

## Martín Ramírez's Creative Compulsions: The Composition, Construction and Conservation of His Monumental Collaged Drawings

Like many “outsider” artists who were not championed by the art establishment until late in their careers or well after their deaths, Martín Ramírez was, until recently, somewhat of a mysterious figure. The details of his biography were scant, and the 42 years that passed between his death and their coalescence in a 2015 biography by Victor Espinoza bred apocryphal tales of his artistic process (Espinoza 2015). Ramírez came to the United States from Mexico and became a migrant worker who found himself homeless on the streets of Los Angeles, only to be incarcerated in the state’s mental hospitals for the last decades of his life. His isolation and misdiagnosis as a mute, catatonic schizophrenic fueled rumors that without access to art supplies, he was compelled to squeeze grapefruits to make ink from their juice; to macerate bread, mashed potatoes, and cereal to make adhesives; and to use small amounts of charcoal derived from matchsticks removed from garbage cans.

While it is true that Ramírez’s circumstances necessitated ingenuity, such descriptions of his desperation detract from the technical skill, sophisticated visual lexicon, and thoughtful revisions that he employed in the production of some 400 extant drawings (as well as many more that were destroyed by hospital staff) over a period of three decades. Fashioned from papers that Ramírez removed from wastepaper baskets and magazines, from the cafeteria’s paper placemats and napkins, and from paper bags of all sorts, the artist’s collaged supports are works of art in their own right that possess a tactile three-dimensional quality. His imagery includes trains that pass through tunnels, men on horseback, Spanish colonial-style architecture, and towering Madonnas to name only a few.

In anticipation of the inaugural exhibition for the new Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (ICA LA) in September 2017, a large number of Ramírez’s drawings housed in Chicago collections were examined, and those from the collection of Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, who are noted artists in their own right, underwent more in-depth study and conservation treatment. Among them, a monumental 17.5-ft.-long drawing would become central to the exhibition after a

major conservation intervention. The project began by learning as much as possible about the various materials Ramírez used to make this monumental drawing and others. The approach was to examine and treat, as necessary, as many drawings as possible before turning to the task of conserving the monumental drawing, referred to here as “the scroll” (fig. 1).

The artist’s biography provides critical insight into the circumstances under which Ramírez made his art. During his incarceration at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California, Dr. Tarmo Pasto, an art professor who taught painting at nearby Sacramento State College, took an interest in Ramírez’s work. Pasto, also a nonpracticing psychologist, sketched the layout of Ramírez’s ward, the cramped confines that seemingly did not deter the artist from working so prolifically and often on a large scale (fig. 2). Ramírez would store countless rolled drawings under his bed and on top of the radiator until there were so many that they were removed and presumably discarded by hospital staff. Dr. Pasto gathered hundreds of the artist’s drawings from 1948, the year Ramírez entered DeWitt, until 1960 (when Pasto retired from the college), and he sometimes supplied Ramírez with better quality papers and a few art supplies. “Better quality” included a sturdy butcher paper, which to Pasto “...would not tear easily,” a pad of typing paper and some stationery, including one brand watermarked Hammermill Paper (fig. 3).

By 1968, when Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson first saw the collection amassed by Dr. Pasto, unrolling drawings on his driveway, and later after they were acquired by the couple, in their own home, they immediately realized that the rolls of drawings had deteriorated. For years, they had been stored in the physician’s garage, some in a wooden crate, and others simply stacked in the rafters. Nutt vividly remembers that, in 1971:

“All the work came to our house – these rolls with multiple drawings, like ten or twenty drawings in a roll, an assortment of big and small drawings. ...we started unrolling them, and we realized that there were bugs inside [all of] the rolls.”<sup>1</sup>

Clearly insects had taken their toll. The appearance of gnawed losses indicated that mice had also inflicted their damage (fig. 4).

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Fig. 1. Martín Ramírez, *Untitled (Scroll)*, ca. 1950. Crayon, graphite, colored pencil, ink and charcoal on pieced paper (recto); various pieced papers (verso). 45 × 211 in. (114.3 × 535.9 cm). Collection of Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson. Credit: Tom Van Eynde.

