visual aspects lies a deep spiritual meaning to wabi-sabi and suki, for this I haven't explored enough to attempt to explain here to art lovers. I will therefore leave this spiritual side of wabi-sabi and suki to scholars or true Zen masters and just talk about what I think will be more effective. I am sure Van Gogh and Whistler were not Zen scholars.

JK: Interesting! We should probably explain that originally wabi and sabi were two separate ideals. Wabi was the word for a quiet simplicity and sabi referred to the patina of age or weathering. But over time it seems like wabi-sabi has essentially



A young tree, growing up in a concrete jungle: Samuel Adoquei



Water pump Eymet, Bergerac: Samuel Adoquei

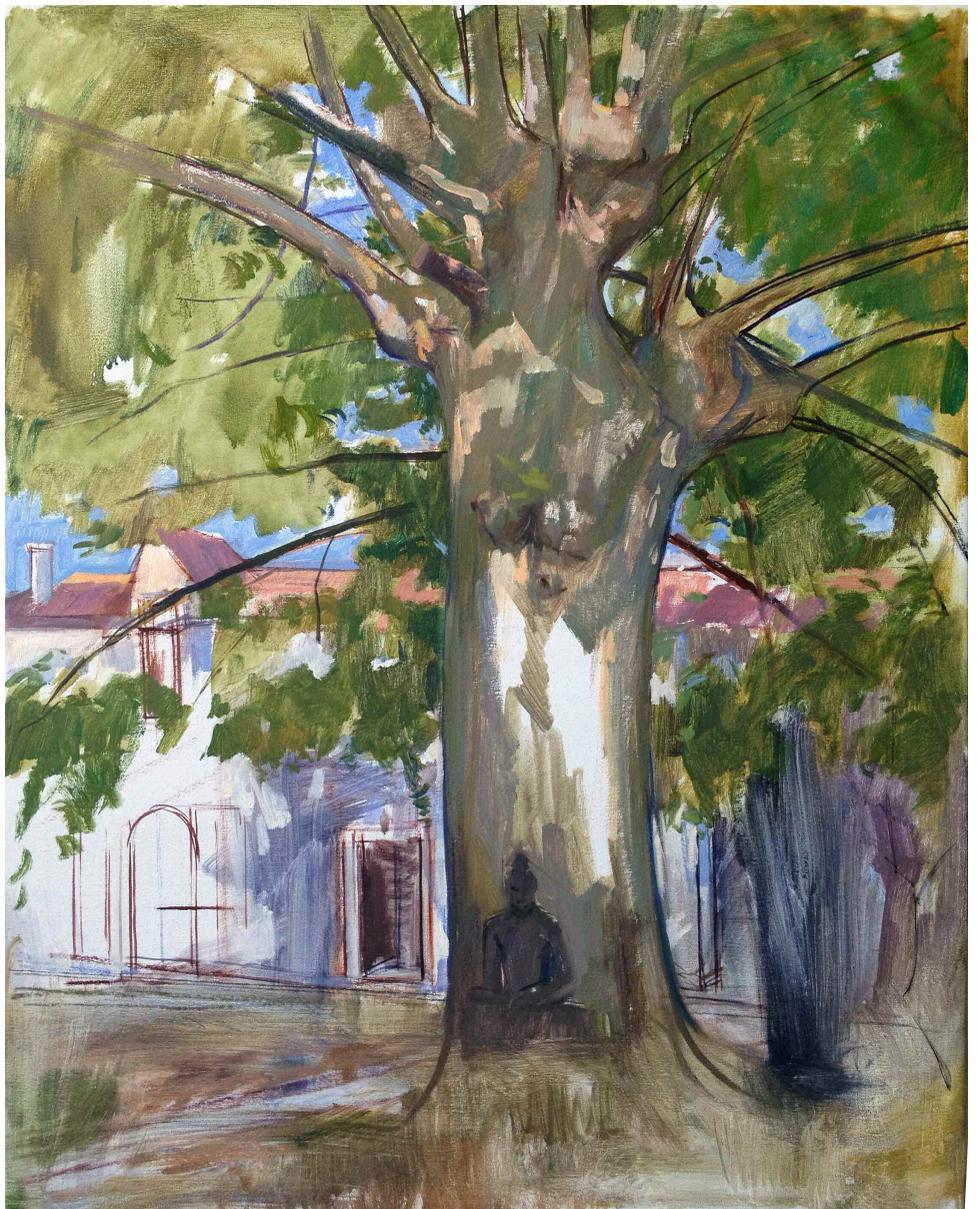
become one, combined concept that means “the simple beauty that comes with age.”

