The Heart of Creation: The Art of Martin Ramirez

Goldie Paley Gallery
Moore College of Art
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Regina Public Library
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Martin Ramirez entered a California psychiatric institution in 1930, where he remained until his death thirty years later. As with many chronically ill patients who cannot be reached, Ramirez was diagnosed “paranoid schizophrenic, deteriorated,” an extremely pessimistic if expressive label that speaks of deep psychic disturbance, profound isolation from reality, and a rigid fixation on an elaborate, even grandiose fantasy life. Saddest of all is the designation “deteriorated.” Prior to the advent of antipsychotic medication, this placed Ramirez effectively beyond the pale of any significant emotional recovery.

In a world of profound mental disturbance, the extraordinary becomes commonplace in the behavior, hallucinations, and delusions of the patient. Can it have been a total surprise when this silent, furtive Mexican psychotic began to make art, using memo pads, brown paper bags, laundry tickets, examining-table paper, and any other materials he was able to lay his hands on? Such remarkable activity is possible when one is mentally ill, for it is ego consciousness—or the center of self-awareness—that is afflicted and not the entire psyche. Although the ego consciousness named Martin Ramirez may have been sick, some creative force, at times beautiful or frightening, often powerfully expressive, was still at work within him. How else could Phyllis Kind conclude that Ramirez’s work “had an authority and formal control . . . which conjures[s] up an hypnotic sense of space and resemble[s] an infinity of styles and ideas in the history of both Western and Eastern art.”

This is not the only conundrum posed by the art of Ramirez. Is his work solely the product of psychosis? Must the facts of his life be known to appreciate its meaning? Are historical influences important? In short, how can such powerful images be thought about, let alone analyzed, if there is an almost complete absence of supporting data? Or can we compare Ramirez to the prehistoric cave artists who left behind little or no trace of their loves and hates, fears and joys, but whose work is still fascinating, gripping, and magnificent? Insight may be gained when we consider these questions in light of the depth psychology of C. G. Jung.

Psyche and Creation

Jung disagreed strongly with Freud’s conflict theory of psychic functioning. Jung was convinced neither that consciousness and the unconscious were locked in eternal warfare nor that the unconscious was a mere dumping site for repressed infantile or instinctive material. The task of consciousness, as Jung saw it, was to emerge from domination by the unconscious and take up the position of coequal partner in the psychic whole; then, through their symbolic dialogue, consciousness could grow and expand. The currency of this symbolic dialogue, the living symbol, is recognized in the highly charged emotional imagery encountered in dream, fantasy, hallucination, and creative work. Despite the broken nature of Ramirez’s ego consciousness, his symbolic images are much more than pathologized epiphenomena; they are natural expressions of our deepest and most collective human strivings, just as when they come through the consciousness of a healthy artist. The viewer becomes the interpreter; even though Ramirez may not have been able to integrate its meaning, his work resonates with our essential humanity.

It may be obvious today that the inner life of dream and fantasy and the inner lives of cultures, expressed in religion, art, and myth, are more than the sublimated detritus of childhood trauma, but this psychological revelation was hard won. About 1906, when Jung was beginning his medical career at the state psychiatric hospital in Zurich, he showed great enthusiasm for the work of Freud, but, unlike his mentor, Jung was concerned primarily with psychotic, not neurotic, patients. Until that time, the general attitude toward psychosis was simply to diagnose and classify the patient’s illness and avoid delving too deeply into the meaning of the symptoms. Jung, however, was fascinated by this material. When asked at eighty-four, during a BBC interview, if there was one case that may have been the turning point in his thought, Jung replied:

