



René Magritte:
The Memoirs of a Saint
1960, Oil on canvas
80 × 99.7 cm, The Menil
Collection, Houston

The Image as Miracle

“There can be too much of a good thing!” we wrote in our last newsletter. This referred to the fascinating question of why we produce so many images, yet admire or love comparatively few. Why are so many images and visual worlds possible—perhaps even necessary? The French philosopher Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, who published the two-volume work *De l’intelligence* in 1870, regarded our sometimes astonishing visual memory as a crucial foundation for cultural achievements. One of his examples was Mozart, who, in 1770, heard Gregorio Allegri’s *Miserere* twice in the *Sistine Chapel* and subsequently reproduced it in full from memory. **Images are intrinsic to the imagination. To imagine something means to picture it to oneself. What I imagine may be absent, but not necessarily—it can just as well be present. Imagination often involves anticipation:** I may imagine a vacation or a festive meal. I can anticipate a conversation that matters to me. Not only in dreams but also consciously, I prepare myself for something that is likely to occur. In order to concretely plan my life, I must form mental images. It is not only for my work that such images are required. Very often I find myself preparing for something that would not come to pass without them. If I leave the house and forget my keys, I rely on images to reconstruct where I might have left them. **The world of objects that are relevant to me and surround me on all sides is often, despite all imagination, a phenomenon of constancy. Ideally, I hold the focused portion of reality in my mind as an image, like a photograph. This may involve objects and forms that actually exist as well as activities that haven’t yet been performed.** Images I retrieve as if rummaging through a chest can also emerge spontaneously. Fundamentally, without my reservoir of experience and a discerning gaze, I can barely make progress. The images I have stored pertain to more than my everyday life. Images of farewells and arrivals also form part of the vast visual memory we all possess to varying degrees. When I look in the mirror, I typically don’t just check my appearance—I also assess whether it sufficiently aligns with a host of social expectations. **A social life without images is unthinkable. This is true not only for humans but also for animals, for whom a far-reaching ability to imagine is of existential importance. Through images and movements correlated with my imagination, I recognize dangers, visualize goals, and find my way.**

Do I perceive myself as an artist when these seemingly banal forms of imagination accompany me? At this level, imagination as a creative faculty isn't even in play. Yet imagination does serve to differentiate and clarify. Even if I strive to be a role model—a person who acts without fault—art remains distant. The issue here is codification: a process that begins with the reordering and partial discarding of known images. **The miracle of the image reveals itself not only in the often overflowing storage spaces of memory but also in our inner agility. My mental faculties are shaped by encounters, daydreams, reading—in sum, by new images.** Not just among engineers but almost everywhere in industry and craftsmanship, the focus almost inevitably turns to products that can be optimized. This applies to their appearance as much as to their packaging. There is *no creatio ex nihilo*. “Virtually all human-made objects are, to some extent, image objects,” wrote Gilbert Simondon in 1965–66 in his lecture manuscript *Imagination et invention* at the Sorbonne, now also available in German. **With the rise of commodity aesthetics, which are clearly aimed at sales, we begin to approach the physical domain of art. We sense that motor functions and sensory functions are almost inseparable, as they are in children's playing.** Desired products, let's say a visually stunning car, are things I want to use, if only with my eyes. The “miraculous,” a promise nourished by luxury, movie stars, fairy tales, and also by artists, rarely adheres to the everyday imagination. **Perhaps artists consciously aim to open the storehouse of their memories in order to explore them more thoroughly, and raise them, as other professions do, into the realm of refinement. It is a sad fact, however, that artists are usually isolated from all those social groups that also use their reservoir of images creatively—sometimes in a state of complete self-forgetfulness, sometimes with great determination.** For decades after Hippolyte Taine, German schools required students to recite Schiller's *Song of the Bell* by heart. The era of rote learning has passed. Even “Learning to Unlearn” is no longer at the top of training agendas. In the art scene—a field that has become increasingly narrow and hence intellectually constraining —“wokeness” has been out of favor since late 2024, and not only because Donald Trump won the presidential election and tech billionaires gravitated toward him. Considering the complex visual worlds that are essential to nearly all individuals, it seems unlikely that the horizon of reality is going to contract anytime soon. Our creativity, already as children, is so profound that we consistently produce unique and often artistically valuable visual worlds throughout our lives. This potential remains largely unrecognized by many societies.

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