

Martín Ramírez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation



Martín Ramírez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation is the first monographic presentation in Southern California of the self-taught artist Martín Ramírez (1895–1963). The exhibition includes a range of works—from small-scale abstractions to monumental figures and landscapes—some of which are being presented to the public for the first time.

Born to a family of sharecroppers in Jalisco, Mexico, Ramírez migrated to the United States in the 1920s to seek work on the railroads. Following the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929, Ramírez found himself unemployed and homeless. In 1931, he was detained by police for vagrancy and interned in state psychiatric hospitals without due process until his death in 1963. In recent years, Ramírez’s psychiatric diagnosis has been called into question, suggesting that the artist was the victim of discrimination and institutional bias. Even under these difficult circumstances, Ramírez produced a body of remarkable drawings that established his iconic visual language of rhythmic mark making and singular imagery. Moreover, his work highlights the many social concerns that endure as challenging topics of debate today—immigration, national borders, incarceration, and the rights of the mentally ill.

To create his drawings, Ramírez collaged found papers and executed his linework with pencils, crayons, burnt matchsticks, and other makeshift implements. He populated his pictures with a constellation of figures—cowboys, religious icons, tunnels, trains, and animals—creating spaces both real and imaginary. References to Catholic imagery and Jalisco’s ranchero culture that appear throughout the drawings demonstrate the artist’s enduring connection to Mexican cultural themes and memories, while the occasional use of images from magazines, film, and television reflects his growing awareness of popular American culture. Ramírez’s unique draftsmanship lends an optical rhythm and depth to his compositions, and his manipulations of found papers through piecing and layering extend his drawings into a sculptural dimension. Although Ramírez is often discussed in the context of “self-taught” or “folk” art, his compositions demonstrate a formal ingenuity that is both aligned with and independent of artistic conventions of his day.

This exhibition acknowledges the artist’s history before his arrival in California as a necessary context for examining his work. By illustrating Ramírez’s progression of motifs and improvisational techniques through drawings that seem to be from various periods, the show situates his singular visual style in the critical orbit of art made in California, where the crossover between Latin American art and American modernism found its fullest realization.

Martín Ramírez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation is organized by Elsa Longhauser, Executive Director, with Jamillah James, Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

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Exploring Recurring Themes in Ramírez's Work

Ramírez and the Written Word

A number of works by Martín Ramírez include large, ornamental words that rest above the drawings like titles. Considering Ramírez was known to say and write very little while institutionalized, the presence of text is puzzling yet may suggest an attempt by the artist at communication. His word choices allow viewers another way to analyze his work, they give voice to his possible intentions, and they provide potential clues to understanding his imagery.

Some of the words present clear connections to Ramírez's life: for instance, he was a devout Catholic from a deeply religious region of Mexico, so references to religious figures in his drawings, such as *Untitled (Jesus)* and *Untitled (Madonna)*, are unsurprising. Other words he used are more ambiguous. "Alamentosa" in *Untitled (Alamentosa)* could be a misspelling of "La Lamentosa" (The Wailing One), a nickname given to the train that passed through Ramírez's native Jalisco. It could also be a misspelling of "Alimento" (food product), which combined with "S.A." (the Spanish language equivalent of the abbreviation "Inc." or "Ltd."), might refer to labeling for refrigerated food companies exporting goods from Mexico to the United States.

According to recent research, Ramírez may have lifted certain of these words from the scraps of newsprint and magazines he used to collage the ground of his drawings. *Untitled (Avana Cuva)*, for example, can be interpreted as a misspelling of Havana, Cuba. Between 1959 and 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis featured prominently in American newspapers and magazines. Ramírez made drawings throughout this period and could very well have encountered references to the ongoing conflict.

The Horn Players

Several later works by Ramírez feature *charros*, or figures on horseback blowing large horns. Although the *charros* recall the artist's many other depictions of horseback riders, the brightly colored, oversized horns introduce a reference to sound, and they serve as a metaphor for Ramírez's desire to communicate despite his near-silence throughout his years of hospitalization. The horns' thin necks and cupped bells do not look like traditional bugles or trumpets, but instead resemble ear trumpets—funnel-shaped devices used by the hard of hearing to amplify sound. For instance, in *Untitled (Horse and Rider with Large Bugle)*, a horn nearly fills the entire composition, dwarfing its player, while lines radiating outward suggest intense volume. By transforming ear trumpets into sounding trumpets, the artist emphasizes his hope to be heard.

Ramírez and Architecture

Martín Ramírez spent the last thirty years of his life in California mental hospitals, moving between their labyrinthine rooms and hallways. His depictions of buildings, many of which evoke these institutional spaces, are marked by repetitive forms and unusual shifts in perspective that conjure for the viewer the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped. Two works known as *Untitled (Arches)* depict a seemingly endless sequence of darkly shaded interiors, stacked one atop the next without any figures or ornamentation. Because the work is cropped, the rows of arches appear to continue infinitely past the edge of the page. *Untitled (Double Courtyard)* more clearly registers as a building, with long, connected passageways resembling the dormitories at DeWitt State Hospital, where Ramírez spent much of his confinement. The sharply angled structure projects forward aggressively, threatening to consume the viewer. All three pieces are marked by rigid, intersecting lines and shapes that impart a sense of stasis and depart from the open, flowing patterns of Ramírez's landscapes.