I had quite a number of experiences . . . that led me to the hypothesis that there is an impersonal stratum in our psyche, and I can tell you an example. We had a patient in the ward; he was quiet but completely dissociated (cut-off from reality), a schizophrenic, and he was in the clinic . . . twenty years. He had come into the clinic, as a matter of fact, a young man, a little clerk, with no particular education. Once I came into the ward and he was obviously excited and called to me, took me by the lapel of my coat, and led me to the window, and said: “Doctor! Now! Now you will see. Now look at it. Look up at the sun and see how it moves. See, you must move your head too, like this, and then you will see the phallus of the sun, and you know, that’s the origin of the wind. And you see how the sun moves as you move your head, from one side to the other!” Of course, I did not understand it at all. I thought, Oh, there you are, he’s just crazy. But the case remained in my mind, and four years later I came across a paper written by the German historian Dieterich, who had dealt with the so-called Mithras Liturgy, a part of the Great Parisian Magic Papyrus. And there he produced part of the so-called Mithras Liturgy, namely it had been said there:

“After the second prayer you will see how the disc of the sun unfolds, and you will see hanging down from it the tube, the origin of the wind, and when you move your face to the regions of the east, it
Plate 6
Untitled
ca. 1950s
watercolor, pen, and pencil
on paper
31 1/4 x 17 1/2
will move there, and if you move your face to the regions of the west, it will follow you." And instantly I knew—now this is it. It is the vision of my patient! . . . Because that thing was not known. It was in a magic papyrus in Paris, and it wasn't even published. It was only published four years later, after I had observed it in my patient.4

The ramifications are important; ancient mythic and religious themes derived from this collective stratum resurface when Ramirez's work is considered. The reason that the symptoms of psychotics or the symbols in dreams and fantasies of healthy modern individuals echo such ancient themes is because the very same intrapsychic patterns that formed them are still at work, shaping and influencing psychic life. Jung called the recurrent imagery—the creative, symbolic expression of these basic human patterns—"archetypal." An awareness of these archetypal patterns, the integration of their significance for personal well-being, and an appreciation of the way they connect the finite ego consciousness to the life of humankind as a whole constitute the work of self-realization or, as Jung termed it, the process of individuation.

Jung's conviction that the creative symbol ascends from this archetypal unconscious is itself an antique theme that has been dealt with by philosophers from Plato to the present day. The creativity of Paul Klee, one of this century's great artists, evolved from a passionate and self-acknowledged dedication to his own inner psychological development.5 For Klee, invisible "formative powers" were at the crux of the natural creative process—powers into which the artist must descend to make true and meaningful art. This "final secret" of creativity that "stands behind all our shifting views" is deep below the surface of consciousness. To descend to this "primordial underground," Klee wrote in his famous Jena lecture of 1924, is to move from "prototype to archetype," or in Jung's language, from the personal to the collective. Once in touch with this deeper level, in which the "primal law feeds the forces of development," the artist truly creates, thereby mirroring God's work.6

Klee, like Jung, directly related his insights and discoveries on the nature of psychological creativity to the art and psychology of the insane. In a now celebrated exchange with friend and Bauhaus colleague Lothar Schreyer, Klee expressed his enthusiasm for Hans Prinzhorn's landmark study of 1922, Artistry of the Mentally Ill, hoping that his own work might come close to the vision and power of the art of "children, madmen, and savages":

You know this excellent work by Prinzhorn, don't you? Let's see for ourselves. This picture is a fine Klee. So is this, and this one, too.
Look at these religious paintings. There’s a depth and power of expression that I never achieve in religious subjects. Really sublime art. Direct spiritual vision. Now can you say that I’m on my way to the madhouse? Aside from the fact that the whole world is an insane asylum?  

The message from both Jung and Klee is clear: depth creative work must access a dimension of psychic life that, because of its emotional force and compelling imagery, may seem insane but is nothing less than the expressive power of the archetypal psyche that Klee christened the realm of the “dead and unborn.” Jung says about such expression:

It is a primordial experience which surpasses man’s understanding. . . Sublime, pregnant with meaning, yet chilling the blood with its strangeness, it arises from timeless depths; glamorous, daemonic, and grotesque, it bursts asunder our human standards of value and aesthetic form . . . it can be a revelation of beauty which we can never put into words . . . the primordial experience (that) rends the curtain upon which is painted the picture of the ordered world, and allows a glimpse into the unfathomable abyss of the unborn and of the things yet to be. Is it a vision of other worlds, or the darkness of the spirit, or of the primal beginnings of the human psyche?  

