

## On Mihail Chemiakin's *Musée Imaginaire*

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*Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire* is a very important research project, a unique interface for navigation through a collection of images and a unique artwork in its own right.<sup>1</sup> The project started decades ago, before the appearance of the Internet, and, later, social media, which have made countless artistic images from all epochs and cultures available on the screens of our computers and telephones. Paradoxically, as this enormous universe of artistic images grows, fed not only by the mechanisms of instant mass distribution of images, but also by recently developed instruments of artificial intelligence (AI) for the instant creation of artistic works, *Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire* has become even more important and relevant.

We often say that this or that earlier project anticipated the Internet with its abundance of cultural content in all media and its ideas connected by hyperlinks, as well as the extensive online digital libraries of images created in our time. Examples of these projects include the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–1929) by the German art scholar Aby Warburg<sup>2</sup>; Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927–1940); and *Le Musée Imaginaire* by the French writer Andre Malraux (1947–1954). Malraux's project directly inspired *Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire*. However, Chemiakin's research is so relevant today not because it “prefigured” digital collections of works of art with their hundreds of thousands of works arranged by categories, such as historical period and medium. Rather than simply anticipating new forms of digital culture, he offers us an imagined and inspired *alternative* to these standard ways of organizing cultural materials. And that, in my view, is much more important.

The labels placed next to works of art in art museums often mention other artists or artistic movements. There might be proof that a certain artist or certain movement influenced the painter of this picture or it might be the curator's hypothesis. Some

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mihfond.ru/mihail-chemiakin/musee-imaginaire>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/about>.

websites on art go even further: for each artist they include a required section on “influenced by” or “influenced,” followed by a list of names. This practice foregrounds one way to imagine how the creators and their creations are linked—by *similarity*. If Artist B influenced Artist A, their works must be in some way similar.

The principle of similarity is also built into the Web image search. You submit an image to the search engine and it returns a large number of images that the algorithms consider similar. The similarity is calculated on the basis of an algorithmic analysis of visual characteristics and on the content of the images.

At first glance, *Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire* is also organized by similarity. It includes a large number of themes. For each theme, the artist creates an album filled with relevant images. The choice of theme provides an alternative to the standard method of organizing collections of images. The themes focus on the important representations of visual artistic thinking and seeing of the world, with titles such as “Intersecting Horizontal and Vertical Lines,” “Steps, Ladders, and Stairs in Art,” “Cuts,” “Flat Forms in Sculpture,” and so on. In other words, this is not a standard library hierarchy of classifications (too rigid), nor a list of single keywords (too free). Instead, the spectator is invited to look at art from the point of view of a single artist-researcher.

When we begin to look at the images collected in these thematic albums, we discover something quite unexpected. Instead of the expected similarities such as “here are many ways that the theme of X is reproduced in art,” we see other types of connections among these images. We can see contrasts, dialogues, and dissonances. Each album, in fact, may be viewed as a carefully selected art exhibition, where each work enriches every other image in the exposition.

If I were to identify what I see as the primary principle used to select images for each theme, I would say it is the *montage*. The images in each thematic album are edited together by Chemiakin as if they were shots in a film. Possibly, this is montage in its most extreme form, as was advanced by Russian and Ukrainian filmmakers in the 1920s.

The ubiquitous presence of digital collections of images in our time, and also the standardized mechanisms in the organization of these collections, affects every aspect of artistic culture. In this regard, a new genre of visual art becomes important: a subjective and idiosyncratic collection of cultural images, chosen by a particular artist. If an earlier artists created unique paintings or a series of paintings or prints on a given theme, contemporary artists can make their own contribution to our culture in a different way: by presenting new ways of seeing and organizing already existing cultural images or other artifacts, and also exposing and critiquing the current classification conventions.

Although a series of important artistic projects used the format of image collections as early as the 1960s (for example, “The Museum of Contemporary Art” of Marcel Broodthaers from 1968-1974, and “The Color of a Flea’s Eyes: A Collection of Images” by Terin Saimon in 2021),<sup>3</sup> they primarily wanted to critique the institutionalized systems. Chemiakin’s project has quite a different goal: a meta-collection of already existing art, which instructs the spectator to see art differently than does a curator or an algorithm.

*Mihail Chemiakin’s Musée Imaginaire* is not compiled with the help of a computer-vision algorithms, artificial intelligence, or a group of experts. This is the vision of a single artist—a unique individual as opposed to many. This singularity stands out on the background of computer-selected media collections on Instagram, YouTube, and other social media sites.

Image search engines and recommendation pages of image apps expose us to an endless stream of images. Their quality and relevance differ dramatically. In contrast, every album of *Mihail Chemiakin’s Musée Imaginaire* is deliberately small, containing perhaps several dozen images. Each image has been carefully chosen to enter into a dialogue with every other image in the folder.

In other words, in contrast to the current “noisy” and redundant algorithmic visual culture, using a small number of templates, compositions, themes, celebrity images,

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<sup>3</sup> [https://tarynsimon.com/works/picture\\_collection/#1](https://tarynsimon.com/works/picture_collection/#1).

and so on that are used by millions of creators, *Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire* is entirely devoid of “noise.” Nothing is repeated, and each image is unique. Its immense breadth and the artist's unique curatorial methods and vision make the *Musée* into an unparalleled endeavor, offering an extraordinary experience unlike anything else in our contemporary algorithmic-driven visual culture.

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