



# New Visions

A rediscovered Martín Ramírez cache prompts a reconsideration of a self-taught master's enigmatic drawings.

By Edward M. Gomez

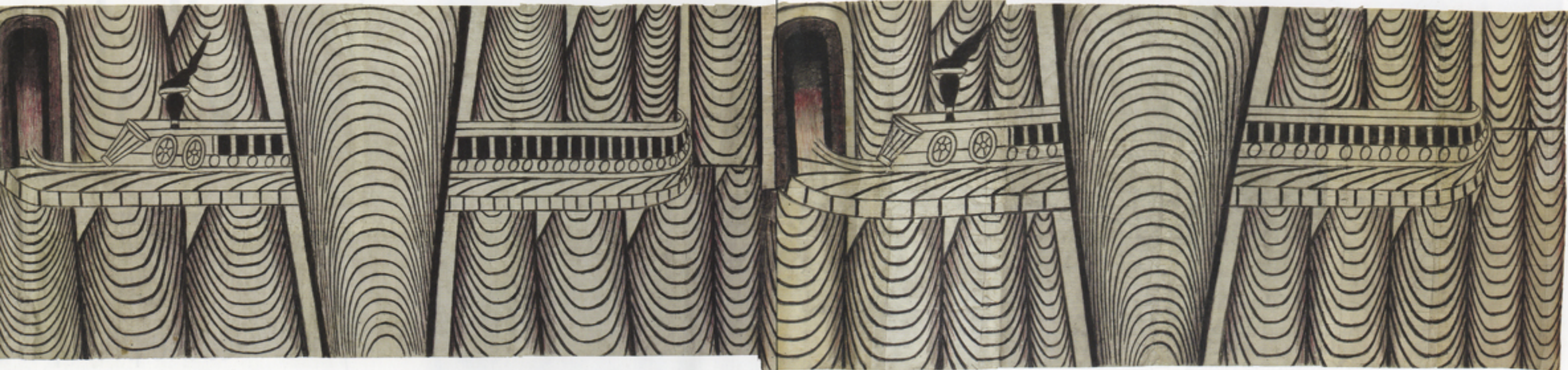
*Untitled (Horizontal Collage of White Church With Abstract Sides), circa 1960–63, paint, crayon, pencil and collage on found paper.*



Like archaeologists, art historians are treasure hunters. Sometimes what they turn up completely changes how we think about a specific work or body of work. That happened in late October 2007, when news broke in the U.S. media that, several months earlier, a cache of 144 hitherto unknown drawings by the Mexican-born outsider-artist Martín Ramírez (1895–1963) had been found in the garage of a Northern California home.

four decades ago. A poor farmer who left the state of Jalisco, in west-central Mexico, in 1925, Ramírez headed by train for the United States to seek employment that would allow him to support his family from afar. In “El Norte” he labored on railways and in mines. However, in 1931, the police apprehended Ramírez, who was homeless and unable to speak English. He was eventually diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic and committed to a psychi-

In the early 1950s Pasto wrote about his subject: “He is slight of build, greatly underweight, a former tuberculosis patient who spends his time on his art. He does not speak to anyone but hums in a sing-song way when pleased with his visitors. When good paper is not available, he glues together scraps of old envelopes, paper bags, paper cups, wrappers. He fashions his own glue out of mashed potatoes and water, sometimes (from) bread and saliva.



That news shook up the small but well-developed sector of the international art market that focuses on the work of so-called outsider and self-taught artists and their often-idiosyncratic creations. (Outsiders are artists who never went to art school and who tend to create their work primarily for themselves, with few or no references to established art history and little concern for the art market.) The California discovery sent a wave of excitement through this specialized field and instantly signaled that the scholarship and critical analysis of which Ramírez's art had been the subject for many years would have to be thoroughly reconsidered.

Ramírez's oeuvre is widely regarded as

an emblematic example of the very best of the outsider-art genre. Because of his sophisticated draftsmanship, his inventive use of a limited range of materials and his work's intriguing affinities to modernist art, his mixed-media drawings on paper have won praise from critics and curators. They are also prized by collectors, who have been known to pay \$100,000 or more for a single piece. Even fragments of Ramírez drawings or studies of single motifs that reappear in larger, finished works have become coveted objects of desire for diehard collectors in the field.

Had he lived to see it, Ramírez might have been surprised by the attention his work has won since his death more than

atric hospital, the first of several in which he would spend the rest of his life.

Although he rarely spoke to anyone during the 32 years of his confinement, Ramírez began making drawings in the mid-1930s. A decade later, while in residence at DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, Calif., the self-taught art maker encountered Tarmo Pasto, a visiting professor of psychology and art at nearby Sacramento State College. Fascinated by the highly original drawings Ramírez was producing, Pasto made the autodidact a subject of his investigation of mental illness and creativity. The researcher supplied Ramírez with art-making materials and, recognizing the aesthetic value of his creations, preserved them and showed some publicly.