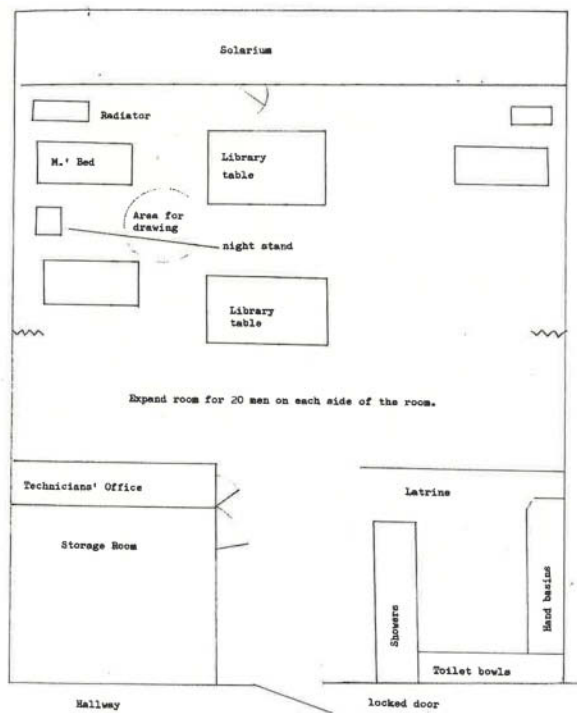


Fig. 2. Tarmo Pasto, sketch of Martín Ramírez's ward at DeWitt State Hospital. Collection of Matthew Pasto. Reproduced in Espinosa 2015, 117.

In order to establish a treatment protocol, as many drawings as possible were examined so that anomalies inherent or intentional to the drawings' aesthetic could be differentiated from damage that occurred after the drawings were removed from



Fig. 3. Martín Ramírez, detail of watermark in *Untitled*, ca. 1950. Crayon, colored pencil, graphite, and tempera on pieced paper. 142 × 39 in. (360.7 × 99 cm). Private collection. Reproduced in Longhauser 2017, 72.

Ramírez's hospital ward. This was done in constant dialogue with Nutt, which was possible because conservation treatment was carried out in the Nutt/Nilsson studio. The hospitality of these custodians of many of Ramírez's drawings was matched by their great sense of responsibility toward their collection.

Nutt looked very closely at each drawing, focusing on every detail and nuance of line, and was ethically invested in conserving these drawings to accurately reflect the artist's intentions. Perhaps because Nutt is an artist with a profound interest in materials and process, he was able to zero in on specific passages in the drawings that he felt had been so visually undermined by their damage that stain reduction,

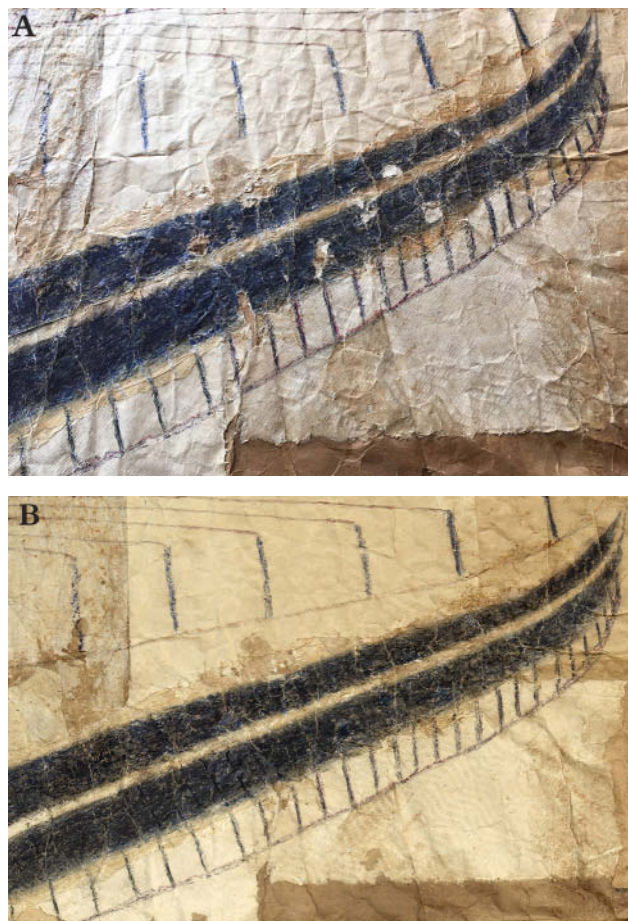


Fig. 4. Detail of *Untitled (Scroll)*, showing insect and rodent damage (a) before treatment and (b) after treatment.

