

## **AN ARTIST AND HIS BOOKS: MIHAIL CHEMIAKIN /**

### **MIHAIL CHEMIAKIN: ARTISTUL ȘI CĂRȚILE SALE**

Sarah H. de KAY

#### **Abstract:**

Mihail Chemiakin (born 1943) is an artist who works in every medium imaginable, from painting, sculpture, and drawing to scenic design and theatrical direction, avant-garde and animated film, ceramics, porcelain, as well as multiple techniques he himself invented such as dried-leaf-and-flower collages, monumental colored pencil and pastel drawings on black paper, and others.

Parallel to his artistic work, Chemiakin has created a mammoth archive of images

classified in his unique system, Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire, which now serves as the base for a new Internet platform intended for use by scholars and artists of all stripes.

Later this year Chemiakin's autobiography, with over 140 new illustrations, will be published. His works are in the private museums all over the world, and in the streets of New York, London, San Francisco, Moscow and Sankt-Petersburg.

#### **Keywords:**

Mihail Chemiakin, avant-garde artist, painter, sculptor, Musée Imaginaire.

### **Rezumat:**

Articolul relevă aspecte biografice din viața lui Mihail Chemiakin (născut în 1943), artist ruso-american, care creează în mai multe domenii și medii ale imaginărilor: pictură, sculptură, desen, design scenic, regie teatrală, film avangardist și de animație, ceramică, porțelan, precum și multiple tehnici inventate de el însuși, cum ar fi colajele cu frunze uscate și flori, desenele monumentale în creion colorat și pastel pe hârtie neagră ș.a.

În paralel cu munca sa artistică, Chemiakin a creat o arhivă gigantică de imagini clasificate în sistemul său unic „Muzeul imaginar” ca o alternativă la muzeul clasic. Tematica operei sale este diversă: de la grotesc teatral la imagini metafizice.

Operele sale se găsesc în colecții private din întreaga lume, inclusiv pe străzile orașelor mari: New York, Londra, San Francisco, Moscova, Sankt Petersburg.

### **Cuvinte-cheie:**

Mihail Chemiakin, artist avangardist, pictor, sculptor, Muzeul imaginar.

I have worked closely with Mihail, to whom I am married, for forty years. And all this time I have tried to understand the secret of his prodigious range of activity – and of his unfailing memory of every book he has ever read. It is evident that his wide reading of all kinds of literature along with his research on the art of all peoples and all epochs, complements his technical skill and native imagination and enables him to tackle any artistic task with confidence. It is also clear that Mihail reads and observes books and works of art with a rare intensity of engagement.

Chemiakin began to read at the age of four, beginning with Pushkin and the children's poems of Samuil Marshak and Kornei Chukhovsky. He and his classmates, children of Soviet Army officers stationed in Germany after World War II, were particularly taken by the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson and, assuming the roles of characters from *Treasure Island*, drew pictures of themselves in scenes from their favorite novel.

At 14, Mihail had made his decision to become an artist and enrolled in the Special High School for Art at the Repin Academy in Leningrad. Here he discovered the German romantics – Tieck, Kleist, Novalis, and especially E.T.A. Hoffman. He devoured their stories, sketched their characters, played with using their gestures and figures of speech in his daily life, thus immersing himself in the world of their stories – and explored it with pencil in hand, drawing on memories of his early childhood in occupied Prussia and Saxony as he imagined the settings of the stories. Delving ever deeper into the world of the German romantics, he created his own visual universe around them.

Chemiakin's interest in literature and music beyond the Soviet-approved curriculum and his eagerness to share them with his classmates cost him dearly. He was expelled from the Special High School at 16 and banned from study at any educational institution. Shortly thereafter he found himself subjected to forced psychiatric treatment for his religious beliefs. In the difficult and dangerous conditions of the experimental clinic where he was incarcerated, deprived of books, the artist managed to create illustrations to his favorite works of literature from memory and distract himself from the terrible, ugly surroundings and suffering of his fellow patients by recalling old master paintings of similar characters – Bosch, Goya, Breughel. Chemiakin recalls in his autobiography that his friend, the sculptor Lera Titov, who had also spent time in forced treatment but was released before Mihail, managed almost every night to climb over the hospital wall, mount the fire escape to the window of our section, and, exchanging a few words with me, thrust tiny rolled-up papers through the bars on the window. When I unrolled the papers I found poems by Alik (Roald) Mandelshtam, a poet who had died young, in the poet's own hand. How these lines warmed and revived my soul! [1].

When at last he was released from the clinic, the artist felt a pressing need to cleanse his body of the medications that the psychiatrists had tested on him for six long months. He left Leningrad

to roam in the mountains of the Caucasus, living in caves and in monastic huts, then later in the Pskov Pechory monastery. This period was the only time in Chemiakin's life when he chose not to be accompanied by books other than monastic Psalters.

