

PHANTASMAGORIA AMERICANA

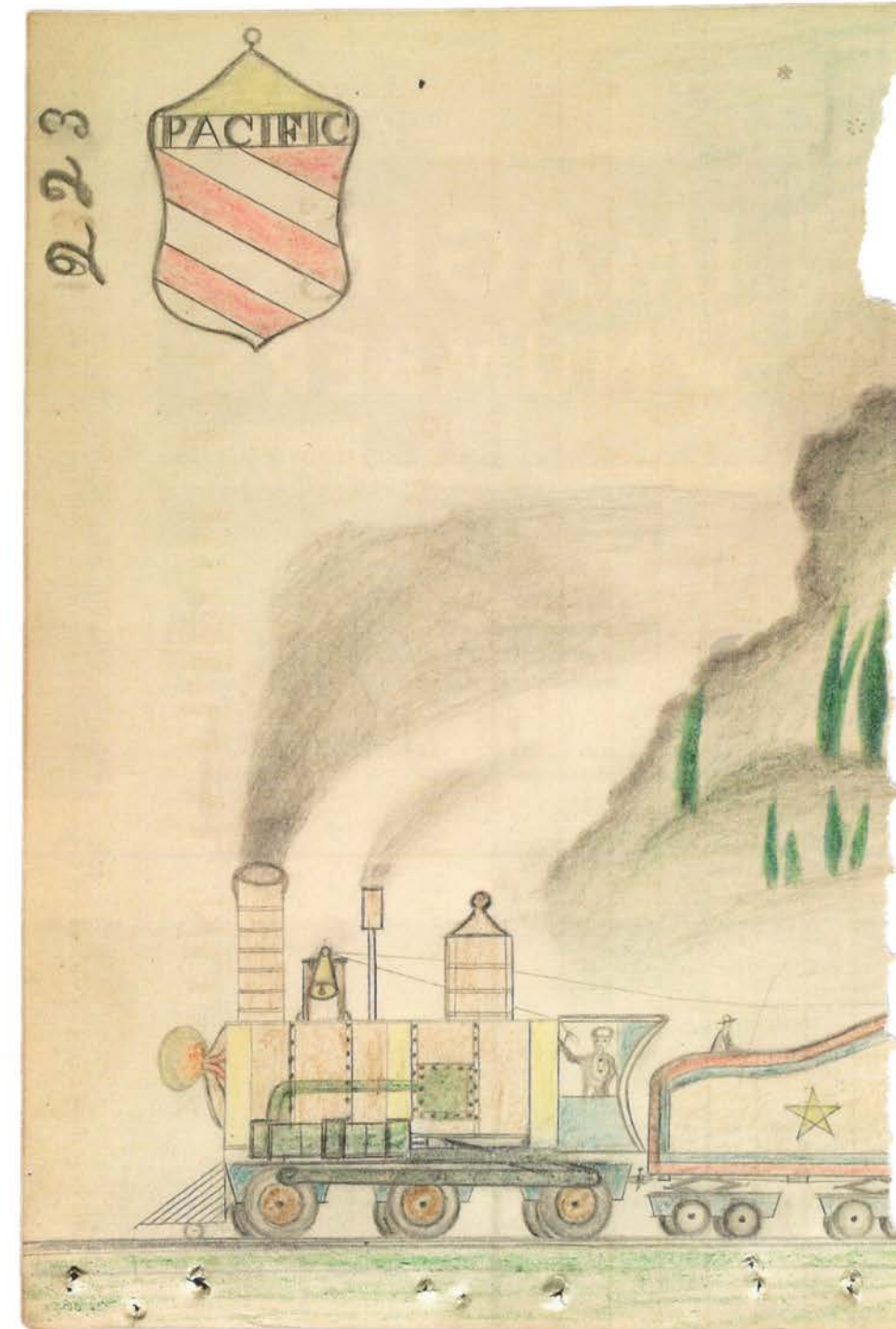
Introducing the work of
the Electric Pencil

by Lyle Rexer

Major discoveries of historical material in the outsider art field are rare. The recent announcement by the American Folk Art Museum of the discovery of a cache of drawings by Martín Ramírez only underscores the point. Before this revelation, the last important find was an archive of work by James Castle, the deaf and mute artist from Idaho, pieces from which began to appear at the Outsider Art Fair about a decade ago and quickly garnered art world attention.