consolidation, infilling and toning of losses and inpainting were warranted. In conversation, Nutt would suggest the trajectory of an inpainted line, or the tone and surface texture of a fill. He had no problem telling the authors to try again if he felt that the tone of a particular fill was not just right or if the authors had neglected to inpaint a small loss that he found visually distracting. Nutt was very concerned with image compensation and encouraged reestablishment of the solidity of the repeated linear forms that Ramírez rendered so emphatically in his drawings—forms that had been undermined by flaking media and grazing pests.

As for the scroll itself, few people had seen it over the years—Nilsson estimates that she and Nutt had unrolled it perhaps three or four times at most—it was just too impractical. The scroll was too big, it was damaged, vulnerable, and there was loose, flaking media on the surface. And to their credit, they did not want to inadvertently cause more damage in the process. As the drawing was unrolled for this project, it could be ascertained that Ramírez worked a bit at a time, unrolling the drawing in his confined space, extending his narrative using a cache of his stock motifs from left to right. When Ramírez

constructed the scroll, he used hundreds of pieces of paper in a vast array of sizes and shapes, some minute and others quite large, and in a multitude of colors and textures that he adhered in layers. A pasted element could be as small as the size of a pea. In a number of areas, collage elements had partially released from the desiccated, brittle adhesive holding them in place. Dates present on some of the papers on the verso indicate that the artist completed the scroll over the course of several months (Stratis 2017, 106). The far right section of the drawing was the most damaged, as one would expect since it was the most exposed and vulnerable to mishandling. The drawing remained unfinished as evidenced by a large swath of blank paper in the lower right, as if the artist would have continued endlessly had the drawing not been removed from the ward.

With little in the way of art-making materials at hand, Ramírez drew as his sole form of artistic expression. He did not paint in oils or make sculpture, although arguably his wrinkled, undulated, pieced-together supports attain a tangible dimensionality. Instead, he used wax crayons, colored pencils, graphite, charcoal, red and black writing inks, and simple watercolor sets. These inexpensive sets were often marketed as tempera paint, poster paint, school paint or watercolor—more accurately, they are opaque watercolors that appear matte when dry.

To better understand these materials, and with the hope of discrediting the fruit juice ink and oatmeal/mashed potato adhesive stories, research to learn more about the low-cost art supplies that were finding their way into primary school classrooms was carried out. This was happening in the 1940s and 1950s at the same time that arts education curricula were emerging and being taught systematically for the first time to elementary school students. Anyone who attended public school during this time may remember the paper, pencils, new box of crayons, little jar of paste, and scissors that appeared on each desk the first day of school every year (fig. 5). The paste had a very distinctive cloying aroma. Such adhesives were marketed as library paste, liquid paste, school paste, or mucilage—and were often supplied with small plastic brush applicators (fig. 6). It was these very same inexpensive materials that were being made available to encourage the making of arts and crafts within the wards of psychiatric hospitals. Espinoza documents that, at De Witt, Ramírez attended arts and crafts workshops. He may have attended sing-alongs too as evidenced by the song lyrics that he pasted onto the scroll (fig. 7).

To better understand some of the more visually puzzling materials in the scroll, analysis was undertaken to characterize several ink and adhesive samples from the Art Institute's 1950 drawing, *Cowboy* (fig. 8), as well as from the scroll. The investigation was inspired in part by an earlier study of the materials of another artist labeled an outsider, James Castle, which provided an unprecedented understanding of Castle's unconventional materials. It was hoped that, with a small and limited sample set, insight could be provided into a few of Ramírez's materials as well.





Fig. 5. Selection of crayons that would have been available to Ramírez.



Fig. 6. Selection of adhesives that would have been available to Ramírez.

