

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

Oct 6-
Jan 13

MARTÍN
RAMÍREZ



English

One of the self-taught masters of twentieth-century art, Martín Ramírez created some three hundred artworks of remarkable visual clarity and expressive power within the confines of DeWitt State Hospital, in Auburn, California, where he resided for the last fifteen years of his life.

Ramírez's complexly structured works are characterized by skillful and inventive draftsmanship and extraordinary spatial manipulations. The artist employs a diverse repertoire of imagery, fusing elements of Mexican and American culture, the environment of confinement, and his experience as a Mexican living in poverty and exile in the United States.

Martín Ramírez (1895–1963) left his native Mexico in 1925 with the aim of finding work in the United States and supporting his wife and children back home in Jalisco. Political and religious struggles in Mexico that directly affected the welfare of his family, as well as the economic consequences of the Great Depression, left him homeless and without work on the streets in northern California in 1931. Unable to communicate in English and apparently confused, he was soon picked up by the police and committed to a psychiatric hospital, where he would eventually be diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic. Ramírez spent the second half of his life in a succession of mental institutions in California.

During those thirty-two years, Ramírez hardly spoke to anyone. However, some time in the mid-1930s, he began to draw. In the early 1950s, Tarmo Pasto, a visiting professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State University, saw some of Ramírez's drawings in the ward at DeWitt State Hospital and recognized their singular artistic value. Pasto not only made Ramírez a subject of his research into mental illness and creativity but also started to supply him with materials, collect his drawings, and, by organizing public exhibitions, introduce his artwork to the public.

During the more than five decades since the fortuitous meeting between Pasto and Ramírez, much has been speculated about the artist's life and work. His oeuvre forms an impressive map of a life shaped by immigration, poverty, institutionalization, and most of all art. Migration and memory seem to factor strongly in every image. His compositions document his life experiences; favored images of Mexican Madonnas, animals, cowboys, trains, and landscapes merge with scenes of American culture. Ramírez never seemed to tire of his preferred topics, yet within his limited set of subjects he demonstrates an amazing range of expression. While his singularly identifiable figures, forms, line, and palette reveal an exacting and highly defined vocabulary, they also show Ramírez to be an adventurous artist, exhibiting remarkably creative explorations through endless variations on his themes. ♣

—**BROOKE DAVIS ANDERSON, CURATOR**

This exhibition is dedicated to the family of Martín Ramírez.





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his project unveils new research about Martín Ramírez's life and family and corrects some of the information that has been published over the course of the past five decades.

Up until now, we did not have accurate life dates for the artist, for example. His family remained unknown to the art world, and most admirers of Ramírez's drawings wrongly assumed there was no family. We did not know where in Mexico he was from, and much of the information about his life in the United States was incorrect. It has long been assumed that Ramírez was mute, but recent research shows that to be untrue. He was first described by Tarmo Pasto as "choosing not to speak, only hum." Later accounts evolved from "he was mute" to "he could not speak" to, eventually, "he never spoke." This reevaluation of prior biographical assessments invites a reexamination of the artist's entire history, including his diagnosis as a paranoid schizophrenic. Interestingly, after Ramírez died, even Dr. Pasto questioned his diagnosis and suggested that the artist was not mentally ill.

The following time line was compiled by Victor M. and Kristin E. Espinosa, and reflects the years of research they conducted to provide an accurate record of the life of Martín Ramírez. ¶



Martín Ramírez, late 1920s
Photo courtesy the Ramírez family

1895 Martín Ramírez González is born on January 30 in Rincón de Velázquez, Tepatitlán, Jalisco, Mexico. On January 31, he is baptized in San Francisco de Asís, the central parish of Tepatitlán.

1918 On May 31, Ramírez marries 17-year-old María Santa Ana Navarro Velázquez in the small parish of Capilla de Milpillas, Tepatitlán.

The Ramírez family moves to Tototlán, Jalisco.

1919 On March 8, the Ramírezes' first daughter, Juana, is born in El Venado, Tototlán.

1921 On January 8, the Ramírezes' second daughter, Teófila, is born in La Puerta del Rincón, Tototlán.

On May 20, Ramírez's older brother Atanacio marries Dominga Navarro, the younger sister of María Santa Ana.

