



MARTÍN RAMÍREZ

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, sometime 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 demonstrated 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

Copyright © 2007 by American Folk Art Museum, New York

Dedicated to the family of Martín Ramírez

JPMorganChase 

Additional support is provided by Altria Group, Inc., National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, Mex-Am Cultural Foundation, Inc., and Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund.



ABOUT THIS EXHIBITION

There is a tendency in the field of self-taught artists and their work to compartmentalize and simplify the achievements of its artists. An artist's work may therefore be presented solely as the output of a mental patient, a religious zealot, or a recluse, for example, without examining it within the broader contexts of culture, history, artistic process, or biography. In the more than fifty years Martín Ramírez's work has been in the public eye, it has been codified as the powerful renderings of a schizophrenic artist. This show aims to take a broader approach, investigating the myriad factors affecting Ramírez's life and art. It examines the artist as an individual engaged with the culture of a specific time and place, an artist who, though obviously under serious constraints, made choices of material, scale, and color in his work. The goal is to see beyond the label "outsider artist" and recognize Ramírez on his own terms, as the virtuoso artist he was.

This exhibition features didactic wall labels by five scholars, providing diverse perspectives and elucidating the multifaceted nature of Ramírez's artistic production. By examining the artist's work through various influences on his art, we hope to present a more nuanced, dimensional portrait of this important, underrecognized artist. This comprehensive approach underscores the richness of the drawings and illuminates the archetypal images—horseback riders, Madonnas, animals, trains, and tunnels—that inspired them. To present an interdisciplinary and holistic exploration of Ramírez's life and his complex, multilayered artwork, the American Folk Art Museum invited five scholars with different areas of expertise to write about a selection of the drawings on display. Their thoughts and ideas about Ramírez's life and art can be found in the wall texts of this exhibition, which are reproduced on the following pages.

Brooke Davis Anderson is the curator of the exhibition and a specialist in contemporary self-taught artists and their work. She writes about Martín Ramírez's materials, processes, and methods of artmaking. Daniel Baumann is a curator of contemporary art in Switzerland. His background in contemporary culture provides a perspective from the mainstream of art history as well as the history of art brut. Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa are sociologists who have been studying Ramírez's life and art since the 1980s. They have unearthed previously unknown facts about the artist's life, and for this show provide new ideas of how Ramírez's life story informs the drawings. Victor Zamudio-Taylor is an art historian based in Paris and Mexico City with expertise in contemporary Mexican and Mexican American art. He places Ramírez's drawings within Mexico's visual culture.

Of course, many mysteries about Ramírez's art remain to be uncovered by future scholars. The museum hopes that the range of viewpoints will help visitors experience multiple approaches to his drawings and collages and illustrate the point that there are many ways to understand a drawing, to appreciate a work of art.

CHRONOLOGY

This project unveils new research about Martín Ramírez's life and his 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 catatonic 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 Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa and reflects the years of research they conducted to provide an accurate record of the life of Martín Ramírez.

- | | | | |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|--|
| 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. | 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. |
| 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. | 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. |
| 1919 | On March 8, the Ramírezes' first daughter, Juana, is born in El Venado, Tototlán. | 1951 | Ramírez's first solo show is organized at the E.B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento. |
| 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. | 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. |
| 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 <i>ranchería</i> near San José de Gracia, Tepatitlán. | 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. |
| 1925 | On August 24, Ramírez leaves for the United States. | 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. |
| 1925-1930 | Ramírez works on the railroad and in the mines of northern California. | 1956 | Pasto goes to Helsinki on a Fulbright fellowship. His visits to Ramírez become less frequent. |
| 1926 | On February 2, the Ramírezes' only son, Candelario, is born in San José de Gracia. | c. 1959 | Pasto visits Ramírez for the last time. |
| Late 1920s | Ramírez makes his first drawings in the margins of letters to his family. | 1963 | On February 17, Ramírez dies at DeWitt of a pulmonary edema. |
| 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. | | |



UNTITLED (Horse and Rider)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1954
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
49 x 44 1/2"
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. 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 his 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



UNTITLED (Caballero with Women)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1953
Wax crayon, opaque watercolor, and collage on pieced
wove and printed papers
42 1/2 x 33 1/2"
Philadelphia Museum of Art, bequest of Derrel
DePasse, 2002-53-42
Photo by Graydon Wood, Philadelphia

According to Martín Ramírez's oldest daughter, Juana, her father used to say that having a good horse and a good pistol would make a man happy. Ramírez was a man of the horse who carried a pistol, two very important symbols of masculinity and social status among the rural poor of the *ranchero* society, where he lived until he was 30 years old. A neighbor in Jalisco also said that Ramírez was an excellent rider of his beautiful bright bay horse. The small drawings that Ramírez sent back to his family with his letters before he was interned in the first mental hospital were mainly of horses and riders.