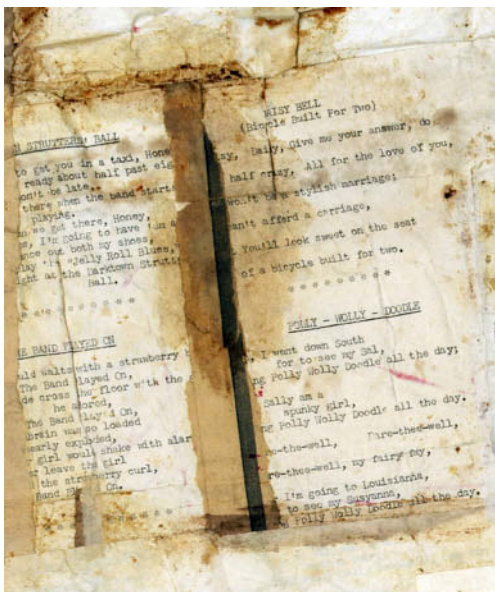


Fig. 7. Detail of *Untitled (Scroll)*, verso, showing song lyrics that Ramírez incorporated into the support.

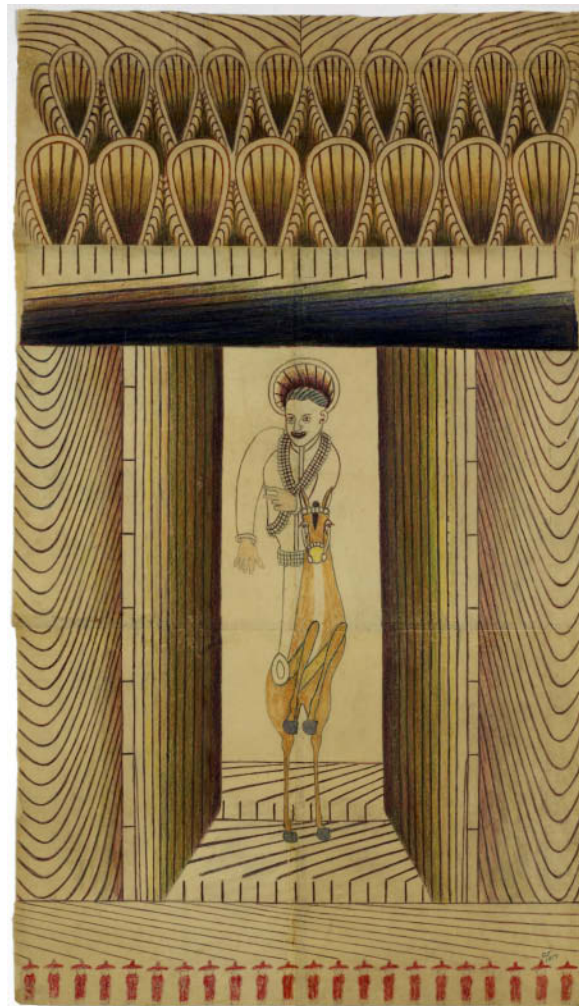


Fig. 8. Martín Ramírez, *Cowboy*, 1950. Wax crayons, colored pencils, and watercolor over graphite on beige wove paper, 156.0 × 86.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Hartman.

In drawings made over a number of years, two similar adhesives could be differentiated visually and under magnification time and time again. Minute samples were taken from the scroll and from the Art Institute's *Cowboy*. Although each sample looked slightly different, FTIR analysis indicates that both are starch-based. For comparative purposes, several historic reference samples of mucilage and library paste were also analyzed, and they proved to be starch-based as well. If, as suggested in the literature, the artist had masticated and mixed all manner of starch-based food with his saliva to form an adhesive, its appearance and consistency would vary greatly from artwork to artwork. However, this was not the case. The visual properties that were uniformly observed were more consistent with the use of commercial adhesives, products that were processed and refined in their manufacture to a degree that is simply not attainable by mastication or mixing by hand. Further evidence of this was found in *Cowboy*, in which the detection of chorine



in the sample, along with its unusual translucency and the lack of grain structure under magnification, suggests the use of a bleached product known as “oxidized starch.”<sup>22</sup> In another sample from *Cowboy*, a modified cellulose such as methyl cellulose was also identified. With that information in hand it was possible to rule out the use of oatmeal and mashed potatoes from the cafeteria for these adhesives.

