



Retail Zen

Experience the refined simplicity of the Japanese aesthetic where you would least expect it: in the bustle of Tokyo's shopping districts.

WORDS NATASHA MEKHAIL



THE WHOLE ideal of Teatism is a result of this Zen conception of greatness in the smallest incidents of life.

FROM *THE BOOK OF TEA*
BY KAKUZO OKAKURA

In a Japanese tea ceremony, the walk to the tearoom is the first step in the ritual. In this short stroll through a garden, forest or bamboo grove, guests are expected to leave behind the cares of the outside world and clear their minds for the simple appreciation of tea.

And while the upscale Omotesando Hills shopping centre in Tokyo's densely populated Shibuya district is about as far removed from a tearoom as a brick from a flower, there's an element of ceremony to my stroll through the mall's causeway, which coils uninterrupted through three floors. The gradual incline eliminates the need for escalators and maintains a peaceful order even on a busy Saturday afternoon.

It's also no coincidence that the mall's design counteracts the frenetic pace that normally accompanies the shopping experience. Its architect, Tadao Ando, references Zen philosophy in all his work. His Church of the Light in Osaka features a sanctuary cross made up of bisecting seams of sunlight streaming through concrete: an interfaith yin and yang. His partially subterranean Chichu Art Museum on the island of Naoshima is literally one with the earth. Omotesando Hills, with its

atrium flooded with natural light and concrete walls that undulate without corners, is not just a mall, it's a place for quiet perambulation.

Mindful design is a feature of all Japanese spaces, from tearoom to shopping centre. Art scholar Kakuzo Okakura described this concept in a turn-of-the-last-century Boston salon when he delivered the lecture that would become *The Book of Tea*. Translated into more than 30 languages, his essay provided four generations of Westerners with an insider's look at the Japanese aesthetic. Its premise – “there is beauty even in the mundane” – is just as relevant today. Here in retail Tokyo, that translates to consumerism elevated to art.



THE ART of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings.

Shopping is Japan's unofficial national pastime. In the world's third-largest economy after the United States and China, consumer spending accounts for about 60 percent of GDP. It's a culture obsessed with “specialties” – every small town has one, be it Bizen pottery, rice-paper screens or sour-plum preserves – and all are snapped up by the domestic populace on their travels. Gift-giving is also a cultural essential, and every visit to a friend's home means the purchase of flowers, a box of sweets or a set of teacups.

But while spending may be fast and loose, the focus is always on quality. Japanese consumers are discriminating. That's why a mall like Omotesando Hills, with Dolce & Gabbana as anchor and row upon row of high-end independent boutiques, may appear devoid of merchandise to Western eyes. But delve below the surface and the reason becomes clear.

In Edition, one of the many well-edited niche luxury boutiques in Omotesando Hills, the floor stocks only one of everything. The organic-cotton T-shirt, the flame-forged silver ring, the hand-stitched leather moccasin... all are arranged with the greatest care. One dangles loosely from a wood hanger, another peeks out of a glass drawer and another tops a metal podium in a lesson that any student of *ikebana* (Japanese floral arrangement) learns on day one: The space between things is as important as the things themselves.

Each object can be appreciated on its own, ➤

PHOTOS SIVAN ASKAYO



ART FORMS

Japanese pottery embraces the beauty in imperfection (opposite); the flagship location of cultured pearl brand Mikimoto, designed by Toyo Ito, is a Ginza icon.



turned over, observed from various angles. The shop is a gallery. But far from being cold and austere, the ambiance is warm and lively, with the salespeople calling out the ubiquitous “*Irasshaimase*” of welcome and the shop’s windows covered in a living wall of ferns.

The mall is just one of the many beautiful examples of design along Omotesando Avenue, where luxury brands compete for prominence with lavish flagships designed by some of the world’s top architects. Today, the crowd along the strip is a mix of serious shoppers (a.k.a. aristocratic Tokyo girls carrying teacup poodles), Harajuku hipsters and international tourists taking cellphone pictures of this architectural permanent exhibit.