Once he felt well enough to return to Leningrad and pursue his artistic work, Chemiakin determined to continue his education despite having been banned from any formal course of study. He took a job as a maintenance worker at the Hermitage Museum, read professional literature, copied the works of the old masters. During this time, he gravitated from Hoffman's stories to the works of Russian writers influenced by the Romantic author – Gogol and Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* struck the artist's imagination. In 1964 he started to create a series of illustrations to the novel and, as his friend, the art historian Vladimir Ivanov, recalls,

(...) Mihail Chemiakin's appearance also reflected his immersion in Dostoevsky's world. Like Raskolnikov, he traded his "Zimmerman" hat for a faded cap. The artist dressed in an "old student coat", like the one described in *Crime and Punishment*. Like an actor studying a role, Chemiakin tried to live in Raskolnikov's image, learn how he walked and how he behaved. He roamed the Petersburg alleys where the novel's action takes place, climbed Raskolnikov's and Marmeladov's dirty, dark stairways, carefully studied the novel's streets and sidewalks. He would walk through Haymarket Square where the repentant Raskolnikov prostrated himself in repentance.

In the summer of 1969 these places served as locations for Lev Kulidzhanov's film of *Crime and Punishment*. Old-fashioned signs and other props appeared on the houses being filmed to re-create the novel's 19<sup>th</sup>-century cityscape. Chemiakin and his friends took advantage of the White Nights and film sets for their own performances(...) [2].

Chemiakin's work on the illustrations was interrupted for many years by the artist's forced departure from the Soviet Union. It was only 50 years later, when the Moscow publisher AST asked permission to use the existing illustrations for a new edition of the novel

scheduled for the author's bicentenary, that Chemiakin returned to his unfinished series. While he worked on finishing drawings he had planned in the 1960s, he read and re-read Dostoevsky's extraordinary novel, constantly discovering new nuances which he underscored for himself and the reader with new illustrations.

Later, Chemiakin created ballet productions based on the Tales of Hoffman – Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* and a completely new ballet, *The Magic Nut* (with composer Sergei Slonimsky), for the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, and *Coppelia* for the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theater. He designed sets and costumes for a ballet based on Dostoevsky's *A Meek Spirit*, also for the Mariinsky Theater.

The American literary critic George Steiner wrote in his essay *A Secondary City*, in which he imagines a world of literature without critics and art without art historians:

The best readings of art are art (...), where (artists) incorporate, quote, distort, fragment or transform motifs, passages, representational and formal configurations, from another painting or sculpture into their own (...)” [3].

Chemiakin is a living example of Steiner's ideal reader. He absorbs works of literature into his consciousness, at the same time transforming the text into images – sometimes even carrying what he has read into a semi-theatricalized life.

It is worth noting here that not all artists and writers approach books and knowledge in this intense, burrowing fashion. For example, Marcel Proust, the champion solipsist, in his essay *On reading* [4], discusses books as he might discuss *madeleines* – the sight of this or that book evokes memories of the spot where he read it, the bench he sat on and the smells that surrounded him, the sunlight and wind; or the chair in the room where he sat with the book. As he reads, he “spends time” with the characters and parts for them forever upon closing the book.

Books enrich the language of the artist's everyday existence. He doesn't limit himself to oft-quoted phrases from Pushkin, Shakespeare, and Vysotsky, but within his close circle of friends and family

converses in the language of a range of authors – poets, novelists, librettists. Phrases, even whole paragraphs, from Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* and Ilf and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* could often be heard in Chemiakin's conversations with his friends; his small daughter was particularly fond of *The Master and Margarita* and its comic scenes and would often cry out merrily: "Hand over the briefcase, you louse!"

All through his life Chemiakin has read insatiably, re-reading his favorite books many times over. Wherever he goes, he always carries paperback collections of Iosif Brodsky's poetry in his pockets, usually along with a few other books. (He wears multi-pocketed clothing everywhere to allow him to have at hand instruments for drawing, notebooks to press the leaves he collects, and various paraphernalia he needs for photography.)

The artist does not limit his interaction with books to reading, illustrating and acting out; he also fills all his books with notes, underlining phrases that interest him, sometimes copying them out into voluminous notebooks, and often noting the page numbers on the first pages of the book, indicating the subject that the phrases address. These might be literary-philosophical themes, like "Dreams", "Death. Time", "Strange Surnames", "Baudelaire on Hoffman"; remarks about fine art, like "Against Bad Surrealism", "The Drawing", "Picasso", "Oleg Tselkov's Green Paintings"; or themes that Chemiakin analyses and compares in his art historical research, such as "The Eye", "Torn Posters-Collages", "Windows", "Shadows". There are so many texts that interest him that several assistants are kept busy transcribing them for his further use.

Every book read leads to another, and year in, year out, Chemiakin discovers new authors of prose, poetry or philosophy, whose imagery and ideas he adds to his immense collection of knowledge. It is well known that the more a person reads and learns, the more questions he has. This is especially true of Mihail Chemiakin.