For both men, the artist is but a conduit for this process. “Art,” Klee wrote, “does not reproduce the visible but makes visible”  

If the consciousness is not severely damaged, the artist may stand back and reflect upon all that has passed through, but when this is not the case, the work by no means is invalidated. What structures it are the larger-than-personal-life realities of these formative patterns. If this dimension is ignored, the entire mystery of the creative process is reduced to a chain of personal factors and historical events that do not account for the numinosity—that is, their gripping emotional effect and ultimate meaning as symbols.

The absence of personal context makes the appreciation of this archetypal dimension critical to any consideration of Ramirez’s work. From an archetypal perspective, his images become symbolic reflections of these formative patterns and primal laws operative in every culture and in every individual psyche. That Ramirez may not have been normal is of no consequence; paradoxically, it even may have enhanced his access to this deeper layer. Jung wrote:

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices: he enchants and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night.

Living symbols are the portals to this ever-enduring realm. Ramirez was neither too sick nor too unskilled to capture this mythic reality in his work, and our psyches respond to its beauty, starkness, and urgency.

**Image As Myth**

Depending on where an individual personality may be in life, a particular archetypal or mythic theme that expresses a more collective meaning will be constellated. Seen or unseen by the person through whom they find expression, archetypal patterns always are present and accessible, shaping life for better or worse. The question is, what myth was being enacted in the life of Martin Ramirez?

Ramirez was locked in a continual psychological struggle to establish and maintain some connection with the so-called real world. Owing to the fragmentation of ego consciousness characteristic of the schizophrenic condition, the quality of this connection was at best tenuous, at worst nonexistent. Lacking the coherence of self-awareness to experience the world as a safe and orderly place—much like the predication of an infant—Ramirez remained extremely vulnerable to powerful archetypal, unconscious forces, reliving the struggle again and again in traumatic proportions and without successful resolution. It is as if, in the language of myth, the dilemma of schizophrenia must fixate chronically in this life or death struggle. The emotional intensity of such imagery is enormous, as it depicts motifs of birth and death, incest or the return to the mother, hope of rebirth, the tragedy of annihilation. Given that Ramirez probably suffered imprisonment in this borderland, his art reflects the myth: the battle of ego consciousness to emerge from nonbeing and symbiosis into being and self-awareness.

The themes that group the works in this exhibition do not account for all of Ramirez’s imagery. No chronology is implied, even when images are discussed in a particular sequence to illustrate the stages inherent in the birth of ego consciousness from the maternal unconscious. At the beginning of psychological existence, ego consciousness is, like the infant, completely dependent upon the mothering figure as the source of all things. Myths analogous to this earliest stage of conscious life recount the all-encompassing Great Mother whose generative and nourishing power find embodiment in the female form. Imagery of this sort abounds in preclassical time. One example is a Neolithic clay goddess from ancient Thrace (fig. 19). Typically, the power of the goddess is conveyed through an overemphasis of the genital area, breasts, and thighs. That she is faceless and massive symbolizes her reality as the anonymous mother of all life,
Fig. 19
Neolithic Goddess
Ancient Thrace
clay

Fig. 20
Untitled
ca. 1953
pencil, ink, watercolor,
and crayon on paper
46 x 36
towering above the embryonic and unknowing infantile consciousness.

In the first grouping of works, Ramirez appears to have dramatically captured some of these feelings. Compare the ancient Thracian goddess with a sexual/sensual drawing of three tunnels nestled amidst echoes of legs into which undeterred horsemen stream (fig. 20). Although stylized, Ramirez confronts an explicit analogue of a female torso, legs spread invitingly, as if these tunnels are the anonymous genitals of nature herself, which like those of prehistoric goddesses, guarantee abundance and fusion but also reclaim life in their image as grave. At this critical early time, life and death imagery are an integral part of the Great Mother's myth, signifying a primordial ambivalence for the fledgling ego consciousness. To be fully born is to leave her safe, nurturing embrace forever and face the painful world of self-awareness and personal responsibility; to remain in symbiosis with her is never to be free from a regressive, dependent state. This perpetual ambivalence is the hallmark of the borderline state and the dilemma of schizophrenia.