The two works *Untitled (Architecture)*, however, are quite different from Ramírez's asylum pictures. They more closely resemble the stage sets that Ramírez often used as a framing device for his horseback riders and other figures. Unlike the ominous archways and courtyards that allude to the hospital, these enclosures maintain a visible means of escape for their subjects. (235)

Horse and Riders

The horseback rider, known as a *jinete* or *caballero*, is an enduring theme in Ramírez's work. Converging lines and gradated shading form a proscenium, or stage set, for the gun-toting horseback figures. The manner in which the riders turn backward and point their guns toward an unseen adversary giving chase adds an element of movement to the drawings and alludes to familiar scenes in the Western movies shown in the mental hospital's playhouse. Ramírez repeatedly drew these horse and rider scenes with subtle variations, and when viewed in sequence, they resemble the still frames of a film reel.

These riders could likewise represent *cristeros*, Catholic counter-revolutionary fighters who lived in Ramírez's native region of Jalisco and rebelled against Mexico's Federal Army. Ramírez left Jalisco before the Cristero Rebellion of 1926–1929, but the fighting took a major toll on his family; he was informed in letters that his land was destroyed, forcing his family to relocate. These riders may also be more generally representative of Jalisco's *ranchero* culture, which celebrated European ancestry, wealth and privilege, masculinity, and conservative notions of honor and family ties. The figure of the solitary male rider wielding a pistol is strongly emblematic of the *ranchero* lifestyle, to which the young Ramírez aspired (in his youth Ramírez rode a bay horse and carried a pistol). The horse and rider drawings thus offer a glimpse into traditions linked to Ramírez's past in Mexico, but they also introduce themes representative of what he may have encountered in the States by way of news or popular culture.

Abstractions

Ramírez's series of winding lines appear as decorative flourishes in almost all of his drawings, but when isolated as simple abstractions, these patterns showcase the artist's ability to build dynamic volumes and surfaces. One untitled work on brown butcher paper demonstrates Ramírez's use of soft white shading as a contour for his lines, making the rippling forms seem to lift away from the paper. The artist often varied the weight of his marks: thinner, denser lines sweep down a page in some works, while thicker, broader lines project upward in others.

Ramírez's abstract drawings have been compared to artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, a style of painting adopted by artists in the United States beginning in the late 1940s. These painters focused on color, surface, and line, and they sought to break away from representational subjects such as the body, landscape, or everyday scenes, instead attempting to capture the inner workings of the mind and spirit. What awareness Ramírez had of this movement is unknown, but the freedom of his line and approach to materials and imagery suggests a similar improvisational attitude.

Tunnels and Trains

Ramírez is perhaps best known for his many depictions of trains and tunnels, which provide the connective tissue between Ramírez's relationships to Mexico and the United States. The railroad linking Jalisco and California was completed in 1887, just eight years before Ramírez's birth in 1895. Once transnational rail connections were complete, industrial contractors from the United States made frequent visits to Mexico to recruit workers for railroad construction. Ramírez was one of these migrant workers. The tumult of the Mexican Revolution contributed to his decision to migrate temporarily to the United States, where he could both make money for his family and avoid the revolutionary violence in Jalisco.

In one large-scale abstraction, a train careens from one dark tunnel toward another, as if caught at a moment of transition between two worlds. Ramírez was similarly caught between worlds, living in the United States and absorbing its movies and magazines, but beholden through language and memory to his home country. The term *napantla*, which means "in the middle of it," is a popular concept in Chicano and Latino Studies to describe an identity stuck between two cultures. The train can therefore be read as a symbol of Ramírez's migrant identity (someone who belongs to two different places, but may not be truly at home in either) and the tunnel both as a means of connecting two worlds and a marker of their division.

Animals

Animals feature prominently in Ramírez's work, particularly deer, which held a special place in his life: in addition to sheep, pigs, and cows, Ramírez kept two deer on his farm in Jalisco, which he named "El Venado" (The Deer). *Untitled (Abstract Patterns with Four Animals)* includes no less than three deer,

while two works known as *Untitled (Stag and Architecture)* place the animal in the center of the composition, above a series of tunnels or doorways.

Tarmo Pasto, a psychologist and artist who frequently visited Ramírez, and who fostered his creative work, had a particular interest in the relationship between wildlife and the psychology of mental patients. One of the few surviving photographs of Pasto and Ramírez shows them standing side by side presenting *Untitled (Abstract Patterns with Four Animals)*. It is possible Pasto encouraged Ramírez's exploration of animals in his drawings, finding common ground with him through this mutual interest.