Ramírez's biography suggests that his riders had an intimate connection to the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), a conflict between armed Catholic rebels and the secular government of Mexico. The revolt had devastating effects on Ramírez's family and on the lives of the rural poor from Los Altos de Jalisco, which was the central area of the conflict. Because of this civil war, the fields were abandoned and thousands of families, including Ramírez's own, were forced by the Federal Army to leave behind all their belongings and concentrate in the biggest towns. The Federal Army took possession of all remaining crops in the countryside, set pastures and fields on fire, and turned their machine guns on any cattle or other animals they could not take away by train. All religious acts and processions were suspended. The churches were closed and later plundered and used as stables by the government's troops.

This apocalyptic situation was described to Ramírez in a letter from his brother, who explained how he had been able to escape execution thanks to Ramírez's wife and a friend. His brother also wrote about the destruction of Ramírez's property and the loss of all his animals. After a long wait, Ramírez replied to his brother, telling him that he was not coming home to Jalisco. This letter made it clear to his family that Ramírez had completely misunderstood his brother's letter and mistakenly believed that his wife, in his absence, had abandoned her duties as mother and left their children to ride off on horseback to fight with the Federal Army against the Cristeros.

—Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa



UNTITLED (Horse and Rider with Trees)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
1954
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
48 x 36"
Collection of George and Sue Viener
Photo by Joseph Painter, courtesy Fleisher/Ollman
Gallery, Philadelphia

Belonging to a discourse on ethical and moral stances associated with peasant and premodern normative notions of masculinity or Mexican machismo, the *jinete*—or horseback rider—is a distant relative of the knight in the premodern Spanish tradition. Imported to the New World, he was linked to values of bloodline, honor, family, and defense of the Church. From the confines of the psychiatric hospital, such an evocation of a traditional figure belonging to a culture in the process of extinction may stand for Martín Ramírez's own persona.

The *jinete* is a character who holds life—or death—in his hands by means of the revolver and the power he exerts over the horse, an animal charged with metaphorical significance in Mexican art and history. From the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico to the Revolutionary period, he who controlled the horse exerted dominance over history and controlled passions run wild, including rape, pillage, and murder. The *jinete* may refer to a loyalist government soldier from the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), with the bandolier crisscrossing his chest and his striped tailored slacks. Then again, he may refer to a Cristero armed horseman fighting *against* the Federal Army, who sought to curb the economic and political power of the Church. But overall, the *jinete* may be considered a symbol for a conservative premodern culture steeped in tradition.

By the mid-1920s, premodern figures already proliferate in modern Mexican art and culture. *Jinetes* and the traditional systems they uphold flourish in genres of popular music, such as the *ranchera* and *corridos* (or ballads) of the Mexican Revolution and Cristero revolt, and in rural films of Mexican classical cinema. This use of visual rhetoric to the past tends to occur precisely when profound changes are taking place, generating identification with a past that seems to be vanishing quickly—within one's own lifetime.

—Victor Zamudio-Taylor



UNTITLED (Collage)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1952
Pencil, colored pencil, and collage on pieced paper
35 13/16 x 18 1/2"
Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern,
Switzerland, A1988.25
Photo courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland

Some great artists, such as Aloïse Corbaz, Adolf Wölfli, and Martín Ramírez, realized their work within the confines of a psychiatric institution. Before they were interned, however, they had, for many years, been exposed to contemporary life. Delivered at the gates of the psychiatric institution, they entered into a closed world. Surrounded by thick walls, many of these institutions were prisonlike. Exchanges with the outside were drastically reduced and made exclusively through third parties: ward attendants, psychiatrists, visitors, and, sometimes, books and magazines. Corbaz, Wölfli, as well as Ramírez—and many other artists—used periodicals and books the same way medieval architects used Roman buildings to construct their churches, the same way DJs today use other peoples’ records: as quarries to give form to new ideas. Whether called “collage,” “cut and paste,” or “sampling,” the practice of reusing, recovering, or repurposing remains a fascinating process, establishing a proper new language rooted in and supported by a broader historical context.

In this masterly collage, the female rider enthusiastically welcomes the virile engineer leaning out of the window of his powerful and impressive locomotive. It is a concentrated image of desire and a possible amorous encounter. At the same time we face a representation—via an erotic setting—of the mythologized clash of the wild and authentic West (represented here by the woman) with the strength of the modern machine age (represented here by the train). Ramírez picked up this cliché and, in transferring it into his collage, transformed its meaning into the opposite. There is an obvious contrast between the stylish illustration of the woman on one hand and Ramírez’s simple and delightful completing of the horse and the rough hatching on the borders. This contrast becomes even more acute when one recalls the conditions under which the collage was produced. Ramírez had cut off all contact with his family in Mexico and remained in California; he’d ended up confined to a mental asylum, knowing that never again would he be on a train back home. Thus, the cheerful image of the glamorous encounter turns into a metaphor for longing and loss.

