



ARTS
ILLUSTRATED



Memories in Time

Light, that playful, mystical thing, can either be divinely immersive or frustratingly invasive, but it retains its sublime quality, waiting for the right moment to be captured, no matter which part of the globe you are in

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I started the day watching my city disappear under sooty grey clouds, the rains lashing out at it. At 20,000 feet in the air the whole world is a beautiful place. The monsoon light is magical, and we all have that Ansel Adams moment with our dinky little phones peering out at the pixels of farmlands and cityscapes. Light is possibly one of the most ephemeral of the elements that any designer or artist enjoys playing with. I love it, and I would like to believe I understand it. I am in complete awe of people who can take you on a simple and sublime journey through their masterful play of light and form, be it in a building, a film, a painting or a photograph.

Here, I need to rewind a month back to Paris, or, more precisely, of eating my way through a delicious meal at Café Marley located under the arcades of the Richelieu wing of the Louvre. The brasserie boasts one of Paris's most enchanting settings with its Napoleon III dining rooms and covered terrace overlooking the Pyramid and the Cour Napoléon. Gourmet food and a stunning view is a heady cocktail. More so, if you see it with an adorable six-year-old nephew, whom I was, somewhat, baby-sitting.

This time, though, sitting in the courtyard was architect I M Pei's Pyramid, with a monumental anamorphic image by the French street artist, JR. It's always exciting to see how a building as revered as the Louvre can be handled irreverently by an artist. The Louvre was shut,

but the recurring theme of rain and magical light made an appearance. The photographic installation became incandescent, reaching out to the heavens like a strange triangular spiritual monument.

Under the Pyramid is the Carrousel du Louvre, with the famous skylight, La Pyramide Inversée (the inverted pyramid). This too was built by the Chinese American architect, I M Pei. Walking down the main concourse I was drawn to the distant inverted pyramid, which seemed like a gigantic lamp from a science fiction film. As I drew nearer, the scale, the light and shadows become even more captivating, with the Pyramid appearing to suck the sky and light into the dark underground



*The inverted Pyramid at
the Carrousel du Louvre,
Paris.*



French artist, JR's photo installation on I M Pei's Pyramid at the Louvre, Paris.

foyer. The metal framework is like a fragile spider's web lightly holding up the glass from crashing into the ground below. The play of light through the glass planes and the metal framework casts changing shadows onto the floor.

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Two days later, I stayed on the Southbank in London, a stone's throw away from the Tate Modern, possibly the most visited contemporary art museum in the world. The Swiss architects, Herzog and de Meuron have delighted all museum-goers by their exciting adaptation of Gilbert Scott's Bankside Power Station into this iconic museum, and more recently with their spanking New Wing. It was the

opening weekend of the New Wing. The façade of this new building plays with your mind, and it appears that a brick wall has been creased ever so gently like some delicate paper. The façade is made of a perforated brick lattice through which the interior lights glow in the evening.

As you step into the New Wing, you are taken up to the floors above by a sweeping concrete stairwell that looks like a giant slide from a distance. It is said that 10,000 visitors came to the museum over the opening weekend, all going up and down that fabulous stairwell. The stairwell gracefully pierces through the building, with natural light streaming down. Light has this amazing quality to even make the massive concrete

structure seem like a flowing paper cut-out. As a visitor one can't help but think of the building as an art.

I have to give a little disclaimer here. I have always loved the Tate Modern; I cannot be objective and am completely partisan. Twelve years ago, as a 30-something, I lived in London and worked at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Another iconic museum in London, but my heart was Tate's and the Natural History Museum's. But to be fair, the V&A was incredibly fun too. At the V&A, the Morris and the Gamble Rooms are spectacular in the way they let light in to illuminate the ornate decorations on the walls and ceilings. They were the original museum cafés designed in the late 19th century,



The brick façade of the New Wing of the Tate Modern, London.

probably one of the most exciting museum cafés in Europe. The majestic columns in the room are covered in moulded ceramic tiles, and the ceiling consists of elaborate designs on enamelled metal sheets with stained-glass windows. The atmospheric rooms are dimly lit by gigantic globes of wire. The well-formed lights of the Gamble Room are a contrast to the stunning Dale Chihuly chandelier at the entrance rotunda of the museum.

The 27-foot hanging sculpture is an explosion of intertwining blue-green glass pieces, suspended mid-air. The natural light from the glass domed ceiling falls on it, casting speckled coloured light across the floor. The sculpture or chandelier, as it's referred to at the V&A, looks like an exotic sea creature

rendered in glass. On closer inspection, each of the transparent glass tentacles and buds seem like a few thousand organisms emanating from one core, all masterfully hand-blown by the American glass sculptor.

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Years ago, I was about a 1,000 km north in Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland. The Isle of Lewis, though more populated, is lesser known than its conjoined twin, the Isle of Harris, home to the famous Harris Tweed textile. My theory on Scotland and the Scots is this: the people and the humour make up fantastically for the notoriously bad weather. They photograph the fantastic countryside for all its worth when it has the few blessed days of

sunshine, and then suckers like me find the flimsiest of excuses to be there because of it. Stornoway for me till then was just one of those mysterious places I saw on the flipping signs at the airport. But once you are there, you know immediately why the Hebrideans love their home so much. It's stunning!

An hour or so from Stornoway, their bustling town of about 8,000, surrounded by possibly an equal number of sheep, is Calanish. The little village of Calanish is known across Europe for its historic Standing Stones. Placed in the form of a cross, the Stones date back to the Neolithic Era. It's completely confounding as to why any Neolithic man or woman in their right Neolithic mind would want to be in a place so cold, wet and windy standing



The New Wing of Tate Modern, London.

by these stones. Thankfully, when I went it was a lovely overcast day, with the sun shining through the clouds and lighting up the lochs. The standing stones seem to be a witness to time that has stood still, waiting patiently. The ethereal light accentuates the grain of the stone over a millennium, while making the grassy surroundings over saturated with green and lighting up the lochs behind like fine sheets of mica.

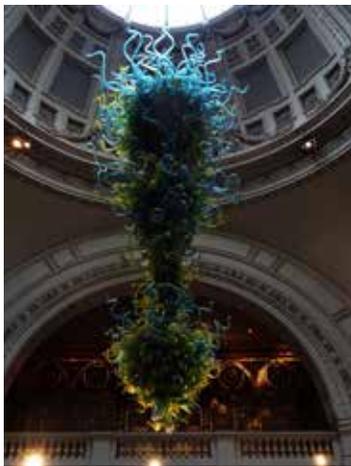
Light has that quality, I reckon, to transpose you across eras in a few minutes, to make you feel like you are witnessing something spiritually timeless and yet transient.

All images courtesy of Siddhartha Das.



● **The Gamble Room**, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

● **Dale Chihuly's V&A Chandelier**, Victoria & Albert Museum, London 2007
courtesy of PSI.



● **Inversions**, by British artist, Mary Martin, made of aluminium, oil paint and wood, 1966 Kunst, Berlin 1973.

● **The Standing Stones**, Calanish, Isle of Lewis, Scotland.