I shyly pull out my own camera in front of Italian shoe and leather goods emporium Tod’s, a seven-storey glass tower, designed by Toyo Ito, ensconced in a criss-crossing frame of concrete. Then I join the throng snapping the Bruno Moinard-designed Cartier, where sets of vertical wooden slats run the length of the glass-and-steel building like stalks of bamboo. The neighbouring building is arguably the street’s most famous: the Herzog & de Meuron-designed Prada, whose smoky, bubbled-glass facade mimics the patina of a luxury handbag.

Art as shopping, shopping as art is an unwritten code, and there’s nowhere in Tokyo that embodies it more than Dover Street Market in tony Ginza. A sister property to the London original, the

SPACE AGE

The Herzog & de Meuron-designed Prada (above); thoughtful gift selection is a ritual in Japan (below).



Japanese outpost was assembled by Comme des Garçons founder Rei Kawakubo, who describes her creation as “beautiful chaos.” There are no walls between bookstore, clothing shop or fragrance counter. Instead, each area is delineated by the mood it strikes. Black Comme des Garçons sells only monochrome garments; Balenciaga marks its territory with dizzying, kaleidoscopic mirrors; Mulberry is flanked by an army of oversize garden gnomes. In the Comme des Garçons Junya Watanabe Man space, a vending machine sells the brand’s cult white T-shirts. Their classic simplicity is the essence of the Japanese aesthetic.



TEAISM is the art of concealing beauty, that you might discover it.

Back in Shibuya, Found Muji’s rustic window display of vintage-looking ceramic cups and preserve jars seems out of place along the six-lane Aoyama Boulevard. A concept-store offshoot of

Japan’s beloved minimalist clothing and housewares brand, the shop’s one and only location sells objects inspired by traditional handicrafts, household implements and tools that represent exceptional design. Think Chinese bamboo steamers, English pewter teaspoons and Swedish waxed-canvas military backpacks. Once again, great pains are taken to showcase each object for the attributes that make it a universal staple.



DETAIL ORIENTED

Even a simple chopstick rest receives a place of honour (above); the Mulberry space at Dover Street Market (right).

You might wonder why a store with some of the most expensive square footage on the planet would give an empty jam jar a place of such reverence. But there’s logic to it. In Japanese art, wrote Okakura, there is meaning in suggestion: “In leaving something unsaid, the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea.” That simple jar whose design hasn’t changed in centuries is in itself perfection. It could be filled with preserves, with river stones, with seashells. In other words, it’s not the jar for sale, it’s its potential.

A similar concept exists at Over The Counter. The shoebox-sized apothecary and lifestyle store curated by Tokyo fashion stylist Sonya Park sells cashmere scarves, eggshell-porcelain teacups and badger shaving brushes. But rather than having the wares out in the open, the stock is kept behind the counter.

The system forces a dialogue between buyer and seller about where the object comes from, the history of the brand and its special features. It recognizes that one should only purchase a premium toothpaste if one appreciates the reason why it’s more expensive than its drugstore counterparts: Maybe it’s made by a fifth-generation family business, maybe it uses ingredients harvested in an ethical way. In making this conversation part of the purchase experience, Over The Counter shows its customers a profound respect.

PHOTOS IWANBAAN (PRADA); SIVAN ASKAYO (SHOPPER, CHOPSTICK RESTS)





there is already a lineup of customers outside. At precisely three minutes to the hour, three female attendants in immaculate uniform (hats, blazers, pencil skirts, gloves) approach the entrance. Two hold the doors slightly ajar while the third steps forward. She welcomes customers to Takashimaya, addressing them in the formal manner as *okyakusama* (“honoured guest”), listing the store and restaurant hours, letting everyone know that there is a rose exhibit on the eighth floor and a new ikebana installation in the entrance gallery. She retreats back inside with her cohorts and a minute later, at precisely 10 o’clock, they whisk the doors open to customers.

And just as they’ve done every morning for almost a century, the store’s employees form two perfect lines on either side of the entrance. As the first guests enter, the staff folds at the waist in unison. A deep bow. A gesture of the utmost respect for their clientele. A ceremony of beauty among the mundane. >



UNTIL one has made himself beautiful, he has no right to approach beauty.

