



"Untitled (Horse and Rider)," 1954. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper.



"Untitled (Tunnel with Cars and Buses)," 1954. Pencil, colored pencil, watercolor and crayon on paper.



"Untitled (Rosenquist Scroll)," 1953. Crayon, pencil and collage on pieced paper.

## THE TRUE STORY

New information about Ramirez as an artist, with firsthand anecdotes about his creative process from nurses and student-observers, makes it easier to understand him. It debunks a lot of preconceived notions about outsider artists — that they're not interested in sharing their work, for example. (Ramirez often hung his drawings at hospital wards.) Human drama also unfolded during the exhibition: Ramirez's descendants, who now live in Mexico, had seen only five works by Ramirez until this exhibit.

The stories also compelled Kreel to add, "I would think seasoned, trained artists would find it somewhat embarrassing. . . . But I would relate more to an artist like that than someone who went to brush school."

## COMPELLING IMAGERY

"Self-taught artists are supposed to work on small scale. Any artist to pull off 12-foot tall drawing is amazing," said Joseph Kettner, MAM's chief curator. Showing Ramirez's work in Milwaukee was a no-brainer, he added. It was an effort to reflect the growing Hispanic community in this town, and to display MAM's strong support of folk art.

"But in the end, you look at the pieces and you realize this guy was just fabulous," Kettner said.

Ramirez's imagery was just as compelling to the two art novices.

"I expected this to be an interesting exhibit. I wasn't sure if I was going to latch onto a particular painting, and I did. So it was successful in that standpoint, there was something here that caught my eye," Kreel said.

Bresler added: "Some of the art you see in museums, (like) a piece of canvas painted black and classifying that as art, is just not very impressive. . . . I'm not very educated as far as the art world is concerned, so I'd relate more to Ramirez's work than some of the contemporary work that doesn't make sense to me."

## STILL MORE TO KNOW

For Ramirez biographer/researcher Victor Espinosa, there is a lot more that the public needs to know about Ramirez. As a Mexican-American, Espinosa says that while Ramirez's art is visually enjoyable, he relates more to Ramirez's biography than his artwork. "Not speaking English, he was forced to be in the hospital. He didn't have any way to communicate. In that sense, anyone who is a descendant of a Mexican can identify with his story," he said.

Ramirez's reputation continues to grow as researchers find out more about him. In Mexico, Ramirez isn't seen as part of Mexican art history because he did all his work in the United States. In America, "Latinos also don't accept him very well because he was born in Mexico and produced his art in the 1950s (when the Chicano movement wasn't full-blown)."

Rather than keeping Ramirez on the fringes of both worlds, this exhibit "is trying to take him out of that box, where the white Western culture has labeled him an outsider," Espinosa said. "When people call him outsider, who is calling him outsider? It's the white people who know nothing about the Mexican culture. And they only started collecting this art because it was made by a crazy Mexican. We have to take Ramirez out of these constructs and see how his art inspires. And see how his art is part of the Latino community and learn from it."

That's a thought that Bresler and Kreel seemed to take to heart. After seeing the exhibit, they went to the City Hall to pay for their water bill. While there, they saw a photography exhibit. "We checked it out," Kreel said.

## If you go

**What** Martin Ramirez exhibit

**When** Runs through Jan. 13. Museum open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., except Thursdays, when it's open until 8 p.m.

**Where** Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Drive

**How much** \$10-\$14

**Info** Call (414) 224-3220 or visit [mam.org](http://mam.org).

## Gallery talks and other events

**What** "Martin Ramirez in Context." A lecture by former MAM director Russell Bowman that gives a behind-the-scenes look at the museum's folk and self-taught art collection.

**When** Thursday, Nov. 8. Lecture is 6:15 p.m.; a reception is 7:15-9 p.m.

**Where** Lubar Auditorium, Milwaukee Art Museum

**How much** Free with general admission.

**What** "The Ramirez Box." The museum and Cedar Block challenge area artists to make a new work inspired by the Martin Ramirez exhibition.

**When** 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 30

**Where** Milwaukee Art Museum

**How much** \$7 and \$5 for members.