—Daniel Baumann



UNTITLED (La Inmaculada)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
1950s
Crayon, pencil, watercolor, and collaged papers
92 x 45"
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase with T. Marshall Hahn
Folk Art Acquisition Fund for the T. Marshall Hahn Collection,
1999.9.3

This image of the Virgin Mary makes reference to the Immaculate Conception: The moon under her feet and the crown of twelve stars upon her head support the idea of Mary being conceived without original sin. The drawing also references the apocalyptic version of the Immaculate Conception, with the Virgin hovering above a demon in the form of a serpent—an image of the Madonna as protector of the conquest and evangelization of the people in the Spanish colonies of America and, later, in 1760, as the patron of the Spanish dominions.

Martín Ramírez's biography indicates that he had contact with several versions of the Immaculate Conception image—in the church in which he was married, in the church in which his three daughters were baptized, and in the church where he regularly attended Mass. The specific versions of the Virgin that inspired Ramírez are most likely a small statue and an oil painting in the little parish of Capilla de Milpillas, where he married his wife in 1918. The statue and the painting depict the Virgin with open arms, in contrast to the usual depiction, in which her hands are held closed in prayer. Ramírez's version recalls even more the influential paintings by the Spanish artist Francisco de Zubarán.

The large central figure resembles *La Purísima*, as the local people call the Immaculate Conception—the patron Virgin of Los Altos de Jalisco, where worship is centered in San Juan de Los Lagos. The inclusion of a crown, however, makes the image more complex and mysterious, because the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception in Capilla de Milpillas is not crowned. The crown suggests that Ramírez perhaps fused the image of the Immaculate Conception with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is always crowned. It is impossible to know whether this fusion of two Virgins was intentional or unconscious, but the synthesis seems plausible because Ramírez grew up close to the town of Capilla de Guadalupe, one of the most important centers of worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Los Altos de Jalisco.

—Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa



UNTITLED (Madonna)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1948-1963
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
79 x 41"
Collection of Ann and James Harithas
Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

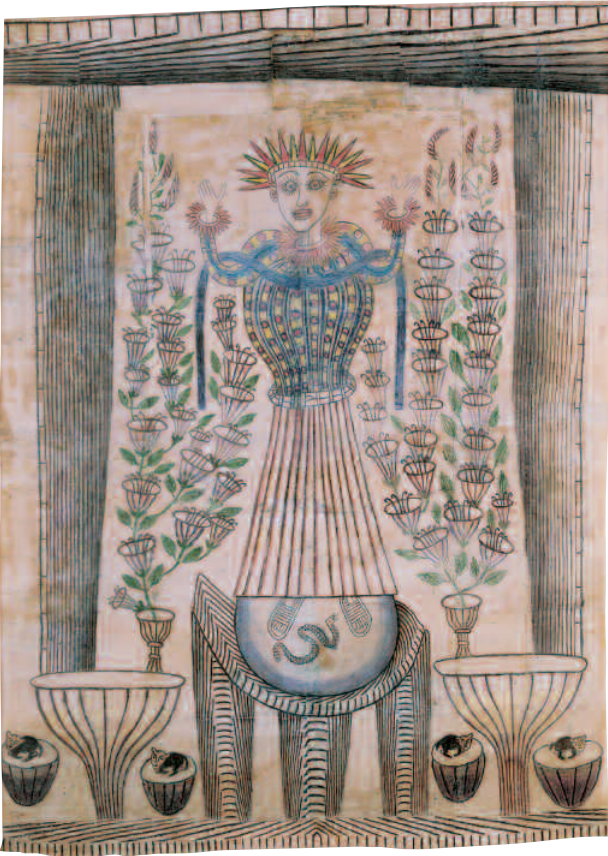
In this large-scale work, Ramírez takes an epic approach to his subject and achieves a kind of grandeur, especially when one considers the environment in which he created the drawing. Ramírez worked on the floor of his hospital ward, choosing a “studio space” bordered by two twin beds and a nightstand. 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 American James Castle and the Swiss Aloïse Corbaz, devised similar techniques.)

