

**Sergei Eisenstein: *Drawings***

**Frieze Masters**

October 3 – 7, 2018

Alexander Gray Associates

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## ***Ecstasy and Embarrassment: Sergei Eisenstein's Drawings***

by Ian Christie

Sergei Eisenstein was hardly a well-behaved official artist of the USSR, despite winning both the Order of Lenin and the Stalin Prize. Those who actually knew him spoke of his exuberant sense of humour, love of detective stories and risqué jokes, which may seem surprising in view of the dark decades he lived through under Stalin's tyranny. I had personal experience of this side of Eisenstein when I was preparing an exhibition of his drawings in 1987 at the British Film Institute. The library of Ivor Montagu, Eisenstein's close friend, who had recently died, arrived at the Institute, and I remember a small photograph falling out of one book. That image, which he must have sent to Montagu, showed him sitting astride a giant phallic cactus in Mexico, with the inscription, 'makes people jealous'.

We published the photograph as a postcard accompanying the 1988 Oxford Museum of Modern Art and Hayward Gallery exhibition, *Eisenstein: Life and Art*, and it proved immensely popular, helping to introduce what would soon be the post-Soviet world to a new image of its most famous filmmaker. Our exhibition apparently helped to change the attitude of the film critic David Thomson, formerly hostile to Eisenstein. In the latest edition of his influential *Biographical Dictionary of Cinema*, Thomson enthused over 'the crowded life of Eisenstein, the range of things he read, saw and was intrigued by', and especially 'the astonishing graphic work that seemed to spill out on paper like ink, or blood; and the delight in dance, gesture and theatrical moments.'

Nothing like a convert, of course! But for Thomson, there is a 'gaiety, a frenzy and a cruelty in the drawings that is missing in the movies'. I would argue these are amply present in Eisenstein's famous films, from *The Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin* to *Alexander Nevsky* and his truncated masterpiece *Ivan the Terrible*. But we need to be taught, or encouraged, to see these qualities beneath the contours of over-familiar stereotypes. Eisenstein loved 'types' – one of his artist heroes was the caricaturist and social commentator Daumier. An early drawing, made in his mid-teens during the Great War, is a virtuoso gallery of 150 Petrograd citizens waiting in line for rations, each sharply individualised, and many interacting in what we can read as a foretaste of the crowd that would be brutally dispersed on the Odessa Steps of *Potemkin* just ten years later.

And other artists, as well as filmmakers, have certainly read the cruelty in many of Eisenstein's images. The most famous example is Francis Bacon's fusing of Velasquez's portrait of a pope with the bloodied face of an elderly woman on the steps in his *Study after Velasquez's Pope Innocent X*. The frozen scream in Bacon's 1953 painting comes by courtesy of Eisenstein. Examples of later filmmakers learning from the rhythms and gestures of his work are too numerous to list. But one example that Martin Scorsese demonstrated to me for a documentary, is how the violence in *Potemkin* influenced his own fight scenes in *Gangs of New York*.

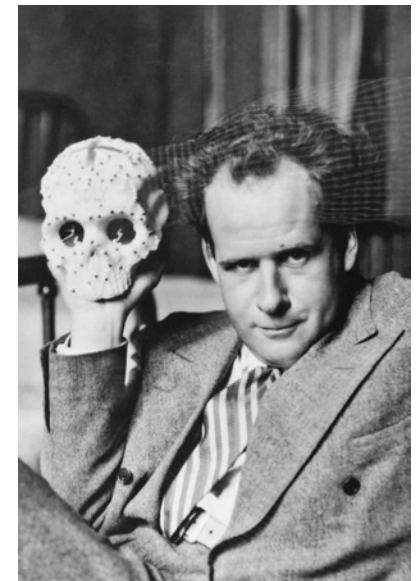
Some of the drawings being shown here bear the signs, quite literally, of coming from the filmmaker's extended stay in Mexico in 1931-2. Seizing hotel notepaper,



Sergei Eisenstein, 1931



Eisenstein on the set of *¡Que viva México!*, 1932



Sergei Eisenstein by Agustín Jiménez, 1931

as inspiration moved him, Eisenstein produced a series of grotesque couplings, titled with a knowing *double entendre*, 'In Pursuit of the Perfect Composition'. These are untypical in their use of hatching to create volume, whereas Eisenstein normally confined himself to an unbroken line, whose suggestive power he tried to analyse in a series of essays. But they are also typically shocking, or embarrassing, in their overt sexuality. If Eisenstein's films were obliged to remain chaste in the puritanical climate of Stalinism, then his riotously, sometimes savagely, sexual drawings may be seen as private counterpoint.