1923 On August 28, the Ramírezes' third daughter, Agustina, is born in El Pelón, Tototlán.

Ramírez buys a small piece of land on credit, in a ranchería near San José de Gracia, Tepatitlán.

1925 On August 24, Ramírez leaves for the United States.



Martin Ramirez, 1952
Photo courtesy the Gómez-Ramírez family

Chronology

1925–30 Ramírez works on the railroad and in the mines of northern California.

1926 On February 2, the Ramírezes' only son, Candelario, is born in San José de Gracia.

Late 1920s Ramírez makes his first drawings in the margins of letters to his family.

1931 On January 9, Ramírez is picked up by the San Joaquin County, California, police and committed to Stockton State Hospital, where he receives a preliminary diagnosis of manic depression.

1932 In April, Ramírez makes his first escape from the hospital.

1933 In July, Ramírez escapes Stockton for the second time.

After a few days in jail, he is committed to the hospital again.

On August 12, he is diagnosed with dementia praecox, catatonic form.

1934 Ramírez escapes Stockton again but returns of his own volition after spending three or four days on the streets.

Mid-1930s Ramírez begins to draw on a more regular basis.

The Ramírez family receives a letter from Stockton State Hospital, informing them about Ramírez's condition.

1944 The newly built DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California, is opened to receive wounded World War II soldiers.

1946 The War Assets Administration sells DeWitt to the California government. It starts receiving transfers of senile, aged, mentally ill, and tubercular patients from overcrowded California state hospitals.

1948 Some of Ramírez's drawings are sent by Stockton State Hospital to his family in Mexico.

Ramírez is transferred to DeWitt.

Tarmo Pasto, who has just become professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State College, meets Ramírez.

1951 Ramírez's first solo show is organized at the E.B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento.

1952 On January 6, Ramírez receives his first and only visit from a family member when his nephew José Gómez Ramírez arrives for two days.

Tarmo Pasto receives a grant from the Ford Foundation Fund for the Advancement of Education for yearlong research into "psychology theory and art expression."

In November, a solo Ramírez exhibition is organized by Pasto at the Women's clubrooms of

Stephens Union at the University of California, Berkeley.

Early 1950s The first solo Ramírez exhibition on the East Coast, organized by Pasto, takes place at the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Center at New York's Syracuse University.

1954 In January, the solo Ramírez show "The Art of a Schizophrenic" opens at the Mills College Museum of Art in Oakland.

In May, Pasto organizes an exhibition of artwork by patients from various California mental hospitals, including Martín Ramírez, at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco.

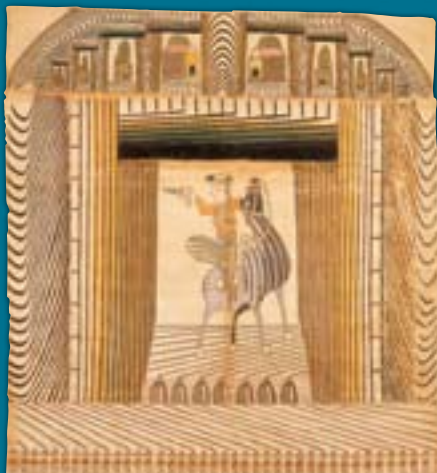
1955 Pasto sends ten of Ramírez's drawings to James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, but no plans are made for an exhibition.

1956 Pasto goes to Helsinki on a Fulbright fellowship. His visits to Ramírez become less frequent.

ca. 1959 Pasto visits Ramírez for the last time.

1963 On February 17, Ramírez dies at DeWitt of a pulmonary edema.

Horse and Riders



Untitled (Horse and Rider), 1954. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper. Collection of L. & L. Feiwel; Photo by Joseph Painter, courtesy Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia.

The figure of horse and rider, or *jinete*, is perhaps the subject most frequently drawn by Martín Ramírez.

