New Visions

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

By Edward M. Gomez
like archaeologists, art historians are treasure hunters. Sometimes it's 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 feathered unknown drawings by the Mexican-born outsider artist Martin Ramirez (1881–1963) had been found in the garage of a Northern California home.

"I was shocked. I've been on the internet and in art magazines and been hearing about Martin Ramirez's work for years," says the artist, who discovered the cache during a home inspection. "But I never thought I would find his work in my own home!"
had provided the artist with art supplies, and Ramírez had given him dozens of his distinctive drawings. In 1983, at DeWitt, Danisevitz 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 1983, and his children divided up his possessions. Phil rolled them up, placed them in three shopping 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 silk kimono and more; for years he had held onto the Ramírez drawings,” Phil recalls. A self-described pedant, the younger Danisevitz 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 batch of works Ramírez had given Peto, maybe he had given some pieces to other employees of DeWitt; maybe others were out there, too.” In fact, she now estimates two other works could have been discovered had they been noticed in 1983, then turned out to be false finds. In contrast, she says, “When I saw the photos Peggy Danisevitz 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 Peto in the 1940s and 50s, Danisevitz and other hospital authorities had signed and dated most of Ramírez’s works on pieces 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 Danisevitz Ramírezes tripled the total quantity of known works by the enigmatic outsider artist. With a lawyer’s assistance, Peggy Danisevitz 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. Collectors were eventually diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic and committed to a psychiatric hospital, the first of several in which he would spend the rest of his life.

pieces from the Danisevitz 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 surprisingly large number of the estate’s holding has been satisfactorily resolved, and both parties have worked together to support the AFAM exhibition and the efforts of Ricco/Maresca to bring the works to market.)

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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 Ramirez’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 hallmark of Minimalist aesthetics). “There’s nothing random in Ramirez’s work, ever,” says Maresca. “Those new pieces prove that Ramirez 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 Ramirez 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, Ramirez’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 turgid skies. In the rediscovered works, Ramirez’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 play with treatment of this sort architectural motif.

“Humanity is a revolution,” 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.”

Martin Ramirez: The Last Works
American Folk Art Museum, New York
Through April 12.

Exhibit Notice
J.W. 14th St., New York
Jan. 8–11.

From left: Unitled (Birds Standing Forward and Back), circa 1940–43, gouache, colored pencil on board and paper; Turrell Burtis and Martin Ramírez present one of the outsider artist’s artworks at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum in Auburn, Calif., circa 1950.

American Folk Art Museum, New York
212-255-1042 folkartmuseum.org

Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
212-925-5200 phylliskindgallery.com

Riccio/Maresca, New York
212-837-1893 ricciomaresca.com