From Darkness to Light explores from a variety of angles the subject of museum lighting in exhibition spaces in America, Japan, and Western Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Written by an array of international experts, these collected essays gather perspectives from a diverse range of cultural sensibilities. From sensitive discussions of Tintoretto's unique approach to the play of light and darkness as exhibited in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, to the development of museum lighting as part of Japanese art's self-fashioning, via the story of an epic American painting on tour, museum illumination in the work of Henry James, and lighting alterations at Chatsworth, this book is a treasure trove of illuminating contributions.

The collection is at once a refreshing insight for the enthusiastic museum-goer, who is brought to an awareness of the exhibit in its immediate environment, and a wide-ranging scholarly compendium for the professional who seeks to proceed in their academic or curatorial work with a more enlightened sense of the lighted space.

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Cover image: Jacopo Tintoretto, The Adoration of the Magi, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice (graphic elaboration by Pier Giovanni Possamai, The University of Venice, Ca' Foscari)

Cover design: Anna Ga�
We travelled at least two hours — crossing a stretch of the endless Russian plain enveloped in an opalescent luminosity — in order to arrive in Zagorsk, an important centre of spiritual life. On the way I wondered how much of the Byzantine architectural tradition the Orthodox Church had kept.

As we crossed over the threshold of the church, Barbara and I found ourselves surrounded by utter darkness; it erased from our minds whatever reference we might have had to the outside world. Each of us was immersed in an infinite solitude.

After a couple of steps I halted, unsure if I was about to trip over a step or bang against something. In such darkness one even becomes unsure about how to stand. I crossed my arms behind my back. After a few seconds the sturdy hands of a man I had neither heard nor seen obliged me to hold them straight down my sides. This assertion of order summoned a glimmer of consciousness to the surface. I then heard a song I had been unaware of until that moment (just as, at first, one does not hear the noise of a small stream when entering the woods). It was a virginal voice that flowed fluently behind me, both sweet and resigned. This voice and its hieratic cadence fascinated me. Almost with a sense of vertigo, I later learnt that what I was hearing was a fragment, an infinitesimal part of a song that had lasted without any interruption for over five hundred years, that is, since the death...
of the Venerable Sergei of Radonez, the founder of this monastery. Nothing has ever interrupted this song of an incommensurable length: not the alternating of days and nights, not pestilence or war, not the revolution that upended the political order of Russia in the last century, not Communism. Nothing. Therefore Barbara and I had not walked out of time, but into time, on entering this darkness. We had entered that time, that conception of time that had ruled the Byzantine civilization for more than a millennium. Byzantine time is nothing but a chain of instants that follow one another for ever, always identical one with the other. Perhaps it is the perception of a temporal dimension totally other than the one we live in nowadays, hurried and syncopated, that allowed me to perceive some tiny glowing points in the great darkness that enveloped me, almost materially.

At this time, I had never seen any of the works by the artist James Turell, so I had a surprised and suspended sense of what was happening to me. Slowly, with time — in this case, physiological time — my pupils started dilating in the primordial effort to penetrate the darkness. I started perceiving the physical nature — as it were — of those fragments of light. I saw that they swung slightly and vibrated as if they had a fleeting life of their own.

Those glowing lights, becoming tiny flames, formed something like a small constellation: a mysterious constellation, at a human height, which inspired a vague feeling of hope. After a while — after how long? — I perceived in front of me, above my head, something like a halo of light: a luminosity that was at first hardly perceptible, but slowly started to reveal its precious essence. It was a golden surface that reflected, very parsimoniously, the scant light of some tall, thin, brown candles, on which small flames swayed.

My eyes were captured by this luminosity. It was something I had never experienced before. I stood waiting with a feeling of hope. I could not possibly say how long this lasted. The mystery that had conquered all my senses had become, at this point, an unfathomable depth, that enigmatic penumbra at the center of the halo of golden light.