In another work, Ramirez reiterates the ambivalent attraction of this tunnel/womb/grave, suggesting a pair of serpentine legs that lead the eye to a cavelike opening at the lower right corner of the picture frame. The opening forms a mandorla of darkness around the head of a child/woman who faces it. There is an unmistakable aura of enticement, a definite movement downward or inward. But to what? An ancient motif, the tunnel or cave symbolizes the transformative passageway that can connect two seemingly opposing realities, life and death, in the mystery of spiritual/emotional and physical rebirth. In myth and fairy tale, this return to the source, presaging the acquisition of deeper wisdom and inner meaning, usually requires some sort of sacrificial or death experience. As a sacrificial doorway, the tunnel/cave/womb embodies the possibility of the radical expansion of consciousness.

If the ultimate task of ego consciousness is to differentiate from the maternal unconscious and come to know both itself and the other as separate entities, reality will be perceived in a more articulated fashion. For Ernst Neumann, this meant that the image of the all-encompassing maternal sourceground would gradually begin to bifurcate and exhibit signs of masculinity. In a forceful drawing of a train exiting a central tunnel flanked by two leglike side tunnels, Ramirez chronicles just such a bifurcation (fig. 21). Instead of giving birth to a child from this cipher/womb, what issues forth is a train, an indisputable symbolic cousin to phallus and snake, each an archetypal image of the penetrating, creative masculinity of the life-giving unconscious matrix. Not merely the
castrating phallic woman of psychoanalytic misogyny, this is an expression of the intrinsic and now differentiating androgynous nature of the unconscious as world parent.

Images of this androgynous character are to be found in other cultures as well. A wood relief from southern India (ca. 1800) shows the serpent bursting forth from between the legs of the yogini (fig. 22). A fifteenth-century illustration from northern Europe, taken from the *Aurora Consurgens*, a major alchemical text, shows snakelike tendrils pouring from the womb of a seated female figure. According to Jung, she is the primordial feminine, called “Physis,” or matter incarnate, the “krater” or vessel of psychological/spiritual transformation, in whose loins are the serpents as the spirit presiding over it.4

As the ego consciousness separates from its identification with the unconscious and awakens to itself, the more abstract generative and destructive qualities of the unconscious personalize and congeal into the more specific imagery of woman and world. What often occurs before this complete differentiation is an intermediary phase in which half-human feminine creatures appear. In myth, such bivalent beings represent a blend of the instinctive and the humanizing potentialities of the unconscious. A striking example of this intermediary being can be found in Ramirez’s collage of a woman’s head and shoulders grafted onto a sinuous, onrushing train (fig. 16). Although differentiation is occurring, this mechanical phallus of the industrialized age is still conjoined with the unconscious as feminine being and, as seen in another drawing of a train linking two antipodal tunnels, is even the umbilicus that bridges the twin mysteries. The phallus will remain then until ego consciousness claims it fully as the hero’s weapon—sword or rifle—or the artist’s tools. Whatever its form, the phallus in the service of consciousness directs the ego’s energies and focuses its ever-increasing sense of independent self-hood. Only then does ego consciousness become a coequal partner with the unconscious in the process of self-realization that Jung called individuation.

Given the fragile state of Ramirez’s self-awareness, it is likely he was exquisitely sensitive to the danger of this intermediary stage. In fact, this awareness is in keeping with the more typically destructive role played by such creatures in myth. Compare the collage work in figure 16 to Medusa, with her serpent hair and petrifying gaze; to the Sphinx, whose chimeric nature and killing riddles destroyed all but Oedipus; to the winged Harpies who, feasting on human weakness, are harbingers of death. If development is to proceed, the potentially destructive energy of these semi-humans must be overcome and pressed into the service of consciousness.
Fig. 23
*Untitled*
ca. 1953
pencil and tempera on
collaged paper
33 x 23½

