

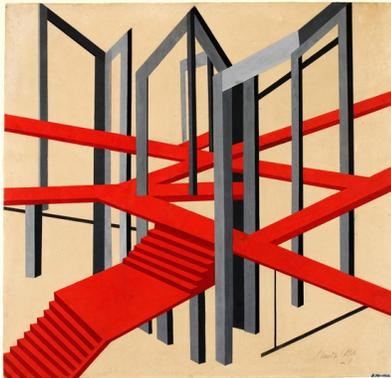
*Italian Town by the Sea*  
Arts Magazine, not  
in ArtsConnected or  
MIA website.



Alexandra Exter



Exter's palette.

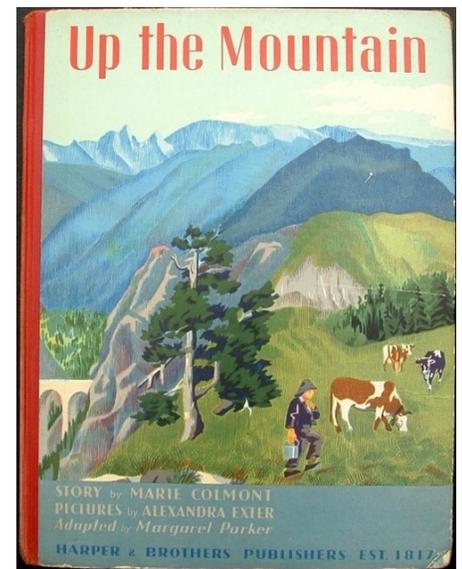


Costume for  
*Aleita*



Design for a Constructivist stage setting for a Tragedy  
Alexandra Exter (1882 - 1949)  
Russia  
Early 20th century  
MOMA

Perhaps Exter's last book illustration.



## **Italian Town by the Sea**

ARTIST: Alexandra Exter

DATE: c. 1917

MEDIUM: Oil and tempera on canvas

DIMENSIONS: 31 11/16 x 24 7/8 in. (80.49 x 63.18 cm)

CREATION PLACE: Asia, Russia

CREDIT LINE: The John R. Van Derlip Fund

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2008.83

LOCATION: G367

### Gallery Label:

Alexandra Exter was a key figure in the Russian avant-garde, whose contribution to the development and dissemination of Cubist and Futurist techniques in Russia was exceedingly important. With her first trip to France in 1907 she established contact with the key players of French Cubism but, interestingly, she never embraced the monochromatic aesthetic of their work. She was equally selective in her encounters with Italian Futurism, rejecting its glorification of the machine and speed, but incorporating its sense of momentum into her pictorial philosophy. Thus, Exter's art became an amalgam of French and Italian influences known today as Cubo-Futurism. The inspiration for the present work was drawn, most likely, from Exter's visit to Italy in 1914, and her impressions of coastal towns clinging to the hillsides became a vehicle for this dynamic demonstration of space rhythmically organized by color and line. The faceted architectural forms and sweeping bands of blue create a circular movement that is repetitively insistent-as though governed by an internal spring.

### Biography

Alexandra Exter was a painter, a set and costume designer, an art teacher, and a book illustrator. She was born into a wealthy family near Kiev in 1882 and educated in the best schools. In 1904 she married Nikolai Exter and kept his name upon his death in 1918. She died, almost penniless, in Paris, 1949.

### Early Career 1907-1914

In 1907 she began the first of many visits to Paris where she met, among others, Picasso, Leger (who later became her teacher), and Delaunay. Like many other artists in Paris she was influenced by the Cezanne exhibit of 1907 and numerous visits to the Louvre. Highly intelligent and fluent in many languages, she traveled to Italy where she was introduced to the ideas of Futurism (Soffici, Marinetti, Severini) However, she found more inspiration in Etruscan art. By late 1914, she had rejected the neutral palette of Cubism in favor of color and energy while moving toward non-objective work that showed a 'dynamic interaction of colours.' Exter moved easily between the art scenes in Moscow, Kiev, and Paris, exchanging ideas and exhibiting paintings in Berlin, Venice, and Moscow.

### Mid-Career 1914-1924

When World War I and then the Revolution broke out she returned to Moscow where she joined Popova, Rodchenko, Burliuk, Malevich, and others of the Russian avant-garde. "In 1915 the evolution of her painting led to large planes of colour, released from the Cubo-Futurist agglomeration of forms, and then to her [simultaneist] compositions which so fascinated the Moscow critics." (Andrei Nakov in *Tatlin's Dream*) Exter and her colleagues discussed the place and importance of art in the new society created by the Russian Revolution. They generally supported the Bolsheviks and created art and pamphlets celebrating the revolution. In 1916, Aleksander Tairvo's Kamerny Theatre in Moscow engaged her to design costumes and sets. She applied geometric concepts to both with stunning results. In 1918 the government appointed her director of new art schools in Kiev and Odessa where she developed and taught a technique for teaching non-objective art to children. In 1921, she was one of five artists in the groundbreaking 5X5=25 show in Moscow. Her work for the 1923 film *Aelita* (Queen of Mars) is considered groundbreaking. Her paintings were featured in the Soviet government sponsored First

Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin in 1922. These years were the height of her career. She even designed textiles and clothing!

