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Outsider to His Kin, but a Ghost No More

By [KATHRYN SHATTUCK](#)

Their flight from Los Angeles had arrived nearly three hours late, but travel fatigue couldn't keep Maria Ramirez-Miller, her six daughters and a granddaughter from scampering out of their Manhattan hotel rooms and onto West 53rd Street on Friday around midnight.

There it was — trumpeted by banners hanging from street lamps and on coffee cups and catalogs stacked in the window of the American Folk Art Museum gift shop — the name Martín Ramírez. For more than 70 years, this self-taught 20th-century outsider artist had been little more than a ghost to his family.

“A friend of mine said, ‘You’re just 20 steps from the museum,’ and we went squealing down the street,” said Josie Alonso de Levy, one of the daughters, who took her own 12-year-old, Cynthia, on the excursion. The next morning the women, laughing and chattering in Spanish and English, entered the museum, where they saw the 97 drawings, many for the first time, that make up “Martín Ramírez.” The retrospective of his art, made while he was confined in a mental institution, opens today.

Suddenly there was silence, and then tears. The daughters huddled around their mother, Mr. Ramírez's oldest grandchild, as she gazed at the work before her: the obsessive, hypnotic renderings of horses and riders, trains and tunnels, Madonnas and the landscape of the Jalisco region of Mexico. In 1925 Mr. Ramírez had left his small ranch there, seeking work in the United States to support his wife and children.

By 1931 he had all but disappeared into the California mental health system, with diagnoses of manic-depression and later catatonic schizophrenia. Over time, he ceased to talk and was classified, erroneously, as deaf and mute. After 1948 he lived out his years at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, Calif., spending his time drawing.

Hospital workers apparently sent Mr. Ramírez's family a few of his artworks, along with a letter, sometime in the 1940s. The family members decorated their patio with the colorful images but then burned the drawings when they were told that Mr. Ramírez had tuberculosis.

The artist's larger works can now fetch more than \$100,000 at auction. His family, however, has been left without any tangible connection to Mr. Ramírez, except for a shared surname and a newfound sense of pride. Few of the art historians or collectors who helped burnish his reputation over the last two decades made any attempts to contact the Ramírez family.

Brooke Davis Anderson, the director and curator of the folk art museum's Contemporary Center, corresponded with members of the Ramírez family as she planned the retrospective, and she guided the family through the show. Before a chronology of the life of Mr. Ramírez (1895-1963), Ms. Ramirez-Miller stood next to the name of her mother, Teofila, Mr. Ramírez's second daughter, for a photograph.

Ms. Ramirez-Miller began to cry as she viewed “Untitled (Rosenquist Scroll),” in which a man stands either in a hole or on a mount, depending on perspective, with a rope tied around his waist. Above, a collaged magazine image of a smiling woman, with arms added on by the artist, holds the rope in one hand and a scythe in the other, perhaps ready to make a cut.

Some critics interpret the image as depicting Mr. Ramírez's wife, who saved his brother from hanging during the 1920s Cristero Rebellion in Mexico by pretending to be his wife. But Ms. Ramirez-Miller, 66, saw it differently.

“I see it as my grandfather in a well, and he is waiting for his wife, my grandmother, to come and pull him out,” she said.

The extended Ramírez family — a surviving daughter, nieces, nephews and grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-

grandchildren — stretches from Guadalajara, Mexico, to California. (Three relatives arrived from Mexico to attend the opening party last night.) Until the last decade, only a few family members had been aware of Mr. Ramírez's rising status in the ranks of outsider artists.

"When this exhibition was started, we had no idea it could be something like this," said Elia Diaz, Ms. Ramirez-Miller's oldest daughter. "It's amazing after all this time to find out where your background comes from."

Ms. Ramirez-Miller's life also speaks to the immigrant story — of hardships in Mexico and the United States, loneliness, language barriers, displacement and depression. The oldest of 16 children, she was sent as a young child to live with her grandmother, Mr. Ramírez's wife, whom she called Mom. By 9, she was designing patterns and embroidering them on garments as a contract worker; by 12, she worked full time as a seamstress.

She recalls when the family received a letter and photographs from DeWitt State Hospital telling them that Mr. Ramírez was doing well and asking his wife if she wanted to retrieve him. She declined, Ms. Ramirez-Miller said, partly because she could not provide his medical care and perhaps because she had felt abandoned 25 years earlier.

"Still, I think she thought she had a very good married life," Ms. Ramirez-Miller said. "She once said that had she known she would have been married only for those eight years, she never would have married."

Like her grandfather, Ms. Ramirez-Miller emigrated to California, where she worked as a seamstress to support her seven children after discovering that her husband had another family.

"She lived a very hard, isolated life," said her daughter Martha Bell, "but always she was a pillar of strength."

Speaking about her great-grandfather, Ms. Diaz said: "Do I think he was mentally ill? I think it's more the fact that he was away from his family, he was homeless without a job, he couldn't speak the language and he was depressed, just walking around, frustrated that nobody was listening to him. And he felt he had nothing to go home to."

In 2000 Ms. Ramirez-Miller and her daughters found Mr. Ramírez's pauper's plot at a California state cemetery in Stockton and, with a priest, laid a tombstone on his grave. The women are now talking of forming a family trust perhaps to buy a work by Mr. Ramírez and promote his legacy.

"My mother and her family grew up with shame, but now I feel pride for my mother," Ms. Diaz said. "She has suffered a lot in her life, and now it's like she's coming full circle. There's a sort of fulfillment from this. It has given her a lot of sense of self-worth connected with her heritage. She grew up really poor, but now she feels rich."

Her sister Elba Ortega added: "It's such an accomplishment for him. Maybe he thought all those years that he had left his family nothing. But he left us this."

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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Cynthia Levy with a drawing by the outsider artist Martín Ramírez, her great-great-grandfather, at the American Folk Art Museum.

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American Folk Art Museum

Maria Ramirez-Miller, center, granddaughter of the artist Martín Ramírez, with her daughters and granddaughter, at far right, at a retrospective of his work at the American Folk Art Museum.

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