Likewise, among the group of drawings studied for this project, there is no visual indication that the artist used juice that he extracted from fruit. Microscopic examination revealed that crayon strokes are broad and have a glossy, waxy appearance. They are hard, compact, and homogeneous. Colored pencil strokes are thin and equally compact—and, in fact, the detection of kaolinite, a common extender in colored pencils, by FTIR and EDS in several colored pencil samples from the scroll and *Cowboy* supports visual identification of this medium. Charcoal strokes appear splintery and particulate and disperse on the papers' surfaces; and finally, under magnification it was clear that the artist's drawing implements included brushes and the pointed tips of pen nibs.

One particular medium that stands out in so many drawings is a bright red ink that Ramírez applied with a brush, and perhaps matchsticks. Analysis of this material identified the organic red colorants eosin and lithol rubine.<sup>3</sup> Both are known for their bright red color and their susceptibility to fading. Eosin is readily soluble; our testing in anticipation of treatment confirmed that. And more to the point, colorants such as these cannot be extracted by squeezing fruit.

Coinciding with scientific analysis, conservation treatment progressed at a slow and steady pace over several months. First, the entire drawing was humidified and gently relaxed to reduce the pronounced waves of undulation. No attempt was made to flatten the scroll; the way in which Ramírez adhered the wrinkled, creased, and deformed papers to each other made it clear that this, like most of his drawings, were never intended to be flat (fig. 9). With the relaxed drawing open to its full length, torn and crumpled edges were unfolded and mended, lifting papers were set down, losses

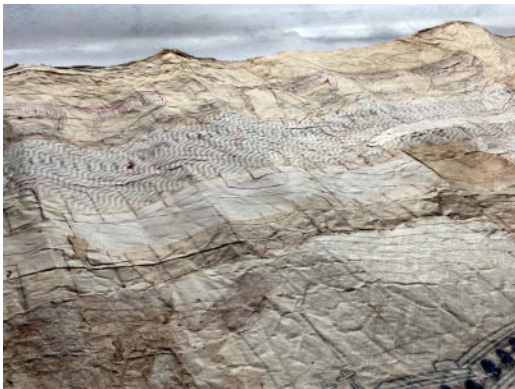


Fig. 9. Raking light detail of *Untitled (Scroll)*, showing natural undulations and cockling that are inherent to the pieced support.



Fig. 10a. Detail of *Untitled (Scroll)*, showing the anthropomorphic smokestack as it appears today.



Fig. 10b. Detail of *Untitled (Scroll)*, showing the artist's first attempt, which he later patched and redrew.

were filled and inpainted, and where wax crayon was applied over desiccated, cracking, and lifting flakes of media-laden adhesive, consolidation, followed by inpainting of areas of loss, was carried out.

As more became clear about Ramírez's artistic process, his manner of constructing his supports and the ways in which he incorporated his subject matter, interest intensified in trying to assess the degree to which intentionality played a role in the artist's process. Several patches, including one with a sketch of an anthropomorphic smokestack was particularly intriguing (fig. 10a). Knowing that the adhesive was water soluble, it was decided to humidify the patch and lift it temporarily to reveal the sketch below (fig. 10b). With the sketch removed, it became clear that Ramírez decided that his first attempt to draw the figure was much too small to carry enough visual weight in the overarching composition. Instead of erasing the form—a practice in which he rarely engaged—he simply adhered another piece of paper over his first attempt and redrew the form, this time much larger so that it could take pride of place in the composition. Upon seeing this, it was clear that this had been a deliberate aesthetic decision on the part of the artist who, in this moment, was clearly conscious of the visual impact of his actions.

Although the primary goal of this project was to examine and conserve a selection of Ramírez's drawings to ready them for the ICA LA exhibition, by studying the artist's materials and processes, misconceptions have been corrected and a fuller understanding of the nature of his materials, and the deterioration to which many have been subjected was established. Through Victor Espinoza's research, the artist's biography has been corrected, clarified, and expanded upon with new and important information. Continued close looking and technical investigation on the part of conservators and scientific analysis on the part of conservation scientists of Ramírez's drawings will surely continue to enhance that story.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. Excerpted from a conversation that took place on June 5, 2017 with Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Mark Pascale, and Mary Broadway (Pascale 2017).
2. Hypochlorite was among the chemical agents used to produce oxidized starches (Stratis 2017, 111, note 16).

3. Analysis of the red colorants was carried out using FTIR and Raman spectroscopy; the identification of eosin was supported by the detection of bromine using EDS (Stratis 2017, 111, note 20).

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