In the more than eighty *jinete* drawings in his oeuvre, the primary subject is framed in a boxlike room strongly suggestive of a stage. The artist uses this structural device not just to contain but to valorize his subject. The construction of the stage is subtly altered from drawing to drawing with changes to the shading, line, perspective, color, texture, and scale, creating a surprising diversity in the series. This technique recalls the paintings of folk artist Morris Hirshfield (1872–1946) as well as the modernist Joseph Stella (1877–1946), who treated his renderings of the Brooklyn Bridge in much the same manner.

Ramírez surrounds the ten smaller stages crowning this drawing with the repetitive line that fills out space in many of his artworks. The artist's concern for pattern repetition and design create a rhythm on the page that suggests depth and dimension in an otherwise flatly rendered drawing. This reverberation emphasizes the tension between geometric and organic forms

and, thus, the tug between freedom and containment. The horse and rider become isolated physically from the drawn world pulsing around them.

Directly below the horse and rider is a suite of seven forms that, given the densely shaded stage setting, appear to be footlights but could also be mounds in a landscape. At the very bottom of the composition sits an audience of tiny, simply rendered figures wearing sombreros. These cartoonish figures appear as a device in several drawings and form the bottom of an overall hierarchical arrangement composed of linear divisions. Martín Ramírez understands formal artistic principles and displays them here with vigor. The diagonal lines making up the floorboards, emerging precisely from the hatted figures below, are evidence of how carefully ordered and well thought-through Ramírez's drawings are. Experiencing this exquisitely staged scene, one starts to wonder, as one does after studying any Ramírez drawing at length, if he ever erased. ¶

—BROOKE DAVIS ANDERSON

Trains and Tunnels



Untitled (Train and Tunnel), ca. 1950. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper. Collection of Estelle E. Friedman.

Where does this train go to? To Drawing City.

Martín Ramírez had decided that there was no way back for him to Mexico, and that he would never again see his family. He had ended up in a psychiatric institution, where life was managed by third parties and the future was reduced to a day-to-day monotony. Similar to the train moving around the bend before disappearing into the darkness of the tunnel, Ramírez was facing a black hole. So, what does this train stand for? For solitude? All windows are black, nobody seems aboard, the smoke goes straight up, no wind is blowing, and time seems absent. All this contrasts with the train as an incarnation of speed, power, and exchange. After all, in the twentieth century, trains were venerated for transporting goods and information at previously unheard-of velocities, and for bringing work, wealth, and modern life to previously remote and inaccessible places. Within a few years, the railroad had revolutionized peoples' lives, but here it stands still.

In this drawing, the composition is dominated by vertical movements reversing one another: The rising of the mountain is counterbalanced by the downward movement of the flanking hills, and vice versa. What could have resulted in a nervous and monotonous up-and-down is transformed into a compact composition by the horizontal band of the railroad.

We stand in front of a paradoxical composition: Multidirectional movements and changing viewpoints offset one another into perfect balance. This is the most accurate and laconic rendering of the artist's situation, without horizon or future, as in the asylum. In the end, the tunnel remains the only possible way to go. But where to, exactly? To darkness and death, as some may suggest? But why would there be light? Could it be the exit to the only remaining place: drawing? After all, this was the place where Ramírez found his language, where he was "heard," where he was able to communicate and get some recognition. Where does this train go to? To Drawing City.

—DANIEL BAUMANN



Madonnas



In this large-scale work, Ramírez takes an epic approach to his subject and achieves a kind of grandeur, especially when one considers the environment in which he created the drawing.

Ramírez worked on the floor of his hospital ward, choosing a “studio space” bordered by two twin beds and a nightstand. The artist collected a variety of papers—discarded nurses’ notes, magazines, newspapers, book pages, flattened paper cups, and examining-table cover sheets, for example—and glued them together with homemade adhesives. His glue recipe included potato starch, bread dough, and saliva. (Other self-taught artists, such as the Swiss Aloïse Corbaz and the American James Castle, devised similar techniques.)

At the beginning of his confinement, Ramírez used only the materials readily available to him in the hospital; only later did he incorporate art supplies given to him by Dr. Pasto and other staff members. Ramírez collected crayons, colored pencils, water-based paints, and possibly also shoe polish and fruit juices, then crushed these materials into a liquid medium that he mixed in a homemade pot. Rather than use a brush, he used a matchstick as his stylus, and for a straightedge he used a tongue depressor. Once the artist completed a drawing, particularly one of a

large scale, such as this Madonna, he would stand on a table to evaluate the artwork, laid out on the floor, from an appropriate distance.