At the beginning of his confinement, Ramírez used just the materials readily available to him in the hospital; only later did he incorporate art supplies given to him by Dr. Pasto and hospital 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 Ramírez 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



UNTITLED (Madonna)
 Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
 Auburn, California
 1950-1953
 Wax crayon, graphite, and watercolor on pieced wove papers
 43 15/16 x 32 3/8"
 Philadelphia Museum of Art, partial and promised gift of Josephine Albarelli, 2002-228-1
 Photo by Joseph Painter, courtesy Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia

The cult and representation of the Madonna is a constant in Mexican religious art and popular expression. Whether for institutional, domestic, or personal use, Virgins depicted in many forms abound—in paintings, sculptures, ex-votos, prints, *tarjetas* (holy cards), medals, and even tattoos on the skin. Roman Catholicism in Mexico is a fusion of indigenous and European belief systems and traditions. Depending on ethnicity, cultural region, social class, and rural or urban context, Mexican culture articulates this fusion dynamically.

Here, Martín Ramírez depicts a Madonna within a rustic setting. Rendered flat and framed in a niche, the drawing may indicate a chapel within a church or a shrine in a workplace or home. This style may also be related to prints or *tarjetas*, common templates for artists with no formal training. Dressed in a robe with hues of celestial blue, the Virgin stands on a tripod that resembles a traditional *molcajete*, a round volcanic-rock artifact and common tool used since pre-Columbian times to grind chiles and spices for sauces. Its form asserts the shape of the moon. Rhythmically underlining the architectural setting are branches of lilies, the flower that always accompanies the Virgin, symbolizing purity and simplicity. The remaining two elements are linked to mestizo—or mixed—culture: the Virgin's Indian huaraches (sandals), and her crown and the fringe on her robe, both of which appear to feature feathers.

In pre-Columbian cultures, feathers were a sacred material used only by the highest nobility, by warriors, and in the ritual attire linked to deities. Feathers were so valuable they were also used as materials to pay tribute. In early colonial Mexican art, indigenous artists used feathers to make mosaic paintings as gifts for popes, emperors, and the like; in addition, feathers were used in the regalia of Church officials. While the clothing of figures in traditional Indian and peasant attire is indicative of cultural fusion, the use of feathers in lieu of jewels in a crown and as elements of attire is rare; the few surviving examples on record are saints depicted in retablos from the eighteenth-century Hispano tradition in New Mexico.

–Victor Zamudio-Taylor



UNTITLED (Madonna)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1950
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
37 1/4 x 23 7/8"
Roger Brown Study Collection of the School of the
Art Institute of Chicago
Photo by William H. Bengtson, Chicago

The oeuvre of Martín Ramírez can be described as a repertoire of different songs that the artist repeatedly took on to modify, to reinvent, or to combine in order to obtain large panoramas. This drawing is closely connected to an iconographic tradition while at the same time an alteration. Placed in an impressive niche, framed by a garland of stylized flowers, and surrounded by a finely built arch, a woman with blue eyes is looking at us. She has folded her hands as if to pray. At first glance, we presume we are standing in front of a Madonna. Looking closer, however, things become less obvious. Surprisingly, she has blond hair—rarely was a Madonna depicted this way. She wears a festive but slightly fancy shirt with red stripes, and her skirt is simple but elegant. Behind her, we see a blue sky dotted with flowerlike stars. Is she standing? Is she praying? Is she laid out as at a wake or, on the contrary, very much alive? Is she a majestic Madonna or a beautiful American woman decorated with stars and stripes? Actually, she may be Mexican: Los Altos de Jalisco is known for its light-haired natives. Could it be that Ramírez was paying homage to a loved one?

We may never find out. Yet, what this drawing clearly shows is how Ramírez proceeded in his artmaking. He based his work on an established and highly popular model but adapted it to fit his very personal purposes. In other words, when confronted with works as idiosyncratic as those of Martín Ramírez, we shouldn't lose ourselves in the idea of "untouched and authentic expression by an outsider." Rather the opposite, we should first look at the "common" to understand how ingeniously the artist transformed it. After all, this is the place where we find authenticity—and art.