Add the Electric Pencil to this short list. In 2007, the artist Harris Diamant purchased a portfolio of some 283 drawings on ledger sheets—many bearing the letterhead of “State Hospital No. 3” or “State Lunatic Asylum No. 3” in Nevada, Missouri—from a collector who had previously purchased them from a dealer. The drawings were first discovered by a fourteen-year-old boy in a trash heap in Springfield, Missouri, in 1970. We can speculate that the drawings may have been done by an inmate in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and later discarded along with superfluous records and other institutional detritus. More research will surely turn up new information, but the trail is less important than how we regard these arresting productions now.

The obvious way is as folk art, as a trove of Americana revealing how the world looked at a particular time and

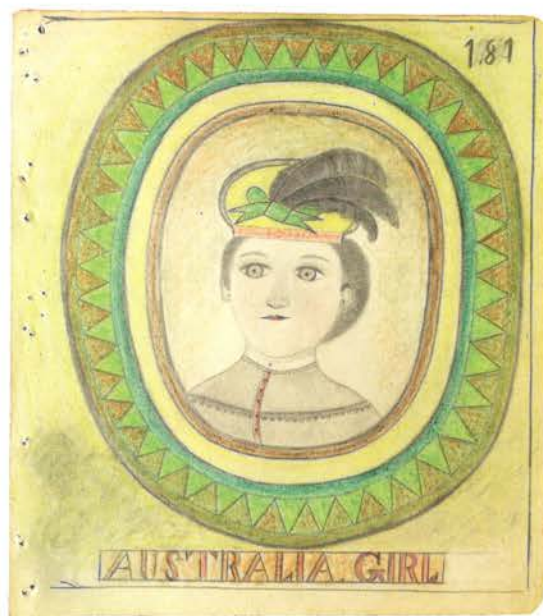


place. The oeuvre of the Electric Pencil—Diamant calls him that based on a single image bearing that label, spelled “ectlectrc”—presents a rural record that looks like a cross between a Sears mail-order catalog and an illustrated primer. It is loaded with drawings of things and people that the artist had seen pictured and perhaps knew firsthand. His (it is assumed the artist is a man) schematic graphic style, supported by

the ruled lines on the ledger paper, suits the presentation of mechanically constructed objects like chairs, riverboats, buildings, and automobiles. The many frontal and profile portraits, probably copies from magazines and newspapers, tend toward stereotypical rendering and seem at first glance to be pretexts for illustrating costumes. Like most folk artists, the Electric Pencil was a recording device, creating a