Many are frankly satirical, embellishing or subverting familiar cultural and religious icons. In Eisenstein's Mexico, angels, Madonnas and toreadors fornicate with abandon, as the iconography of church and the *corrida* are intercut. Knowing Eisenstein's encyclopaedic range of references, we can read these anthropologically, psychologically or even as commentaries on the literature inspired by Mexico, such as D. H. Lawrence, which he knew well. But we should also be cautious of seeing them as essentially symptomatic, revealing his 'real' feelings. In childhood, and from Mexico onwards, drawing seems to have been almost a daily practice for Eisenstein, and it served many functions, from recreation during long periods of enforced inactivity, to entertaining and even instructing his filmmaking collaborators. And, indeed, self-analysis. As the American scholar Joan Neuberger has noted, Eisenstein was fascinated by duality, and also by its denial in what we might term today 'non-binary'. If there is a theme running through his many kinds of drawing, it is surely the refusal to accept binaries, stereotypes, and his ecstatic embrace of the polymorphous and the perverse.



Sergei Eisenstein, 1920s

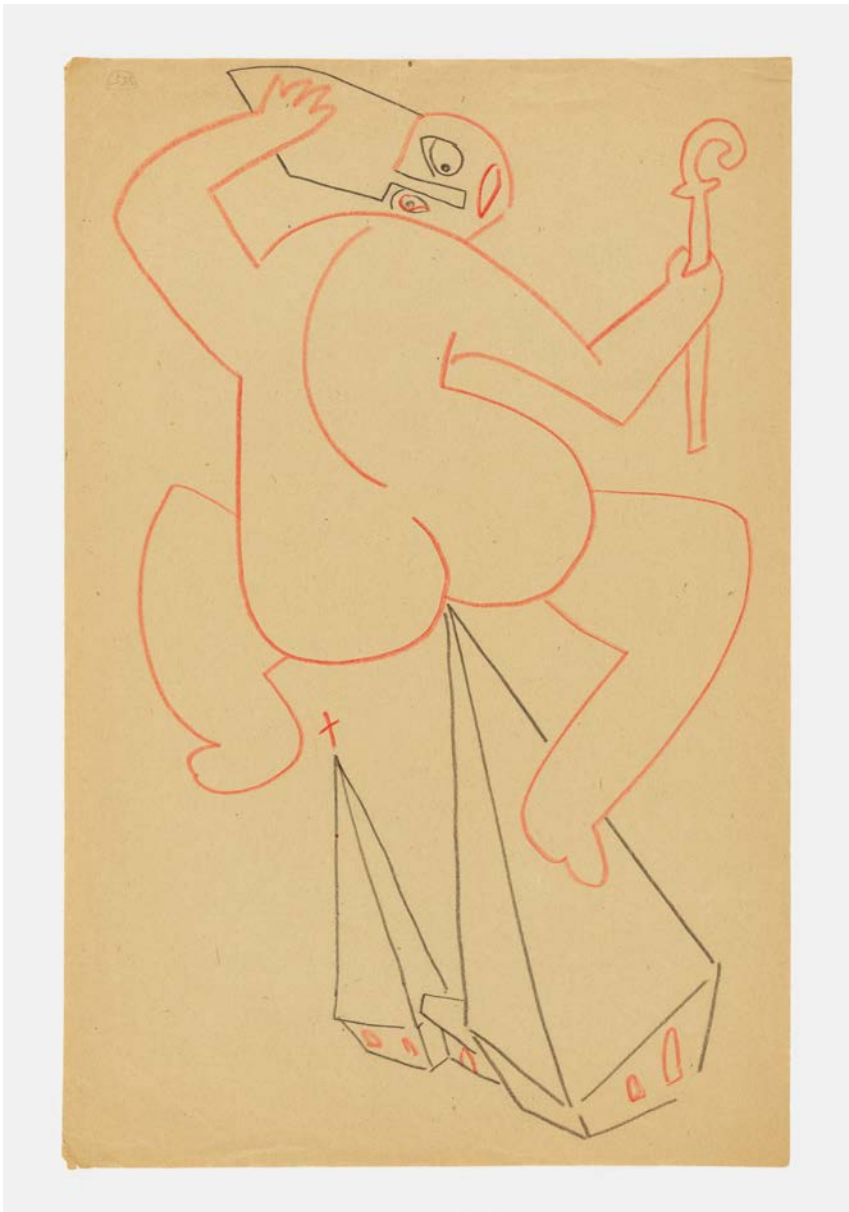
Ian Christie is a film historian, curator, broadcaster and consultant, and has been Anniversary Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College, University of London, since 1999.