He squats on his haunches, moving about the floor between two cots, using stubs of colored pencils and Crayolas. His drawing is kept rolled-up, and usually only a portion of it is exposed at any one time." To student visitors, Pasto noted, the artist displayed his work "with obvious pride."

Over time Ramírez gave Pasto—who died in 1986—nearly 300 of his drawings. It was those works that the American painter Jim Nutt purchased from the doctor in the early 1970s along with his wife, artist Gladys Nilsson, and art dealer Phyllis Kind. In 1973 in Chicago, Kind presented the first exhibition of Ramírez's rediscovered art. (Today, her gallery is in New York.) Since then

Untitled (Trains and Tunnels), circa 1960–63, gouache, crayon, colored pencil and graphite on lined and pieced paper.





From left: *Untitled (Galleon on Water)*, circa 1960–63, gouache, colored pencil and pencil on pieced paper; *Untitled (Reina/Madonna)*, circa 1960–63, paint, crayon, pencil and collage on lined paper.

appreciation of the artist's unique drawing style and signature images—Mexican horsemen, Madonnas, trains barreling down railway tracks and futuristic tunnels—has increased; it culminated in the historic Ramírez exhibition that opened at the American Folk Art Museum in New York at the beginning of 2007.

During the run of AFAM's survey, after reading about it in a local newspaper, former art teacher Peggy Dunievitz contacted the museum to tell its curator, Brooke Davis Anderson, that she believed she had some original Ramírez works to show her. Dunievitz's husband William, who died in 1992, was the son of Dr. Max Dunievitz, the physician who had served as the medical director of DeWitt State Hospital during the last three years of Ramírez's life. It was there that the artist died. Like Pasto before him, Dunievitz

had provided the artist with art supplies, and Ramírez had given him dozens of his distinctive drawings. In 1963, at DeWitt, Dunievitz organized the first posthumous exhibition of Ramírez's art.

Peggy and William's son Phil had rescued the artworks from the trash after his grandfather, the doctor, died in 1988, and his children divided up his possessions. Phil rolled them up, placed them in florist-shop boxes and stored them in his mother's garage. Years later he transferred the drawings to a cardboard box that lay on top of a refrigerator in the same garage. "Max had collected pottery, Japanese silks, kilim rugs and more; for years he had held onto the Ramírez drawings," Phil recalls. A self-described packrat, the younger Dunievitz says he thought the drawings "might have looked cool as wallpaper in a restaurant." One time he wrapped a gift in one of them.

Anderson recalls, "I had assumed that, in addition to the well-known big batch of works Ramírez had given Pasto, maybe he had given some pieces to other employees of DeWitt; maybe others were out there, too." In fact, she notes, at least two other would-be Ramírez discoveries did come to her attention in recent years, but they turned out to be false finds. By contrast, she says, "When I saw the photos Peggy Dunievitz sent me, I sensed she had the real thing, so I flew right out to California to meet her and examine those works in person. As soon as I saw them, I knew they were authentic." It helped that, unlike Pasto in the late 1940s and '50s, Dunievitz (or other hospital staffers) had signed and dated most of Ramírez's pieces on behalf of the illiterate artist, on the back of each drawing. "For the first time ever, we have dated material that gives us a sense of Ramírez's artistic development," Anderson says. The artist's previously known works had not been dated.

The rediscovery and authentication of the Dunievitz Ramírezes tripled the total quantity of known works by the enigmatic outsider artist. With a lawyer's assistance, Peggy Dunievitz contacted several dealers who specialized in work by self-taught artists and chose Ricco/Maresca, a gallery in New York, to bring to market the Ramírez works that she wanted to sell. Codirec-

tor Frank Maresca, who took charge of the project, promptly arranged for the Dunievitz holdings to be photographed for posterity with state-of-the-art digital equipment and to be conserved. "There were remnants of tape adhesive or rubber cement on some of these later drawings that had to be removed," he explains.

Now, in another milestone exhibition that reaffirms its commitment to research and programming in the outsider-art field, AFAM is presenting *Martin Ramírez: The Last Works*, a selection of 25 of the rediscovered Ramírezes, including three pieces the Dunievitz family has donated to the museum. The exhibition will remain on view through April 12. In New York this past fall, Ricco/Maresca also presented a hot-selling show of some 20 additional

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pieces from the Dunievitz holdings. (The emergence of the newly rediscovered Ramírez works in California reportedly prompted some of the artist's U.S.-based descendants to lay claim to them as heirs. In regard to these works, a spokesperson for the law firm in New York that represents the estate of Ramírez says the disputes between the estate and the Dunievitz family have been satisfactorily resolved, and both entities have worked together to support the AFAM exhibition and the efforts of Ricco/Maresca to bring the works to market.)