—Daniel Baumann



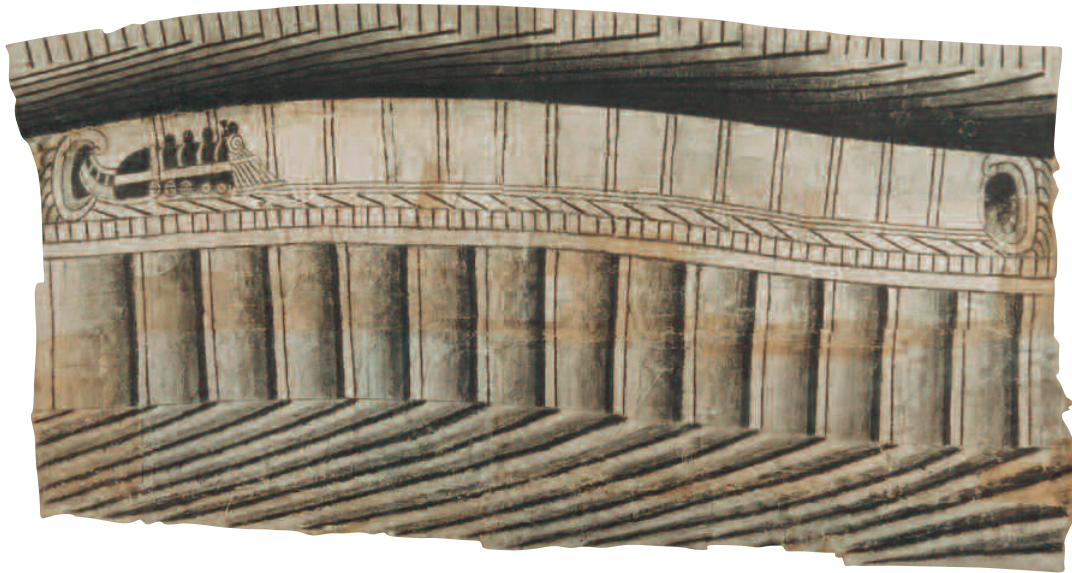
UNTITLED (Train)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1953
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
22 x 44 1/2"
Private collection
Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

Martín Ramírez had a deep, ongoing fascination with trains, which, after horseback riders, are the most frequently recurring subject in his art. His work is full of long trains emerging from mountains, slithering snakelike over long tracks, crossing a dark abyss over bridges, or running through tunnels that connect Jalisco and California—the two worlds in which he lived.

Trains, of course, had an important place in Ramírez's life as an immigrant. He was born in 1895, just eight years after Los Altos de Jalisco was connected to California by railway. As many Mexican immigrants did at that time, he traveled north to the border by train, crossed into the United States at El Paso, Texas, and then traveled to contracting centers in San Antonio. There, like thousands before and after him, he could board other trains headed for California, Kansas, and Illinois. In northern California, Ramírez worked at mines and in the railroad industry; the railroad tracks were never far away. And the train was not only the means of transport that had carried him away from his homeland to a strange world far from his family; it was a train that would most likely be his means of transport back to Mexico.

On January 6, 1952, more than twenty-six years after Ramírez had left his family in Mexico, he was visited at DeWitt State Hospital by one of his nephews, who at the time was a guest worker on a farm in southern California. The nephew later said that the conversation with Ramírez was long but not easy. Things were especially tense when he asked Ramírez if he would like to now return to Mexico and his family. Ramírez answered that he preferred to stay where he was. When the nephew asked if he wanted to send a message to his wife, Ramírez's reply was tragic and apocalyptic. "Just tell her that we will see each other in the Valley of Jehoshaphat," he said, referring to the site of God's final judgment. It is not too far-fetched to imagine, then, that his decision to abandon his wife and children had plagued Ramírez until his last days. Thus the recurring train motif invites us to imagine that Ramírez was able to travel back to his homeland many times, tirelessly and obsessively, but only in his dreams, his fantasies, and his drawings.

—Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa

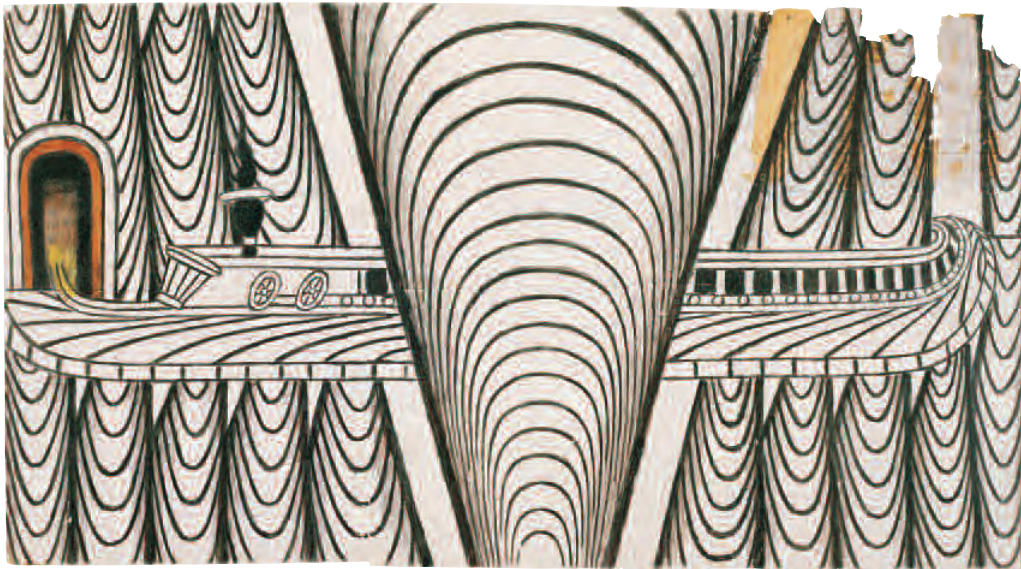


UNTITLED (Train)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1948-1963
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
27 x 50 1/4"
Collection of Pat Parsons
Photo by Dok Wright Photography, Burlington, Vermont