Nikolai Cherkasov on the set of *Ivan the Terrible*, 1944



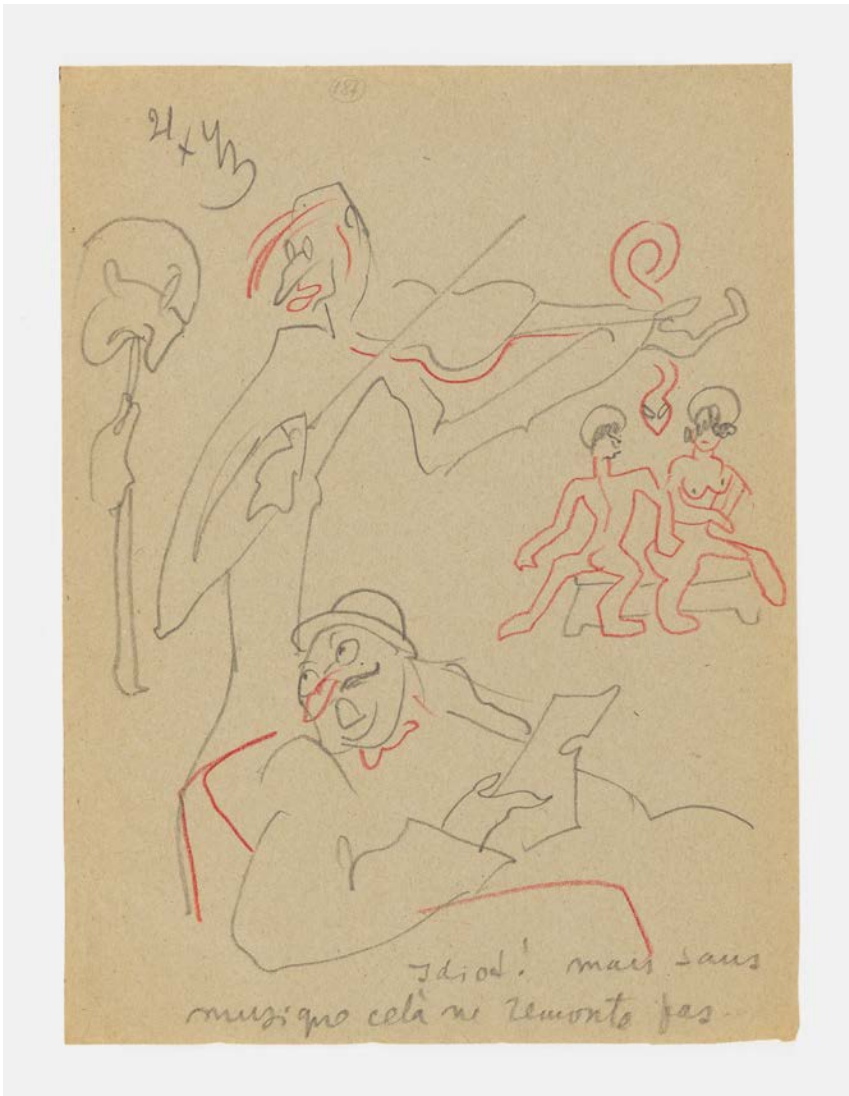
Sergei Eisenstein, 1926



Untitled, n.d., colored pencil on paper, 17.32h x 11.42w in (44h x 29w cm)



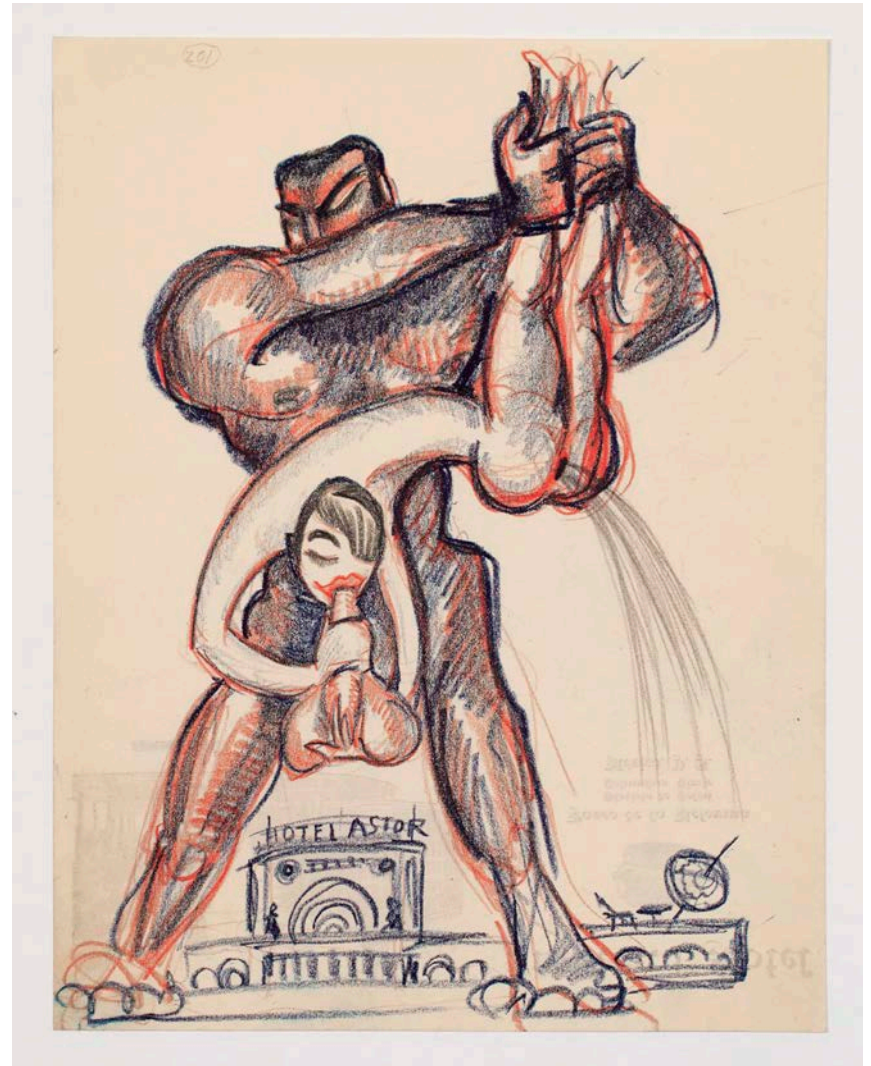
Group: Untitled, n.d., colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