As if we had invoked it, as if our waiting had the quality of prayer, at the center of that halo, which became more and more luminous as the minutes went by, the face of Christ appeared. Something like a miracle had happened. This Man was not ‘real’ like those painted by artists,
with realistic physiognomic traits portraying a real individual man. The face of this Man was iconic: it was the same face that appeared — always identical — to all the worshippers in the Orthodox church who invoked his appearance in the darkness of their existence.

This was the reason for the darkness that had annulled my own identity when I had crossed over the threshold of this church, and made us feel infinitely alone, in spite of our being — Barbara and myself — close to each other. It had made the material substance of this sacred place disappear into the darkness, as well as its spatial form. It had reduced our notion of time to the sense, merely physiological, of pupils dilating. That darkness had allowed us, unsuspecting wayfarers, to live a mystical experience: to witness the miracle of an apparition.

On entering a church, the Orthodox worshipper separates himself from the contingent reality of the world, in order to approach — as much as he can — the dimension of the sacred (which remains for him unreachable, beyond the iconostasis, where the eucharist celebrations take place). Concentrating on prayer, on invoking the divine, he might see the figure he implores for mercy appear from darkness.

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This experience should not have surprised Barbara and myself, two Venetians who are familiar with the glory of the chapel next to the Ducal Palace. Inside there is not only the limited surface of a rectangle covered with gold — with tesserae of gold mosaic — just like the background of a painting. The whole ‘sky’ is covered with gold: its arcades and vaults reflect gleams of light within which figures and stories, angels and saints on a golden background appear.

Why then were we caught unaware in the church of Zagorsk?

Because when we enter our beautiful palatine chapel, we are betrayed by what we already know. This knowledge reduces any feeling of expectation, when it does not forbid it entirely. But we are also betrayed by light: for centuries now, light has desecrated the ancient darkness of Byzantine origin. We are the victims, as it were, of those who, a few centuries ago — adopting the European Gothic style — opened onto the southern apse of the church transepts those immense rose windows that allow the sun to flood the chapel with light, especially during the midday hours.
In spite of this gross act of desecration, darkness has persisted in many other Venetian churches from the proto-Renaissance period. Not so much, I believe, out of respect for the teaching of Leon Battista Alberti, who thought that too much light was incompatible with the sacredness of a holy place, but for a more intriguing historical reason. After the fall of Constantinople into the hands of Islamic forces in 1453, Venice wanted to show she was, in the west, the legitimate heir of the political authority and of the cultural riches of that ‘second Rome’ that Emperor Constantine had founded on the shores of the Bosphorus. Therefore a form of neo-Byzantinism inspired the architecture of the most significant Venetian churches for some time.

Let us think of the church dedicated to Saint John Chrysostom — not by accident a Greek saint — which has, again not by accident, a Greek-cross plan. Three supreme artists, among those active in Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century, were called to confront this explicit proposition of neo-Byzantinism — a conceptual neo-Byzantinism. These artists did not avoid the problem of light, but they dealt with it, with great critical lucidity, or rather — as we are entering modernity — they dealt with the influence of light on the perception of an image.

On the main axis of the church, on the high altar, the figure of Saint John Chrysostom is represented with other figures in a small canvas. He is not in the centre of the composition. He is not in a frontal position. In fact, the shade of a canopy obscures him. Concentration is required — and therefore time is needed — to see this saint clearly: the great Sebastiano del Piombo has cleverly defined the duration required in order to have a clear perception.

After only a few decades, the ancient Venetians judged that this took too long. Therefore the shape of the chapel was altered. The vault that covered the space was eliminated in order to open six windows that were to throw as much light as possible from above onto Sebastiano’s painting. As a result, the length of time needed for perception was shortened. Yet, today, to us, the children of electricity, it still seems too long.

But let us remain in this church. In order to realize how deeply felt and understood this concept was at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in addition to the knowledge of the ‘time of perception’, we should shift

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2 Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) was an Italian architect, poet, author, artist, priest, philosopher, linguist and cryptographer.
focus from the main altar to the two altars set along the transversal axis of the church. They are installed in two chapels, topped by vaults, which take their light from two small, narrow, and high windows — almost two slits — opening in the small space. The works placed on the altars of these two chapels were conceived with the premise that they would only receive scant lighting, which would strike the pieces obliquely from these slits.