In Mexico, trains were a symbol of change and of the coming of modernity. Particularly during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), it was trains that brought Mexicans together as they rode them from battle to battle, or fled from battles. In the process, many Mexicans became acquainted with other Mexicans from different regions of the country and got to know their country as a budding modern nation. But change and movement—despite the positive effects we may associate with them, including development and progress—were certainly also traumatic. How people react to change depends on their personal as well as cultural experience. For a peasant from Los Altos de Jalisco whose culture was sedentary and grounded in past traditions and agriculture, having modernity and, in particular, migration thrust upon oneself was doubtlessly felt as a kind of personal and cultural uprooting. In a broader context, railroads generated unprecedented and unforeseen mobility as well as economic and social changes in both Mexico and the United States. In doing so, the “fire horse”—as trains were called by Native Americans and peasants in Mexico—broke down premodern economic, social, and cultural constructs, leaving people with premodern backgrounds and traditions at odds with a changing universe, if not in a cultural limbo or *Nepantla*—the cultural in-between state of a person trapped in a new world that is both incomprehensible and frightening but also at least partly desirable.

This may explain Martín Ramírez’s obsession with trains and tunnels, which he represents in closed, hermetic, dense, and engulfing settings. In particular, his depictions seem to revolve around a point of no return. They are often circular, with the train coming out of one tunnel only to follow the tracks into yet another. The contours and chiaroscuro with which Ramírez renders the imagery are charged psychologically. Train and tunnel appear as oppressive and nightmarish; the repeating lines seem paranoid, conveying a sense of fear and entrapment. Modernity as expressed in this drawing is not progress but incarceration, a point of no return to his native land and to a universe as he knew it, one that nurtured him. This is where the universal message of the drawing lies. By means of a most personal experience, Ramírez powerfully articulated a universal circumstance of pain and suffering we all can relate to.

—Victor Zamudio-Taylor



UNTITLED (Train and Tunnel)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1950
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
17 1/2 x 31 7/8"
Collection of Estelle E. Friedman
Photo by Edward Owen, Washington, D.C.

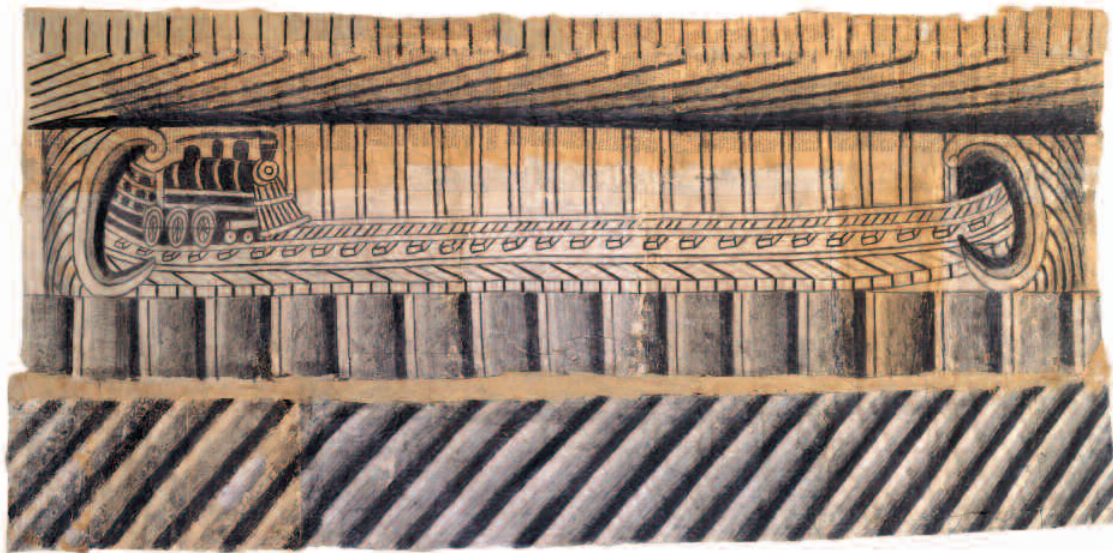
Where does this train go to? To Drawing City.