The confidence with which the fingerprint contours are drawn, along with their nearly perfect spacing, indicates a powerful orderliness the artist forcefully brings to the scene, as well as a clarity and sense of control over the direction of his artistic expression.

While it might seem unlikely, Ramírez had an audience. Artist Wayne Thiebaud remembers visiting him with art classes from a nearby college. Thiebaud recounts, “I met him and watched him work. He used little prototypes he would roll up, and pull out of his jacket to copy, like a foot or a head or a train, or a horse and rider. It seems he had a kind of series of little characters that he would bring on stage almost like a repertory company. He pasted papers together with a mixture of bread from the mess hall and his saliva and would paste together all kinds of bits of material of all sorts of paper he could find.” ¶

—BROOKE DAVIS ANDERSON



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his work brings to mind the Mexican art of the codex, or picture scroll, and of *muralismo*, or wall painting.

Didactic and narrative by definition, both the codex and mural traditions embed Mexican expressions across history, from pre-Columbian times on to the colonial and modern periods. Along with their narrative and art-historical values, sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century codices, as well as the colorful murals that adorned churches, were also indices of transculturation. Both the codices and the murals express the dynamism of *mestizaje*, in which a third culture is produced from the fusion of indigenous and European views of the universe in the context of uneven relations of power and representation.

In this drawing, we observe the simultaneous use of a *mélange* of archi-

tectural styles—from premodern Mexican, European, and American traditions—blending into accentuated geographical backdrops. A phallic tower with a clock that recalls Coit Tower (San Francisco, 1933) looms behind a northern Mexican building painted in vivid yellows and reds; it has a horseshoe arch in the medieval Spanish-Arabic style, which was used in colonial Mexico. Next to this incongruous grouping is a sketch of homes with cantilevered roofs, an architectural feature that is rare in Mexico. A double-steeple church is crowned with an oversize dove, recalling traditional folk art ceramic figurines that represent the Holy Ghost. The dove

Landscapes



Martín Ramírez, *Untitled (Landscape)*, ca. 1948–63. Crayon, pencil, watercolor, and collage on pieced paper. American Folk Art Museum, extended loan of Audrey B. Heckler. Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York. Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York.

nestles over a chalice or baptismal font next to a California Revival/Spanish colonial grouping of buildings with red-tile roofs. A fantastic animal burrows from the earth between the pair of neo-Gothic towers that recall the monumental cathedral of Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco.

In this amazing mix of styles and influences, Ramírez contrasts his native Mexican culture—which he views romantically as premodern—with technological advances from his adopted country. Fantastic animals coexist with a parade of automobiles in the upper part of the scroll. Yet these elements—drawn from nature and technology—are not in opposition; they flow and are

simultaneous, they are equivalent in symbolic value.

History for Martín Ramírez is not linear; his understanding of it—whether personal or social—is full of ruptures. It shifts and glides as the past becomes the present, and all of it is part of the modernity he is experiencing, witnessing, and living. His is a universe that is breaking down, and through his art he tries to make sense of it, pushing and pulling his attention over an array of sources and symbols from the two cultures that he negotiates as a Mexican American. ¶

—VICTOR ZAMUDIO-TAYLOR

More to explore

Martín Ramírez is one of many self-taught artists whose work has captured the public's imagination. Discover the work of other self-taught artists on the Upper Level of the Museum's Collection galleries. The Milwaukee Art Museum holds a celebrated, comprehensive collection of folk and self-taught art, including The Michael and Julie Hall Collection of American Folk Art. Explore works in all media from the nineteenth century to today by American and European artists.



Bill Traylor, *Talking Couple*, ca. 1940. Milwaukee Art Museum, The Michael and Julie Hall Collection of American Folk Art.

Presented by Marianne and Sheldon B. Lubar

Education Sponsor



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cover *Untitled (Rosenquist Scroll)*, 1953 (detail). Crayon, pencil, and collage on pieced paper. Collection of Joni and Michael Zavis. Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York.



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