SA: Exactly. Wabi-sabi is the opposite of the Western idea of “bling,” or anything that is glossy, finished, and new. And you can’t separate them because you can’t get sabi without wabi, or wabi without sabi. Just like you can’t have Impressionism without color. You have to take them both together. Trying to separate them would be like trying to answer that chicken-and-egg question!

JK: I think it’s really easy to see wabi-sabi expressed in many traditional Japanese art forms. A Zen rock garden is a great example, where you have these really ancient, weathered rocks—gorgeous shapes—arranged in a beautiful, serene composition. But what are some of the places you see wabi-sabi expressed in our culture today?

SA: Actually, we see it all the time. Look at fashion right now—we’re really into wearing jeans and t-shirts that are worn or old. Imagine! Fashion makes us pay more for clothing that look beat up, faded and torn apart. We feel cool, simple, and ordinary when wearing rags. Or have you noticed this trend of restaurants serving drinks in old-fashioned glass canning jars? Is it coincidental that old cultures in Europe rather than painting and plastering the buildings to look new, they scrape off all that which has been added over the centuries in order to expose the original stones. Exposure of old wooden beams and fake aged bricks are now delights for architects, go figure.

It could be because subconsciously humans want to feel unpretentious, closer to nature, accepting the end cycle of the nature of things—things we deem “conventional

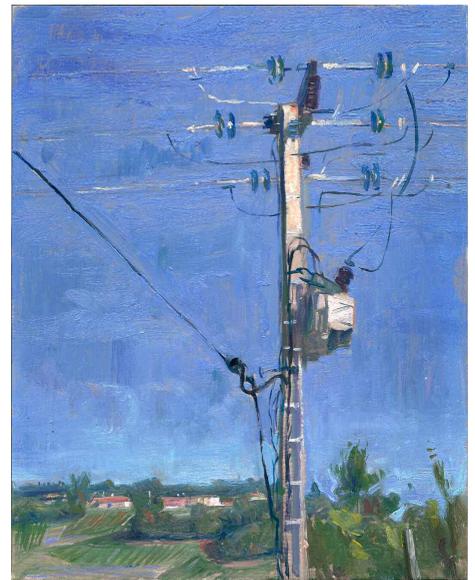


Light, Religion and Nature, Samuel Adoquei. Oil on canvas 30 x 24

beauty”—by celebrating the unconventional beauty of the final stages of life, when these things are getting ready to return to nothingness. I just went to a show at the Met that shows how so much of fashion and décor has been inspired by traditional Asian aesthetics, but the concepts are so familiar to us that we don’t even recognize that that’s where we’re getting these ideas.

JK: Do you see wabi-sabi in contemporary art?

SA: Absolutely. Think of van Gogh’s painting of his old work boots. We still see artists painting that type of thing today, like paint-



Generations before Iphone, France. Samuel Adoquei



A Tree in Mon, Denmark. photo: Samuel Adoquei

ings of old, beat-up trucks.

JK: Or run-down barns! That's a popular subject where I live in the Midwest. So we should probably talk about suki, too, which refers to subtle elegance. I see that in a number of contemporary artists' work, including yours.