On these two altars, with these specific and limited sources of light, Tullio Lombardo and Gentile Bellini placed two masterpieces. They did so with equally refined but different conceptions which it is worth now considering.
Tullio Lombardo (ca.1455–1532) — the greatest sculptor in Venice during this fascinating period — carved a scene in half-relief on a thick, white marble slab, portraying the *Traditio Legis*, where Christ appears with the twelve Apostles and the Virgin (in this case an allegory of Venice) kneeling in front of Him. The relief of these figures is limited. The perception of the consistency of the single figures, in their whiteness, is allowed only by the faint shadow they project onto the marble, thanks to the scant light that grazes them, entering from the side slits. For those who wish to capture the details, the refinement, and the accurate drawing of these figures — fourteen in number — crowding together, superimposed onto one another, almost amalgamating one with the other, Tullio asks for time — a modern person would say patience — time of a duration that Tullio cleverly regulates.

Bellini — the master of colour and shadow — does not follow Tullio, whose approach is based on the material quality of the white marble and on the perfection of form. Instead, he violates darkness; or more correctly, the concept of darkness. In the penumbra of the chapel where his beautiful *pala* is placed, he creates a fascinating landscape, made vivid by brilliant sunlight.
The visitor of nowadays — our contemporary — does not have the patience to wait, so that his eyes and then his mind can apprehend the naturalistic luminosity of this virtual sky. He switches on a spotlight using a coin, to satisfy his impatience to see everything right away, without ‘wasting time’.

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To return to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. In this magnificent upper hall of the Scuola, I cannot conclude my observations on the ‘time of perception’ without discussing the canvasses by Tintoretto. First, we will consider Andrea Palladio’s architecture, primarily the Redentore church.

Palladio, in the church of the Redentore, has the light burst into the church — first the light of dawn and then the light of sunset — through
the great windows he has placed on the long walls of the nave. During the remainder of the day, light converges at floor level, beneath the dome, entering from the many windows he positioned on the walls of the exedrae on both sides of this central space. What enhances the luminosity of the church is the whiteness — according to Palladio the ‘bianchezza’ — of the walls and of all the architectural ornaments.

With a brightness of such intensity, with the distinct perception that such light allows, with the sharpness that every material, every form, every detail assumes, this church — built by Venice almost as a response to the outcome of the sixteenth-century Council of Trent — does not allow the worshipper, or anyone who frequents it, any form or experience of mysticism. It calls for a distinct perception of every single thing, and this stimulates that form of rational consciousness, that form of modernity, of which Palladio — in his own way — reverting to the lesson of the ancients, meant to be the prophet.

As a consequence of this ‘lesson’, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, darkness — that darkness that Leon Battista Alberti still defended, almost devotedly — lost all its conceptual significance and became an anachronistic mental category. It failed to resist the acceleration of history. There was no longer the time for perception that needed time. This irruption of sunlight bursting into space — of the same nature as the illumination Giovanni Bellini had introduced to the church of St John Chrysostom — was such a strong, one could say even revolutionary message, that after Palladio’s Redentore had arrived in the cultural universe of Venice, changes were made in almost all the churches of the city to enhance the luminosity of the interiors (such as the alteration made in the main chapel of St John Chrysostom). However, although this development has never been adequately researched, I am not going to focus on it now.

Instead, I must mention Tintoretto at San Rocco as I close. It is obvious that Tintoretto was determined to avoid that form of modernity based on the unhampered victory of light. That is, Tintoretto does not believe it is natural light — from an imaginary sky, spreading out into space through large windows — that creates a true illumination in man. By making everything visible, light reduces the possibility of distinguishing the value of one thing or the other. Tintoretto’s figures do not frequent the Palladian spaces; one could say they retreat from them.
They emerge from a darkness that has an almost material consistency. They are liberated from this darkness by Tintoretto himself. It is he who gives light with his own brush, it is he who makes the Light. It is Tintoretto who decides, in a peremptory way, the time necessary for the message he wants to communicate.