Respect is intrinsic to a society that always puts the group before the individual. Place your handbag in the basket, remove your shoes, step onto the raised platform, pull the curtain, cover your face with a face cloth. These are the steps involved in trying on clothes in a Japanese dressing room. Shopping protocol is a ritual of polite behaviour in which the garments – and ultimately the next person to try them – also receive their due respect.

And in the same way that merchandise in a Japanese store may seem sparse to Westerners, the number of personnel may also seem excessive. Shops often employ greeters whose job is merely to say “welcome” and “come again” to customers. But sadly, this is one aspect of the experience that is vanishing as post-recession cost-cutting has resulted in many retail redundancies.

Still, there is one place that rigorously upholds tradition. The glamorous Takashimaya department store in Chuo has remained largely unchanged in its decor (marble floors and crystal chandeliers) and customer service (white-gloved and attentive) since it opened in 1933.

When I arrive just prior to the 10 a.m. opening

WINDOW DRESSING

Comme des Garçons’ Omotesando address (above) and its T-shirt vending machine at Dover Street Market (below)



TOKYO MINUTE

A Marni doll necklace at Dover Street Market (above); Found Muji recreates design staples and traditional handicrafts (below).



ADDRESSES

Tokyo

Omotesando Hills

An architectural shopping experience.
4-12-10 Jingumae, Shibuya
OMOTESANDOHILLS.COM

Dover Street Market Ginza

Rei Kawakubo's favourite things meet in "beautiful chaos."
6-9-5 Ginza, Chuo
GINZA.DOVERSTREETMARKET.COM

Found Muji

Practical objects from around the world get a Mujification.
5-5-6 Jingumae, Shibuya
MUJI.NET/FOUNDMUJI (JAPANESE ONLY)

Over The Counter

Grooming and provisions apothecary.
101 Palace Miyuki, 5-3-8 Minami Aoyama, Minato
ARTS-SCIENCE.COM/SHOPLIST/OVER_THE_COUNTER

Takashimaya Nihonbashi

Tokyo's original luxury department store.
2-4-1 Nihonbashi, Chuo
TAKASHIMAYA.CO.JP/TOKYO (JAPANESE ONLY)



Art of the Stay

I'D MARVELLED AT THE ARTWORK in the Shangri-La Tokyo for two days before a staff member let me in on a little secret. All of the 2,000 originally commissioned artworks – from the lobby screens of gold embroidery silk, one-tenth the width of a human hair, to the 2,400 eggshell porcelain tiles making up the mural installation at the entrance – were based on the Tang Dynasty Chinese poem "Song of the Pipa." The Shangri-La takes aesthetics seriously, from these works to the design of its rooms to the spa services. The two-hour Kisetzu Ritual includes a foot scrub, skin polish, steam bath, full-body massage and mineral soak replete with spa products, essential oils and fragrant teas that respond to the body's seasonally changing needs. For an artful meal that also has a seasonal twist, try Nadaman restaurant's *kaiseki* meal, a traditional multi-course Japanese dinner. In this chef-selected collection of small plates, served in ceremonial procession, only the freshest in-season ingredients are used. Every dish is artfully presented with sprigs of in-bloom flowers, and the lacquered bowls and chopstick rests are themed to match the colours and mood of the time of year. SHANGRI-LA.COM/TOKYO



LITTLE EXTRA

The Shangri-La can arrange a visit to Takashimaya department store in the care of a personal shopper – an interpreter and guide who can talk you through the teacups, equip you with incense or show you how to tie a kimono.

Make a Connection

SO MUCH MORE THAN A DEALERSHIP, Mercedes-Benz Connection, Tokyo, is a meeting place for those who love the brand. In Downstairs Coffee, sip lattes and cappuccinos made by internationally award-winning barista Hiroshi Sawada. Afterwards, visit the Gallery to get a closer look at the lineup of Mercedes-Benz vehicles. Take one on a spin in the Trial Cruise or just relax on the sofas to watch their performance on widescreen TVs. Still peckish? On the second floor, the Upstairs bar and restaurant serves casual French fare from a menu developed by Michelin-starred chef Ryuta Iizuka. **Mercedes-Benz Connection**, 7-3-10 Roppongi, Minato

MERCEDES-BENZ-CONNECTION.COM