### Later Years 1924-49

When the revolution turned toward communism, Exter emigrated to France. Most of the works in her Kiev studio were destroyed by fire during the fighting. In Paris, Exter taught at Fernand Leger's Academie Moderne and continued to design sets for the ballets of Bronislava Nijinska (sister of Nijinsky) and Elsa Kruger. Yet, as public interest waned for Constructivism and Russian avant-garde art, her work fell into obscurity. With most of her assets lost in the Russian Civil War and as a Soviet citizen living in Nazi-occupied Paris, Exter was in a tough spot. She hid her canvases, taught at Leger's Academie, and collaborated with Gio Colucci on book illustrations. Upon her death, her friends claimed many of her works before Simon Lissim, a fellow Russian and former student, was named heir.

### Art History Context

Although Exter achieved great success in the 1920s, she never chose one distinctive style. She moved through Cubism, Futurism, and Constructivism as one of the most experimental women artists of the avant-garde. Cubo-Futurist is the label most attached to her work which shows the faceting of Cubism, but with a brighter palette and the non-objectivity of Futurism but without the machines. Look for color and rhythm in her work. Her stage designs have some elements of Constructivism. Look for use of space and volume. Criticism is mixed about her illustrations.

### How and why was Exter's work rediscovered

Interest in Exter's works re-emerged in recent decades. She named Simon Lissim as the heir to the contents of her studio, her sketchbooks, palette, letters, and archives. Lissim moved to the U.S. where he continued to do book illustrations. Many provenance questions are tied to him. Upon his death, Andrei Nakov, noted art historian, expert on Russian avant-garde, and biographer of Kazimir Malevich, was named 'moral authority' for Exter's work and retains her archives. He has set up the official website and is writing the definitive study of Exter. There have been disputes about authenticity of some of her work, especially at an exhibition in Tours in 2009, but scientific analysis of her palette and signature appear to have resolved these issues.

### Questions and Discussion Point

1. What do you recognize in this picture?

2. What part of the painting looks realistic, what part looks abstract?

*There is a sailboat in the upper left, towers and buildings on the right. The colors indicate blue sky, blue ocean with white clouds and waves. The warm sienna colors are on the towers and town buildings.*

3. Where has the artist used faceting?

4. How does the positioning of the facets make you feel?

5. Where do you see movement, energy or speed?

*Exter has compressed the geometric planes and arranged them in a way that opens the shapes of the town's building and the ocean's waves and creates a swirl of motion.*

6. If you were making this picture into a quilt or reconstructing it with colored paper, what shapes would you use most often? How would you divide your colors?

*Think about how Exter first saw this view, then how she took it apart, and how and why she put it together again.*

7. Compare Exter's painting to the others in the gallery. Notice how her palette and energy change.

## Quotes by Exter

5x5=25 “The works exhibited are part of a general plan of experiments with colour whose goal is to resolve, at least in part, the problems of the relations among the colours, their reciprocal tension, and their rhythmization, and also the transition of a colour construction based on the laws of colour itself.”

“I owe my art to France since my first teachers were Cezanne and the Louvre museum.”

## Other works at the MIA

This pamphlet is available in the Prints and Drawings Room upon request. While it is extremely fragile and written entirely in Russian, it is interesting to look at the illustrations by these avant-garde Russian artists.

Futurists: First Journal of Russian Futurists, No. 1-2

ARTIST: David Davidovich Burliuk

Vladimir Burliuk

Alexandra Exter

DATE: 1914

MEDIUM: Color lithographs, letterpress and photolithographs

DIMENSIONS: 10 5/8 x 8 in. (27 x 20.3 cm)

CREATION PLACE Europe, Russia, Moscow

CREDIT LINE: The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund

ACCESSION NUMBER: B.90.9

LOCATION: Not on view

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: binding: paper covers

## Label

Vladimir Burliuk's color lithographs rank among the most accomplished and impressive color prints executed for Futurist books. The authors constitute a "who's who" of the Russian Futurist literati. This influential publication achieved the goal of David Burliuk, himself a poet and painter, to unite both visual artists and writers under the banner of the Hylaea movement; he is credited as a founder of this movement. Burliuk was aided in the enterprise by the painter Alexandra Exter, who spent six months per year in France or Italy, where she came into contact with Fernand Léger and the Italian Futurists. She played an active role in the production of the books published in 1914. Reproductions of her paintings appeared in the Journal.

## Bibliography/Sources

<http://www.andrei-nakov.org/en/exter.html>.

<http://www.alexandra-exter.net/en/fantasmeees.html>. Official site set up by Andrei Nakov.

<http://www.incorm.eu/Biogs/Exter.pdf>.

<http://www.moma.org>

There are plenty of images on Google, but not all have been authenticated.

Sue Hamburge, April 2011