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THE MODERN DRAWING

100 Works on Paper from The Museum of Modern Art

John Elderfield

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Alexandra Exter

RUSSIAN, 1882–1949

Costume design for THE GUARDIAN OF ENERGY. 1924. Pen and ink, gouache, and pencil, 21¼ x 14¼" (51.1 x 36 cm)
The J. M. Kaplan Fund, Inc.

The Guardian of Energy was a kind of chief of police on Mars, as shown in Yakov Protazonov's 1924 film, *Aelita*. Based on a play by Alexei Tolstoy, the film tells of a Martian workers' revolution as witnessed by a Soviet engineer, scenes of whose Moscow world are satirically interspersed with the imagined utopian one. (He falls in love with Aelita, the Martian queen.) It was produced by the new Moscow film studio, Mezhrabpom-Russ, formed after the introduction of Lenin's New Economic Policy, which served to soften East-West relations and brought back to the Soviet cinema filmmakers like Protazonov, who had been working in exile since the October Revolution. It was therefore a very internationally conceived production, and Exter had the ideal qualifications to design it. Not only was she highly respected for her work in the theater (she was Tairov's principal designer) and a foremost member of the Constructivist avant-garde (its machinist interests being appropriate to, and reflected in the choice of, this particular subject); additionally, she was perhaps the most internationally experienced of Soviet artists, having regularly traveled to France and Italy, where she knew the Cubists and Futurists.

Exter's designs clearly reflect knowledge of her friend Léger's classicized machine pictures of the early 1920s, and similarly present a formalized encomium on mechanical beauty. They also, however, resemble Tatlin's counter-reliefs (p. 85) cast in human form; especially this one, which is composed of a comparable set of flat and convex metallic planes arranged geometrically at right angles to the viewer. Necessarily more effective on paper (or in stills) than moving on the screen, it imagines a modernized warrior, whose spurs are levers, whose armor is boiler plate, connected by huge flanges and with a large screw-joint at the shoulder, whose gauntlets are wiremesh, and whose helmet (of the same material) exhibits an arrow-shaped needle from a dynamometer, presumably to keep track of the energy level of his brain. Like most futuristic costumes, it has a very conventional basis—here, the sinister Black Knight of medieval romance—but it is all the more telling for precisely that reason; for it thereby recalls, as it must, the associations that attach to the conventional source and project them into the new context. And the new context, though nominally of the future, clearly belongs to 1924. T. S. Eliot once observed that historical fiction tells us far more about the time of its creation than of the time it attempts to recall. The same is obviously true of science fiction. Even the face in this drawing bears this out. There seems to have developed in the 1920s a convention as to the desirable appearance of machine heroes: a keen eye; clear-cut features, with a stern little crease or two; a rigidly horizontal line of a mouth above a stubbornly projecting lower lip-cum-chin; preferably bald; and always to be seen in profile. (The Grosz on p. 129 shows exactly these features too.)

Aelita turned out to have been a dream. The engineer awoke, and threw into the fire the plans for his Martian journey, calling for a return to serious work. Allegories often take the form of journeys—which are similitudes of metaphorical "journeys": through life usually; here, to revolution—during which the hero meets a sequence of figures, each of which is a trope, signifying a particular burden to be overcome. The hero usually wins; but not here. The dictatorship of the Guardian of Energy is reestablished in 1924—the year that Lenin died and Stalinist repression began. As utopia became dystopia, Exter herself, in 1924, moved to the West.