Viewers of the current AFAM show who are familiar with the overall darker tones and more weathered looks of the artist's already-known works may be surprised at just how vivid and bright the Dunievitz Ramírezes appear. Their physical condition is due to the quality of paper with which they were made and to the fact that they had not been excessively exposed or handled for many years. One drawing from 1960–63, *Untitled (Arches)*—which is almost 20 feet



ELLEN MCDEHNOTT/THE ESTATE OF MARTIN RAMIREZ



long—is as bold, dynamic and formally inventive as any emblematic work of the Pop or Minimalist art movements of the 1960s and '70s. It shows stacked rows of rectangular arches marching, with a jaunty rhythm, horizontally across a vast pictorial space. In this grand image, evidence of Ramírez's artistry and keen compositional and design decisions can be seen in his emphatic use of repetition (a Pop art hallmark) and in the simplicity of his forms (a mainstay of Minimalist aesthetics). "There's nothing random in Ramírez's work, ever," says Maresca. "These new pieces prove that Ramírez was an artist whose work dramatically changed and evolved."

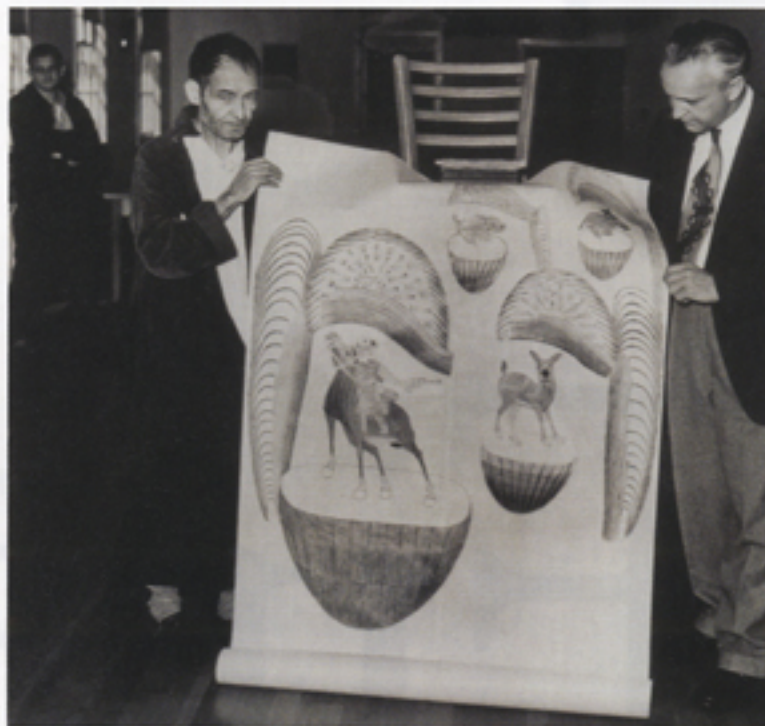
Because they had been well preserved, the rediscovered works, which were made with regular pencil, colored pencils and gouache, appear more vibrant than the more faded, familiar works by Ramírez that have been shown publicly and widely reproduced during the past several decades.

The colors in the new works are fresh and rich, and in these images, Ramírez's line feels more confident than ever as he offers unexpected variations of familiar motifs, including horsemen blowing giant trumpets and Spanish galleons in full sail set against turquoise skies. In the rediscovered works, Ramírez's patternmaking in his train-tunnel mounds and abstract, tubular forms, the ripples of waves and all those majestic arches are as inventive as anything in hand-drawn or contemporary, computer-generated art. His arches recall Paul Klee's frequent playful treatment of this same architectural motif.

"The emergence of the Dunievitz Ramirezes is a revelation," says Anderson. "There is so much to discover and explore in these works that we'll be studying them for many years to come, looking for clues to understanding the motivations, subject matter and vision of one of the most original artists of the 20th century." ■

ELLEN McDERMOTT/THE ESTATE OF MARTÍN RAMÍREZ;  
PHYLLIS KIND GALLERY, NEW YORK

From left: *Untitled (Riding Forward and Back)*, circa 1960-63, gouache, colored pencil and granite on lined and pieced paper; Tarmo Pasto and Martín Ramírez present one of the outsider artist's artworks at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, Calif., circa 1950.



**Martín Ramírez:**  
*The Last Works*  
American Folk Art Museum, New York  
Through April 12.

**Outsider Art Fair**  
7 W. 34th St., New York  
Jan. 9-11.

**American Folk Art Museum,**  
New York  
212.265.1040 folkartmuseum.org

**Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York**  
212.925.1200 phylliskindgallery.com

**Ricco/Maresca, New York**  
212.627.4819 riccomaresca.com