Fig. 24
*Snake Goddess*
Palace at Knossos, Crete
middle Minoan III period
faience
The appearance of more completely humanized female forms symbolizes the further articulation of the world and differentiation of consciousness. In a salient image, however, Ramirez combines many familiar elements to form a chilling narrative to show how, even at this stage, danger is still very much present. In one of his collage/drawings, it is easy to read the destructive capabilities of this stylish, smiling, yet seemingly horned (a vestige of the earlier stage?) woman (fig. 11). Wielding a sickle-shaped instrument, she appears ready to slice through an umbilical rope around the waist of a tiny male figure standing at the mouth of a tunnel. When compared to the ancient Hindu goddess of death, Kali, who dismembers her victims with a similar sickle-shaped sword, Ramirez presents the unconscious personified as woman in the role of devourer and fate: it is her capricious control that decides on life or death. Psychologically, this death-delivering female epitomizes the dread of nonexistence that threatens the emergent ego consciousness.

Another drawing of this horrifying power almost assaults its simplicity (fig. 23). A frightening female figure stands encapsulated in a stagelike entryway. With leering mouth, dilated eyes, and ominously beckoning arms, she can only be an image of psychosis or death. Does Ramirez use theatrical elements to defend against or focus awareness on such ghastly and fearsome psychological dangers? Free of softening color and constructed from angular, serpentlike lines, she is startlingly similar to the image of the snake goddess of ancient Crete (fig. 24). If consciousness is to thrive, this enemy must be defeated.

Just as the process of differentiation brings forth the negative aspects of the unconscious, it also makes possible the personification of the unconscious as giver of spiritual birth—hence, Ramirez's fascination with the motif of the Madonna. As "coredemptrix," vouchsafing the victory of consciousness over death, she represents the humanizing and spiritualizing side of the unconscious. Through her, the regressive pull of the unconscious is transmuted into wisdom and ultimate mastery over the impersonal compulsion of instinct. The Madonna represents the urge of the unconscious to ensure the place of ego consciousness as a partner in the psychic whole and collaborator in the work of individuation or self-realization.

Ramirez highlighted the spiritualizing and humanizing qualities of his Madonnas in their solar crowns—symbols of wisdom—and in their spiritual dominion over tunnels and snakes, agents of the dark side of the unconscious. Possibly drawing upon memory when he created these images, he repeats familiar iconography, as exemplified by the sixteenth-century Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe (fig. 25). Standing on the crescent moon and emanating solar rays. In these and other images, the Madonna as redeemer symbolizes the loving assistance given to the consciousness by the unconscious, not so much to keep it in thrall as to ensure growth.

In the wholeness of psychic life, death and darkness are also present, no matter how beneficent the unconscious as goddess or mother. The dark side is present in several of Ramirez's Madonnas as well. In figure 26, her gargantuan size dwarfs a tiny figure at the upper left who appears to be perched precariously on the familiar tunnel. In figure 6, diminishing a chorus line of faceless figures below her, she easily could overcome a smaller, hapless figure on horseback who, sharing her solar crown, suggests an identification with the child Jesus. Even more sinister, however, is an enormous Madonna (plate 1) with angry face who floats over three tunnels, two of which recall the ample thighs of the Neolithic Thracian goddess (fig. 19). This Madonna is almost certainly a goddess of death, whose sharp glance and knife-like rays from crown and sleeve could slice and kill like the sickle sword of Kali or the talons of Lilith, her Sumerian sister. By incorporating the Madonna's destructive qualities, Ramirez brings the image of the unconscious as sourceground full circle, reminding us that even when consciousness seems so substantial and supported, it is never far from that borderland and the reach of death.