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



UNTITLED (Train)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1953
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
22 1/2 x 47"
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., 1990.1.2
Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

Martín Ramírez did not date the surviving drawings he created over approximately fifteen years (though Tarmo Pasto dated a few works he collected). The regularity of Ramírez's subject matter and the lack of dates coupled with the slim primary resources about the artist make it difficult to accurately trace his stylistic development. Even so, it is clear that Ramírez did develop a vocabulary of motifs and forms and shapes that he repeatedly explored, modified, and refined, creating an overall continuity to his work. The result is what artist Alison Weld calls a "chiseled vocabulary."

The concentric lines, tunnels, orifices, and voids in this portrait of a steam-engine train bring to mind the similarly mysterious work of Lee Bontecou. The drawing is part of a suite on the subject, and Ramírez might have used a maquette, such as artist Wayne Thiebaud had witnessed, and traced this train image in order to make this drawing and the others on display nearby. Strictly organized in four horizontal bands, the work is formally composed. The train, on the second-highest panel, enters the composition from a tunnel on the left, with another tunnel beckoning from the right. The other panels strikingly suggest train tracks as well as railroad ties and structural tunnel supports as seen from above, below, and the sides. The overall effect is of great movement, referencing Ramírez's long, personal journey from Mexico to the United States, and the great distance between where he had come from and where he found himself. The controlled line in the drawing is admirable, especially when one considers the rough, uneven surface pasted together from a variety of papers, including a greeting card, a candy-box wrapper, and pages of a book. These book pages, used in the top panel, were torn from a copy of *The Man Who Wouldn't Talk*, a title startlingly suggestive of the artist's biography.

Only the well-known photographer O. Winston Link obsessed as much as Ramírez over steam-engine trains; both artists seem to have been enthralled by the industrial genius and prowess trains embody. The visual power in this drawing reinforces this potent meaning for Ramírez as well as pointing to his sheer pleasure in making lines. As in most of his drawings, the repetitive line pulsates off the paper, and its precision is hypnotic.

—Brooke Davis Anderson



UNTITLED (Landscape)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1948-1963
Crayon, pencil, watercolor, and collage on pieced paper
40 x 105"
American Folk Art Museum, extended loan of Audrey B. Heckler
Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

This 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 architectural 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 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



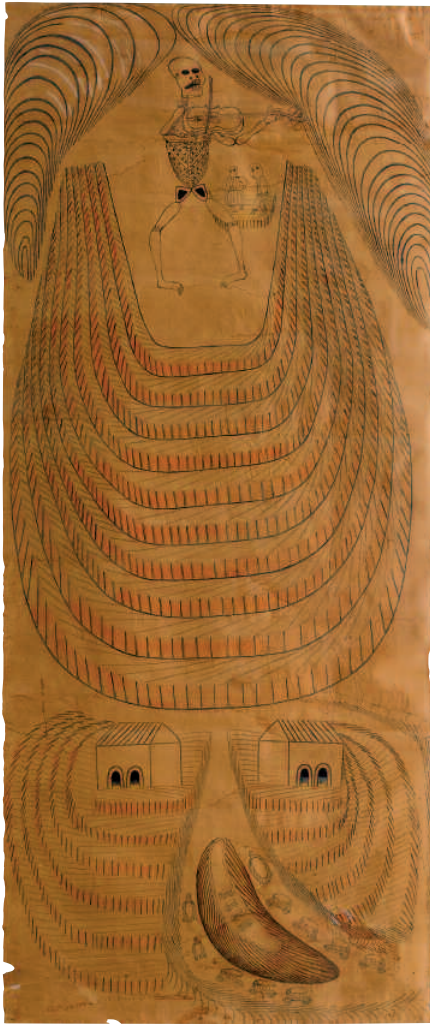
UNTITLED (Tracks with Woman)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1950
Crayon, pencil, and collage on pieced paper
82 3/4 x 38 1/4"
Collection of Helen and Jack Bershad
Photo courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

This work was assembled from several pages of recycled paper and collage, demonstrating that Martín Ramírez was a master bricoleur—someone who uses whatever materials are at hand. The artist incorporates crayon, pencil, collage, chine collé, and other materials and techniques that he also uses with great skill in other works.

Ramírez's styles—spanning representation and abstraction—are blended in a free-for-all that in the end becomes expressionistic. The range of styles and processes at his disposal allow him to investigate multiple forms and explore a wide variety of feelings inspired by nature, technology, and memory. Here, Ramírez demonstrates his sophistication as an artist. His representative inclination and his abstract stylization of landscape—along with his lust for the drawn line—merge in a distinct, singularly expressive drawing. And just as he unites different artistic styles, so, too, he marries creative techniques. For example, a line will begin in crayon, continue in pencil, and conclude with collage. The apparent freedom and assurance in artistic production is one of the many awesome aspects of Ramírez's artwork. Jerry Saltz, the art critic for the *Village Voice*, once cunningly observed, "Ramírez used parallel lines like Slinky toys."