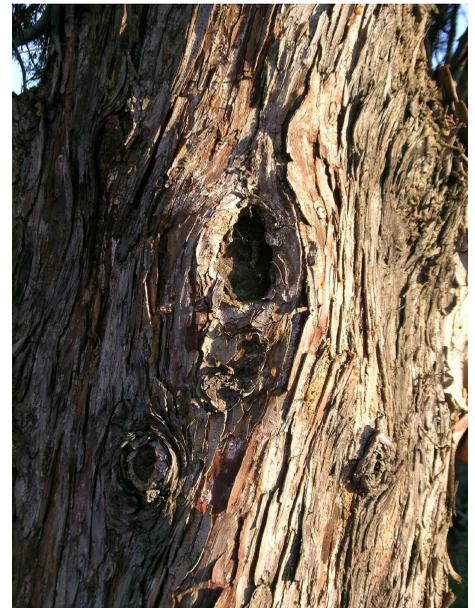
SA: What do you mean?

JK: I'm thinking about your still lifes, for instance. You often arrange objects that you probably picked up at the market, like some plums or a potted plant or some fish and onions. But you paint them simply and directly and with power, and somehow in the process, you imbue these objects with grace and beauty. As the viewer, I feel like I can see your

reverence for these humble objects coming through on the canvas. To me, that's wabi-sabi and suki.

SA: That's absolutely correct. I am at a stage now where I take a philosophical approach to everything I do. And I actually use these concepts in my own work in a lot of different ways. When I'm writing, for example, I try to express things in a way that is simple but elegant. Wabi-sabi from the artist's viewpoint also includes the idea of allowing people to see something familiar or old in a new way so that they can appreciate its' beauty. And that's what I try to do with my books—let people see things in a whole new way.

JK: Well, your paintings do that,



A Tree in California, photo: Samuel Adoquei

too! So do C.W. Mundy's paintings. He's a modern follower of the impressionistic style, and his choice of subject combined with his style and treatment also embody wabi-sabi and suki. So this whole conversation started because you had mentioned to me that you were giving your students a lecture on wabi-sabi. I'm curious to know what you tell them and why you think it's important for artists to know about these concepts.

SA: I want my students to understand that everything that comes out on the canvas should be a reflection of the artist's outlook on nature. It's not enough to be able to render the texture of an object or to know when to lose an edge. That's wonderful, but cultivating that kind of outlook on art leads to producing only images. A painting should be more than just a demonstration of skill and technique. In fact, great art has nothing to do with technique. Great art comes from the artist expressing what is in his mind and how he sees the world.

The Zen master or the Buddhist who stops along a street to look at blades of grass shooting out from stones and then meditates on the wonders of nature has no preference for beauty. It is not because he or she doesn't have beautiful works of art or shining golden relics at the monastery or doesn't have time to enjoy the wonders of sunsets or the glittering stars of the night but because he or she gives equal love and appreciation to all nature's creations.

Philosophically, naturally, and spiritually, all things with life go through a couple of stages until they go back to wherever they came from. For example, a seed be-



Water Tower, Monbazillac, Bergerac, France Samuel Adoquei

comes a plant. The plant produces a flower, which metamorphoses into a fruit. The fruit then ripens, becomes nutritious and gets eaten. After all the life has been stripped away and all the artificial wrapping has vanished, it too decays and dies and dissolves back to wherever it came from. The cycle has ended at where the beginning must start. This is the nature of all living things. As the cycle of the seasons rotates, life must continue: fruits, vegetables and some living creatures rush into existence while others rush out to make space. It is this

understanding that opens us to new ways of loving all that nature approves.

At which point, process or stage do we think the beauty lies for the nature of what we see? When it sprang to life, when it started performing its duty or when it started dying and decaying and dissolving? One could only answer this question honestly if one's insight to nature and beauty is not skewed by virtue of certain fixed beliefs or ideologies. The seed, the plant, the ripening fruit, or the decaying and

