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CLOSE READING

From a Mental Hospital, a Cinematic Mexico

By [KATHRYN SHATTUCK](#)

IN 1925 Martín Ramírez (1895-1963), the great self-taught draftsman, left his small ranch in the Jalisco region of Mexico for work in the promised land of the United States. He never returned to his wife and four children back home, spending more than three decades confined to psychiatric hospitals after being picked up off the streets of California in 1931: jobless, homeless, confused and unable to communicate in English.

But in the 300 drawings Mr. Ramírez created over the last 15 years of his life — after being sent to DeWitt State Hospital near Sacramento with a diagnosis of catatonic schizophrenia — he revisits the scenes of his young adulthood: the horse and rider, trains and tunnels, Madonnas, animals and landscape of his native Mexico.

“He was a landscape artist obsessed with memory,” said Brooke Davis Anderson, director and curator of the American Folk Art Museum’s Contemporary Center. “Mexico breathes in his work.”

“Martín Ramírez,” opening Tuesday at the museum with 97 of these works (including the untitled one below), moves beyond the traditional view of Mr. Ramírez as a deaf and mute schizophrenic artist. It interprets his artistic merits by looking at the work as art shaped by poverty, immigration and institutionalization.

He was making art before his time at DeWitt; he decorated his letters home and made drawings at Stockton State Hospital, where he was first institutionalized. But there is no record that any of that work survived. He was never interviewed.

After his transfer to DeWitt in 1948, he met Tarmo Pasto, an artist and psychology professor at Sacramento State College, who began to collect Mr. Ramírez’s drawings. Mr. Pasto introduced him to local artists and to some of his students, including the painter Wayne Thiebaud, who recalls having brief conversations in Spanish with Mr. Ramírez.

Mr. Pasto also arranged for Mr. Ramírez’s work to be exhibited, which he was aware of from newspaper articles the hospital saved. Reviewing a group show at the de Young Museum, Alfred Frankenstein of The San Francisco Chronicle called Mr. Ramírez the “most striking artist” in the exhibition, one with “an innate gift for form, color and pictorial organization” whose art “went deep into recollections of his country’s folk art.”

But the glory that Mr. Ramírez may have longed for never arrived. In accordance with California laws protecting the privacy of mental patients, he could not be mentioned by name. Instead he was called simply, “an aged Mexican.”

He fared no better in New York. In the 1950s, Mr. Pasto sent a tube holding 10 of Mr. Ramírez’s drawings to the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#) for a show that never happened. They were put into storage. The museum now has the largest public cache of Mr. Ramírez’s work — though the drawings came to light only 40 years later when an intern stumbled upon them.

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MARTÍN RAMÍREZ

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 West 53rd Street,
Manhattan
Tuesday through
April 29

TECHNIQUE "What turns on so many people to Martín Ramírez's artwork is this extensive patterning and this hypnotic use of line and rhythm," said Brooke Davis Anderson, director and curator of the Contemporary Center at the American Folk Art Museum. Shading, she added, "helps give some dimension to flat surfaces." He created his uncannily spaced lines by using tongue depressors provided by the hospital's staff. The fingerprint patterns "feel like radio-wave signals for me," Ms. Anderson said. "Here's this man who we've long thought was deaf and mute, and we now know that's not true. The radio waves seem to me like a very compelling image of communication between the artist and the viewer." The painter Wayne Thiebaud saw Mr. Ramírez take images of his recurring figures and trace over them. But no one ever saw him erase.



American Folk Art Museum

MATERIALS Mr. Ramírez shaved or melted down crayons and pencils to create a medium that he applied with a stylus shaped from a matchstick. "No one would have taught him to do it," Ms. Anderson said. "It almost feels as if he's renegotiating material and making it his

own." He made paper from scraps he found, gluing them together with a paste of bread or oatmeal and saliva. "Even when he was given paper, he built up the support with the back of greeting cards, candy-box wrappers and pages from a book," she said.

SETTING "The stagelike setting is really fun," Ms. Anderson said. "It's both the cinema and the theater as much as it is the 19th-century Mexican altar. Ramírez was a devout Catholic who experienced intimately three churches." The setting isolates the figure by placing it in a sort of box while also exalting it. "Ramírez places his horse and rider on a pedestal, quite literally in a lot of drawings," she said. There are curtain swags, seven footlights and a chorus line of men in sombreros who act as an audience. At the top, 10 windows lead viewers beyond the stage or altar into a landscape similar to Mr. Ramírez's home.

HORSE AND RIDER Mr. Ramírez drew more than 80 horse-and-rider images. Why was that subject so compelling? "New research tells us that Ramírez was actually a very respected and known horse rider in his part of Mexico," Ms. Anderson said. The Pancho Villa-like images might refer to the Mexican Revolution or to the Cristero Rebellion, led by Catholic rebels against Mexico's secular government, during which Mr. Ramírez lost his land. "The war impacted his family," Ms. Anderson said. "His brother was almost captured, and the wife of Martín Ramírez pretended to be the wife of his brother in order to save him." Then there were the westerns: "We now know there was a cinema at DeWitt," she said.