One sees in this large landscape references to contemporary American culture as well as an autobiographical flavor in the Mexican architecture of his homeland, the trains of his occupation, and the objects of his imagination. But as to the exact meaning there will always be questions. Perhaps the main frustration upon confronting a drawing like this is that we have no true idea about what it signified to the artist. Ramírez was never interviewed about his artwork, and he did not leave any writings about his drawings, so his intentions and motivations will never be fully understood, although elements of his life experiences pepper each composition. Ramírez commemorates in his works the landscape of Mexico and northern California—he records the hardscrabble territory of immigration, of living between borders, countries, centuries, and cultures. Cultural memory, immigration, relocation, dislocation, alienation, and isolation exist between each drawn line in this rollicking landscape. As a border artist, Ramírez displays a kind of wanderlust for his meandering journey, and each drawing becomes a beguiling act of documentation, recording, and ultimately sharing a life lived.

—Brooke Davis Anderson



UNTITLED (Skeleton)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1948-1963
Crayon and pencil on pieced paper
81 1/2 x 34 1/2"
Collection of Selig and Angela Sacks
Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

Reduction and simplicity were among the core principles of modernism, and “less is more” became a key motto of the movement. Popularized by the great architect Mies van der Rohe, “less is more” is an apt way to describe the art of Martín Ramírez. Just like Mies, Ramírez was deeply marked by modernity—although not exactly the same way. Mies, a well-educated German architect, immigrated to the United States in 1937 and became one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century. Ramírez, a Mexican farmer with little formal education, left his family in 1925 in order to try his luck in the United States. In contrast to Mies, he ended up on the other side of modernity and entered into the dustbin of history. Yet both the architecture of Mies and the art of Ramírez are rooted in modernist principles of efficiency, reduction, and simplicity.

The image of a skeleton playing music belongs to the ancient iconographic tradition of *Danza de la Muerte*, or “Dance of Death.” Established in the fourteenth century, it was widely popular as a representation of the absolute power of death over human life. In contemporary United States and Europe, the Dance of Death was gradually replaced by the cult of eternal youth, and—paradoxically—found its new home in youth subculture. In Mexico, the *Danza de la Muerte*, as imported by the Spanish conquerors, met with the Aztec culture and its cults. This led to a new tradition that found its annual peak in the *Día de los Muertos*, where life and death meet in a festive gathering. In the lower part of this drawing, we see a condensed representation of everyday life: cars, houses, streets, and hills. Whatever happens, the road takes us upward, terrace after terrace, year after year, to meet with the last dance. Death waits at the summit, but it is always present playing its melodies, sometimes in the background, sometimes far away, but always, in the end, very close.

—Daniel Baumann

–image not available–

UNTITLED (Landscape)
Martín Ramírez (1895-1963)
Auburn, California
c. 1953
Crayon, pencil, and colored pencil on pieced paper
84 x 35"
Private collection

Martín Ramírez's entire body of work could be seen as a series of landscapes, or maps, or fragments of maps that narrate the drama of his life: his migratory and cultural odyssey between the traditional rural world of his homeland in Los Altos de Jalisco and the modernity of northern California in the first half of the twentieth century. In some of his maps Ramírez constructed an alternate world without borders, sometimes connected by trains running through tunnels, where his idealized rural world coexists without contradiction alongside modern buildings, highways, and automobiles. This drawing could be seen as an attempt to portray the most significant cultural contexts that marked his life: his hometown in Mexico and the psychiatric hospital in California, where he spent the second part of his life.

The church with two towers, Arabic touches, and the adjacent palm tree could represent the Santuario del Señor de la Misericordia, in Tepatitlán. This is where Ramírez attended Mass on special occasions; it is perhaps one of the most identifiable colonial buildings in his work. The structure at the bottom of the drawing is a common motif in Ramírez's art. Other versions of this structure, which also include a train crossing horizontally along the back of the building, suggest that this could be Ramírez's representation of Stockton State Hospital, the first psychiatric institution in which he was interned, in 1931. The hospital was located very close to a railroad track, and from its windows Ramírez might have been able to see flora and fauna typical of California, as depicted in this and other drawings on exhibit here.

While Ramírez has the ability to graphically communicate, in a very complex manner, the transcultural experience of a displaced migrant and mental patient, he is also capable of representing a profound sense of distance that turns away from the conventions of traditional perspective in favor of more jarring, less managed breaks and disjunctions. The power of this spectacular transnational landscape lies in Ramírez's ability to connect the two distant worlds he simultaneously inhabited in his life, visions, and conflicted memories.

–Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa