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Air Spirits

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Architect Toyo Ito excels in silver light. His is a volatile brightness, made to lighten and hollow out solid things, to massage static forms, to dispel the last sign of earthbound weight.

Glistening metals are eaten into by air. Thin steel vaults loft above ground, opening like petals of some strange metallic flower with its delicate petals unfurled to gather sun and breeze. Solid beams are punched with openings, walls are dissolved into gauze-like tissues, each piece slightly offset to relax and breathe and draw light into impervious material. Even the lustrous rails seem pneumatic, as if borne on currents of air, traceries of light that glide and loop along stairs.

Ito’s ethereal aims are especially convincing in the wonderfully flowing spaces of his just-completed Municipal Museum in Yatsushiro, on the Japanese island of Kyushu. The cranescent light shaped here not only reinforces Ito’s general intention to induce architecture to open and float, but also is perhaps the building’s primary expression.

Devoid of any assertive hue, this deceptively minimal structure is able to enjoy vast mutations of fluid color and reflection. Its pale tones take on a little of every color outside now an overcast dove gray, now a hint of yellow-green, or watery purple, or softly fading pink. Reflections in the folded glasswork and aluminum screens insert flickering images into a zone of quiet.

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Dusky tones ripple along curving metals. The mono-chrome light is thus strangely full yet dim, clear yet mysterious, and pushed up into recesses one might expect to find in heavy darkness, uniting the light with various ranges of shadow and suspending it all around in a faintly glowing grayish air.

By these contrapuntal values, especially a dual austerity and elegance, Ito’s light offers a startling recreation of the gray sensibility and tea-inspired aesthetic of traditional Japan. While colorless and empty, lonely in its wintry hues, its air of silence, the restrained palette gives rise to the most flaxen of optical phenomena — volubulous surfaces, a delirium of glitter and sparkle, infinitely multiplied images that seem to encircle and accompany us, a fairy-tale world like some hollowed out diamond or chandelier.

Spere yet abundant, calming yet awakening, this cool, silvery light refreshes the eye, even as it hovers between reality and dream. In the fragile interval between outside and inside, where we are opened again to the poetic imagination and to the wonders of simple perception banished from practical life, we can hear the breathing of someone alert to the pleasures and adventures of purposeless seeing. What a splendid way to enter a museum.