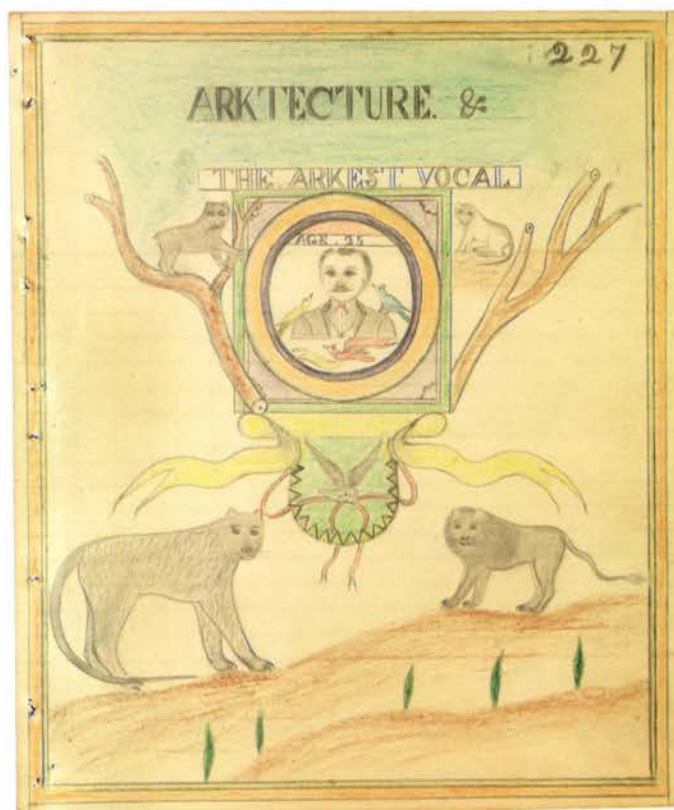


All drawings: Electric Pencil, *Untitled*, ink, pencil, crayon, and colored pencil on ledger paper (each sheet approximately 8 x 10 in.), 1900–1920. All images courtesy Harris Diamant

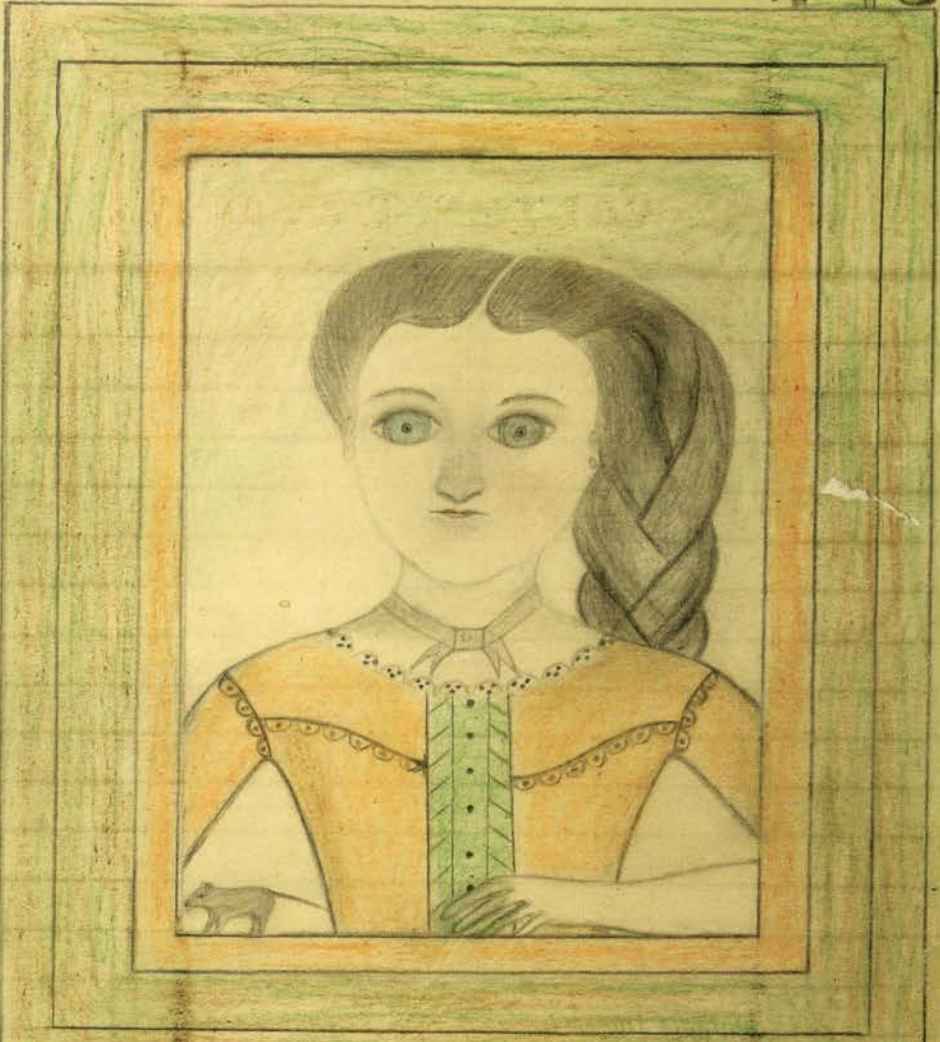


painstaking visual catalog of things that struck his fancy.