Ramirez's immersion in and obvious fluency with archetypal patterns indicate that his imagery may also reflect the growing independence of consciousness. This countermovement is first illustrated by his repetitive use of stage and stair motifs and his interest in cityscapes (plates 7 and 4). The stagelike enclosures provide distance from and framing for symbols that are dangerous or require special focus. This defensive and focusing activity is an integral part of conscious functioning, serving as a tool for intensified concentration, differentiation, and separation. The function of stairs can be deduced from their importance in sacred structures of Mayan, Egyptian, and other cultures. Stairs orient, focus, and direct human participation in the worship of the deities. They center and frame the experience, assisting consciousness to ascend or descend to the archetypal realm of the dead and unborn of the gods and goddesses. Cityscapes are the products of people; in rendering them with such care, Ramirez was placing himself within the concourse of human interaction. The relative anonymity of the drawings and the absence of individual portraiture may indicate the limitation of Ramirez's sense of belonging.
Plate 7
Untitled
c.a. 1950s
pencil, ink, crayon,
and watercolor on paper
34 x 24
On a more individualized note, the stags of Ramirez are statements of the increasing strength and independence of ego consciousness in this mythic drama. These mighty, antlered beasts reign with a silent, confrontive dignity, both alone and in connection with other animals and landscape elements (figs. 8 and 27). They have a sense of control, conveyed by their frontality and position on stage and stairs—pictorial elements that are tools of consciousness. Are these stags self-portraits of the mute Ramirez, who must have stood apart from the manic activity of collective life and culture, silent and vigilant like the stag? The primeval power of the stag is graphically envisioned in a Paleolithic cave drawing at Les Trois Frères sanctuary in France (fig. 28). This drawing of the “sorcerer,” enrobed by the body of the antlered beast, Alexander Marshack writes, 16 coalesces the very essence of “masculine” virility, that capacity to effect change and to participate with purpose and awareness in the world. The stag, as symbol, represents a crucial stage in the acquisition, by consciousness, of its own phallic and creative self-awareness, ultimately asserting an individual stance to the world.

The next step in the transformation, a more fully humanized image of consciousness, is expressed in Ramirez’s many renditions of the armed horsemen (fig. 2, plate 7, and cover). Whether bearing a resemblance to the spirit of Zapata, the patron hero of Mexican peasantry, or to earlier heroes—Mithras, who with peaked cap slew the bull of darkness and illuminates the world with sword and torch, two traditional instruments of consciousness; Perseus, who dispatched the Medusa with his sword; St. George, who destroyed the dragon with his lance—all personify the growing coherence and determination of consciousness. This is the “hero with a thousand faces,” 3 whose task is to subdue completely the negative aspects of the unconscious—imaged as bull, dragon, lion, or snake-haired female—and establish a working relationship with its more benevolent, life-affirming side. The culture bringer—ego consciousness as hero—dispels darkness, passivity, and fear and replaces them with direction and purposeful activity embodied in the weapons he carries.

In a sense, the warrior hero moves beyond Ramirez’s Christ figures, who seem so ill-equipped for independent action. As the enfeebled horseman suspended above the Madonna (fig. 6) or a tiny figure overwhelmed by her enormous size (fig. 26), they are variants of a consciousness at the mercy of the unconscious. In contrast, the hero as warrior or artist (fig. 13) is a figure who actively expresses his own being. Even when surrounded by the ciphers of the unconscious, he is not rendered impotent but seeks to comprehend his world through the act of creation. This is ego consciousness as coequal partner in the creative dialogue with the unconscious.

We may have to admit that the unspeaking and psychotic Martin Ramirez did not permanently achieve this heroic level, but his determination to image and express his inner world is certainly true heroic action. That we are awed by his work and feel in it the power of this universal symbolic struggle is testimony to how, in his own enigmatic way, Ramirez was an authentic culture bringer, enlightening those of us who hardly know we sleep. To reflect upon his work is to reflect upon an unceasing mythic process—the expansion and illumination of conscious life through the cycle of psychological birth, death, and rebirth.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Annmarie Ronnberg, curator of the Archives for Research in Archetypal Symbolism at the Jung Foundation in New York, and the Archives itself for invaluable assistance in the preparation of this essay.


15. Ibid., p. 229.


Fig. 26
Untitled
c. 1950s
crayon and colored pencil
on paper
76 1/2 x 37
Fig. 27
Untitled
ca. 1953
pencil, tempera, and crayon
on collaged paper
28¾ x 34¾
Fig. 28
“Sorcerer” cave painting
Les Trois Frères sanctuary
engraving, partly painted