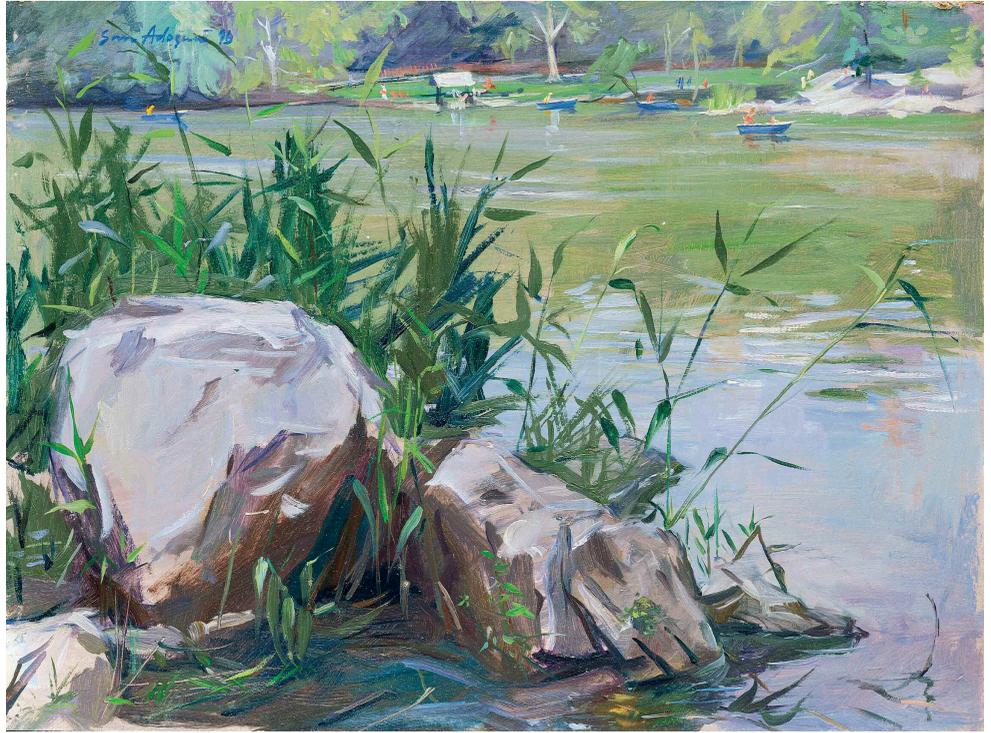
vanishing fruit—which one is more beautiful? This is what wabi-sabi and suki enlighten us with. And this is what the enlightened artist can help the enthusiast see in the nature of the journey of life. The simple beauties Zen masters and Buddhists discover in unexpected places is what the artist must bring out to the layman to enjoy.

JK: So what would you say you personally have learned from studying wabi-sabi and suki?

SA: To see and portray the beauty of things simply, to show the beauty of things decaying and vanishing, and to bring forth the beauty of the end of life is the legacy my research gave me. To put this knowledge and wisdom in my books, and make it accessible but strong and powerful and effective enough to help people who read it to go on to achieve great accomplishments, and to help others discover and dedicate moments of appreciation and praise to nature's overlooked or ignored beauty is an outlook we now pursue with equal effort.

I also learned all in life is nothing but moments in transition, with our limited insight we only acknowledge, praise and prize that which gets our attention, feels good, looks good and smells good. I must daily remind myself not to suffer such limited overview of life. The proof that humans are evolving but not changing is all around us, man is not a finished being, man is becoming.

Most of all, the physical reminder by these transformations, coming from nowhere, growing and aging, dying and dissolving nature of living things that all too shall pass. It is humbling to be reminded the same nature that created that decaying and dissolving thing is the same nature that created you,



A family in Central Park, New York. Samuel Adoquei

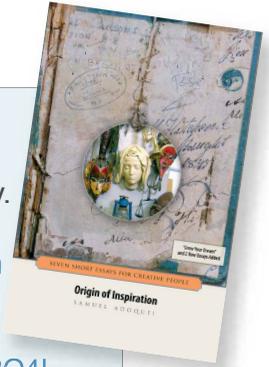
Samuel Adoquei is the author of 'Origin of Inspiration and How Successful Artists Study. Click here to learn more about his books

Books: www.howsuccessfulartistsstudy.com

Official website: www.samadoquei.com

Short Film on Sam, The Unseen Beauty:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8w4Gg1RO4I>



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