Yet the drawings tell another story, that of an outsider, a representative of art brut, or raw art. Here was an artist prone to repetition, obsessive styling, and recombinatory gambits: an artist tethered less to the real world than to represented reality, and whose ultimate motivations, like his biography, remain obscure.



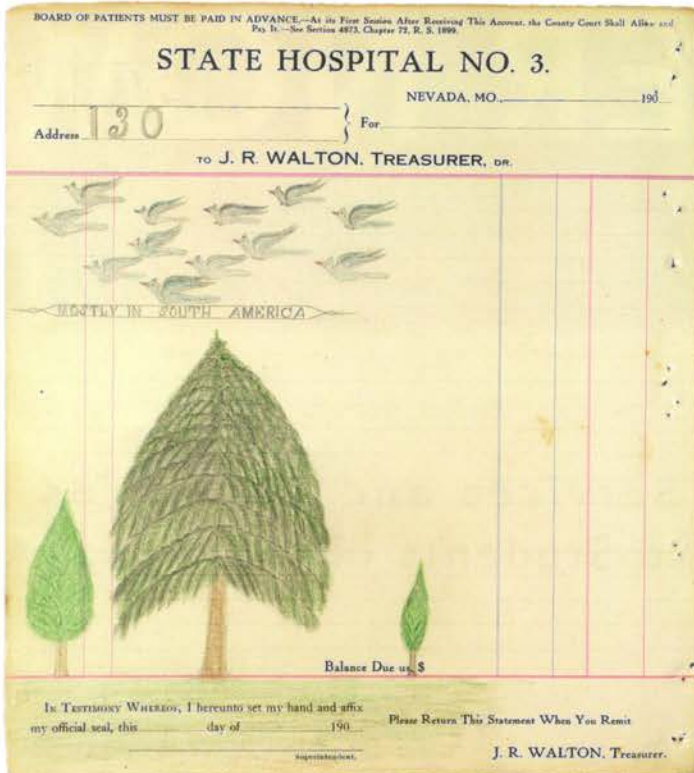
143



CHINA GIRL. AFTER RATS' &

Clearly an autodidact, the Electric Pencil made art that veered between what he couldn't quite do and what came naturally, almost unbidden. The effects oscillate between energy bound and energy released. Reflecting the former, his portraits are exercises in narrow control, attempts to reproduce found images with the proper perspective (straight on) and precise detail. Features requiring greater specificity and expression—eyes, for example—are reduced to a formulaic element that can be incorporated in any rendering. This gives the drawings, especially the portraits, the feeling of having been assembled from a kit, like dolls. Yet these staring, open circles also offer a window into the psyche of the artist. They take on a mesmerizing life of their own and stare back. It is as if the represented faces the Electric Pencil is clearly copying held the same appeal as living ones.

Call it obsessional, the other energy; it animates the hair of his figures, feathers, tree boughs, and blossoming vines, with its



intricate curving lines. These flowing forms inspire an uncharacteristic (for him) extravagance. We can almost feel the Electric Pencil letting himself go. The two energies seem to come together most powerfully in one of the simplest images, a gigantic sawmill blade, labeled "Big G." Taken as a whole, the images put us in intimate, almost physical contact with an artist using forms to take possession of his world and losing himself in them.

Seemingly constrained by the particulars of place and time—life in Missouri at the turn of the twentieth century—the drawings are actually free of both. The America here is accidental, a collection of occasions, a visual game. The Electric Pencil, who was a dubious historian, has mapped for us a territory of pure imagination.