The artist also reads dictionaries, and in recent years has been combing through the monumental Dictionary of Russian Dialects,

in whose fifty volumes he identifies interesting, comic, expressive words that have become obsolete. He hopes to return these words to general usage, restoring the rich variety of the Russian language. Chemiakin draws the characters and objects described by these words, organizes games for children using the forgotten words, and plans to create books and possibly short animated films that will help these interesting, unusual words return to the vernacular.

Of course, Chemiakin is first of all an artist, and along with literature, philosophy and poetry he reads professional literature – artists' remarks on art, artists' biographies, art historical research and analysis. His library of art books – monographs on individual artists or artistic movements, antique books with engraved illustrations – is made up of tens of thousands of volumes. Here also Chemiakin interacts with the books in a manner unlike that of the passive reader or viewer.

Very early in his artistic career, the artist noticed that most art books were not compiled in the way he needed for his own artistic work, and he took to cutting reproductions out of some of his books and magazines and, analyzing this or that image, pasting them on separate sheets of cardboard along with images from other books that, for him, were related – either by subject, or by device, or by technique. In this way, Chemiakin created his own „Musée Imaginaire” consisting of what he regards as paste-up layouts for ideally compiled books.

*Mihail Chemiakin's Musée Imaginaire* is the result of a constant and insatiable search for knowledge, a search for connections among ideas, images and art of diverse cultures. The artist's range of interests is extraordinarily broad – he studies and analyses more than 1000 different themes in fine art alone. His research archive, sorted and arranged by theme, can be regarded as a model for the creative and intellectual path of an artist who, before addressing a subject in his work, studies everything that has been done before him on the subject in order to create something new. It is also a collection of images organized to enable the viewer to retain the information

with the help of the mnemonic device of connecting images to one another, each image reminding the viewer of its neighbor.

Undeniably this process – this state – of searching, analyzing, comparing, juxtaposing both ideas and images creates an environment in which new ideas and images are generated. When given an artistic or intellectual task, whether by commission or by his own initiative, Chemiakin enters this vortex of competing, comparing, complementing ideas and images and “sees” instantly dozens of solutions that will not work, some that almost work, and yet others that might combine to approach a solution.

Chemiakin is not just a reader, but also a publisher of the work of his contemporaries – poets and writers. With the first money he earned in exile in Paris he compiled and printed *Apollon-77*, an almanac of post-Stalinist unofficial Russian art, literature, and photography. He also published books of poetry by Mikhail Yupp, Dmitri Bobyshev, and Vladimir Vysotsky, sometimes with his own illustrations, to conserve their work for posterity.

All of Chemiakin's interactions with books – reading, viewing images, culling images and phrases – take place exclusively with printed books that can be leafed through, written in, whose pages become familiar friends with time. He is firmly convinced that reading from a screen is but short-term learning that the reader forgets as easily as he received it. He has tested this theory on his students and confirmed that the most effective way to learn is through active interaction with printed books, best of all with pen in hand. All readers, but especially artists of all kinds, need this active, hands-on contact with books, ideas, images – in George Steiner's words, not „consumption” but „ingestion”.

Among the passages Chemiakin selected to transcribe is this one from Erik Satie's *Notes of a Mammal*.

„Isn't a bookstore a bit of a 'Temple of Dawdling' (...) A strange seduction! Don't we dawdle before the booksellers' displays in the most inclement weather, standing with our feet in the water, the wind in our eyes? No matter! There are books in front of us; they



invite us to rest, touching them with our fingers and our gaze – to forget ourselves in them, beatifically – to despise the low bonds that tie us to the old Poverty of humanity.” [5].

Unlike Satie, Proust, and their fellow Parisian „dawdlers”, Chemiakin, his feet already proverbially wet and the wind already in his eyes, moves beyond the pure pleasure of touch and gaze and plunges headfirst into the now calm, now roiling sea of ideas, imagery, texts and images he has gathered and continues to gather, from which he unfailingly emerges with new ideas.

### **Bibliographie references:**

1. CHEMIAKIN, Mihail. *Moya zhizn': Do izgnaniya (My Life Before Exile)*. Moscow: AST publishers. [translated from the Russian by Sarah H. de Kay]. [to be published in November, 2023 by Elena Shubina].
2. IVANOV, Vladimir. *Metamorfozy avtora (Metamorphoses of an Author), introduction to F. M. Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment*. Moscow: AST publishers, 2022, p. 6. [translated from the Russian by Sarah H. de Kay].
3. STEINER, George. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 17. [first publication 1989].
4. PROUST, Marcel. *Sur la lecture*. Paris: Editions Sillage, 2011.
5. SATIE, Erik. *Les Cahiers d'un Mammifère: Chroniques et articles publiés entre 1895 et 1924 (Notes of a Mammal)*. Vaucluse: Editions L'Escalier Vaucluse, 2010, p. 88. [translated from the French by Sarah H. de Kay].