Landscapes

Ramírez's most elaborate works are often landscapes, which unfold as winding narratives that include different combinations of figures, animals, buildings, and vehicles. Flanked by swirling patterns of wavering lines, even modern industrial scenes with trains and tunnels are transformed into a kaleidoscope of organic formations. These environments do not necessarily present specific places; instead, they appear more as fantasies from Ramírez's imagination that consolidate the many motifs found in other works.

Across the artist's landscapes, the perspective is much like a bird's eye view, drawn as if observed from above. Some scholars believe this stems from Ramírez's work as a manual laborer on farms and railroads, which required workers to bend toward the earth to perform their duties. Others suggest this perspective emerged from the artist's method of spreading his paper on the ground and drawing while bent over. The largest wall-mounted work on view and *Untitled (Landscape with Deer and Caballero)* depart from the prevailing logic of Ramírez's landscapes in one important way: they show the sky in colorful detail, opening up the picture plane, rather than starting closer to earth. Incorporating new forms, such as the white and red clouds, and changing a composition's perspective, demonstrates that Ramírez was willing to experiment beyond a limited range of stylistic tendencies.

Other Figures

The portraits Ramírez made can rarely be traced back to specific people. Many, such as *Untitled (Seated Figure)*, likely come from the artist's imagination and portray a unique blend of fantasy, historical narrative, and religion. These subjects are often rendered in black lines with a similar smiling expression — an expression that is extended, somewhat chillingly, to the prone figure in *Untitled (Corpse)*.

Other human figures, such as those in *Untitled (Landscape with Seven Figures and Buildings)*, are depicted in full color with a broad range of facial expressions and were likely copied from magazines and movie stills. The man on the far left holding a gun looks like a cinematic hero; his red lips and combed blonde hair are a far cry from the *caballeros* found elsewhere in Ramírez's work. Similarly, the woman to his left seems pulled from another source; she appears to be running away from something or someone, her long hair flowing behind her. Five other figures in colorful dress, including the image of Jesus on the left, seem as if they belong to yet another scene. Flanking a large church, they suggest the narrative of Jesus and the cross.

Ramírez's Scroll

Martín Ramírez's monumental scroll, on view publicly for the first time, presents an unfolding narrative that can be traced through a series of related scenes. Animals and landscapes on the left lead into a long train flanked by workers and a *caballero*. These give way to buildings and figures, followed by a series of tunnels at the end of the work. It is tempting to interpret this scroll as a diary of the artist's personal journey from the farms of Jalisco, along the railroad tracks, into American cities, and later to the abyss of the asylum.

The scroll underwent considerable conservation, a process detailed in the publication accompanying this exhibition. A team led by Chicago-based conservator Harriet Stratis used a variety of techniques to sensitively repair and restore the fragile work, which had been in storage for decades. It was vital to retain and strengthen the scroll's patchwork composition, as well as make minor modifications to the visual and physical composition of the work. The conservators considered the scroll's drawn surface and its method of construction to be equally important; as such, the monumental work was treated as both a drawing and a sculpture.

Collaged from numerous scraps of paper, the scroll is a dense patchwork glued together with commercially available adhesives. Ramírez regularly repurposed magazine pages, candy wrappers, butcher paper, examining-table sheets, cigarette papers, and medical documents to form the ground for his drawings. In this scroll alone, we find traces of grocery bags, advertisements for safety matches, magazine clippings, and handwritten notes. Ramírez's works thus tell the history of their own making: turning the pieces over reveals their many parts and teaches us about the resources available to the artist.

Madonnas

Untitled (Madonna) and *Untitled (Reina)* are among some of Ramírez's most elaborate figural drawings. Given their resemblance to the Catholic Virgin Mary, they are referred to as his Madonnas. The snakes at their feet are consistent with statues of the Virgin Mary found throughout Latin America, in which she is often depicted with her heel stomping on a snake (a symbol of Jesus Christ's rising to divine status and the defeat of Satan). The minute detail of their dresses also recalls the elaborate ornamentation of Virgin figures in Catholic churches, including those in Jalisco. There, Ramírez would have encountered them in niches, which could have influenced elements of these compositions, including their stage-like framing and niche-like archways.

Ramírez's Madonnas have some important departures from traditional Catholic iconography. For one, Ramírez depicts them without shawls, and with their arms extending up and outward instead of downward or in prayer. Their expressions are vivid and self-aware, unlike the sober modesty of many images of the Virgin Mary. These differences have led scholars to wonder if they are more than just Madonnas; some believe they are a mixture of the Virgin Mary and the Statue of Liberty, and therefore symbolize the artist's border identity. Others suggest that they represent saints rather than Virgins, and it is also possible that they refer to a more universal female deity. Much like Ramírez's cowboys and

portraits, these figures are based on an established model—the Virgin—but diverge in a number of ways, giving the icon a personal dimension.

Martín Ramírez Timeline



- 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.
- 1925–1930** 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.
- 1948** Some of Ramírez's drawings are sent by Stockton State Hospital to his family in Mexico. Ramírez is transferred to DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California. 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. 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.
- c. 1959 Pasto visits Ramírez for the last time.
- 1963 On February 17, Ramírez dies at DeWitt of a pulmonary edema.

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