Untitled, 1943, colored pencil on paper, 11.46h x 8.39w in (29.10h x 21.30w cm)



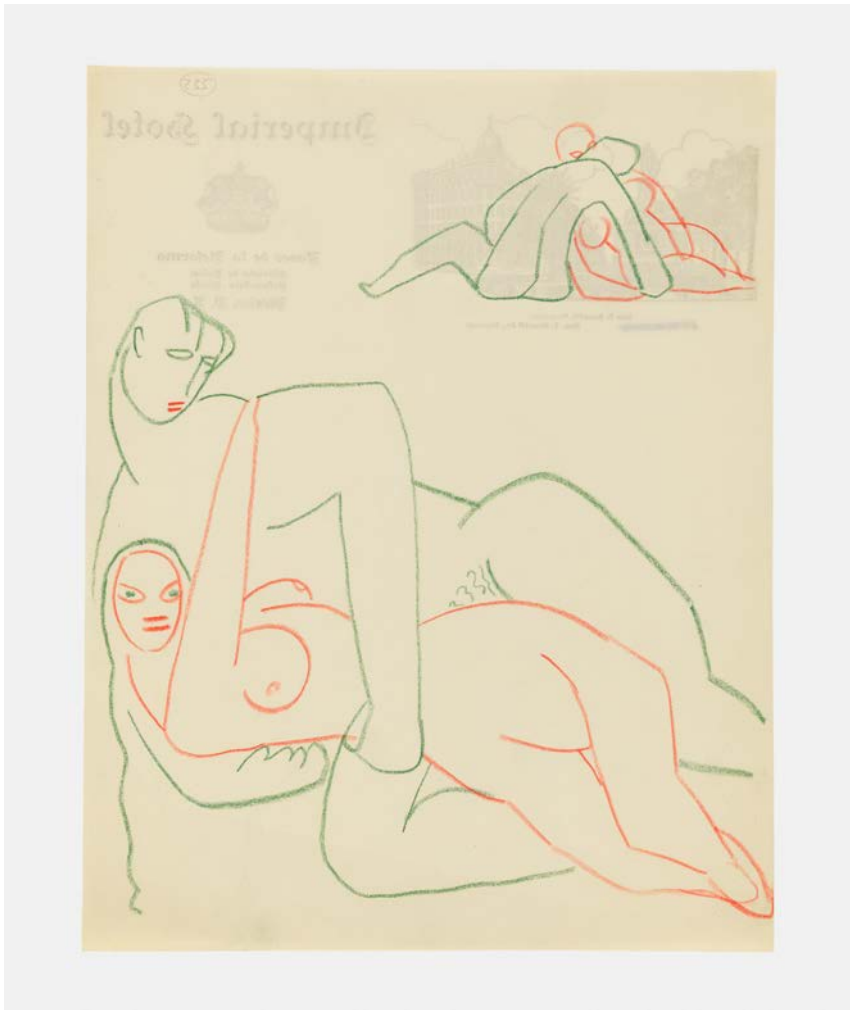
Group: Untitled, 1942–43, colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



Untitled, c. 1931, colored pencil on paper, 10.67h x 8.27w in (27.10h x 21w cm)





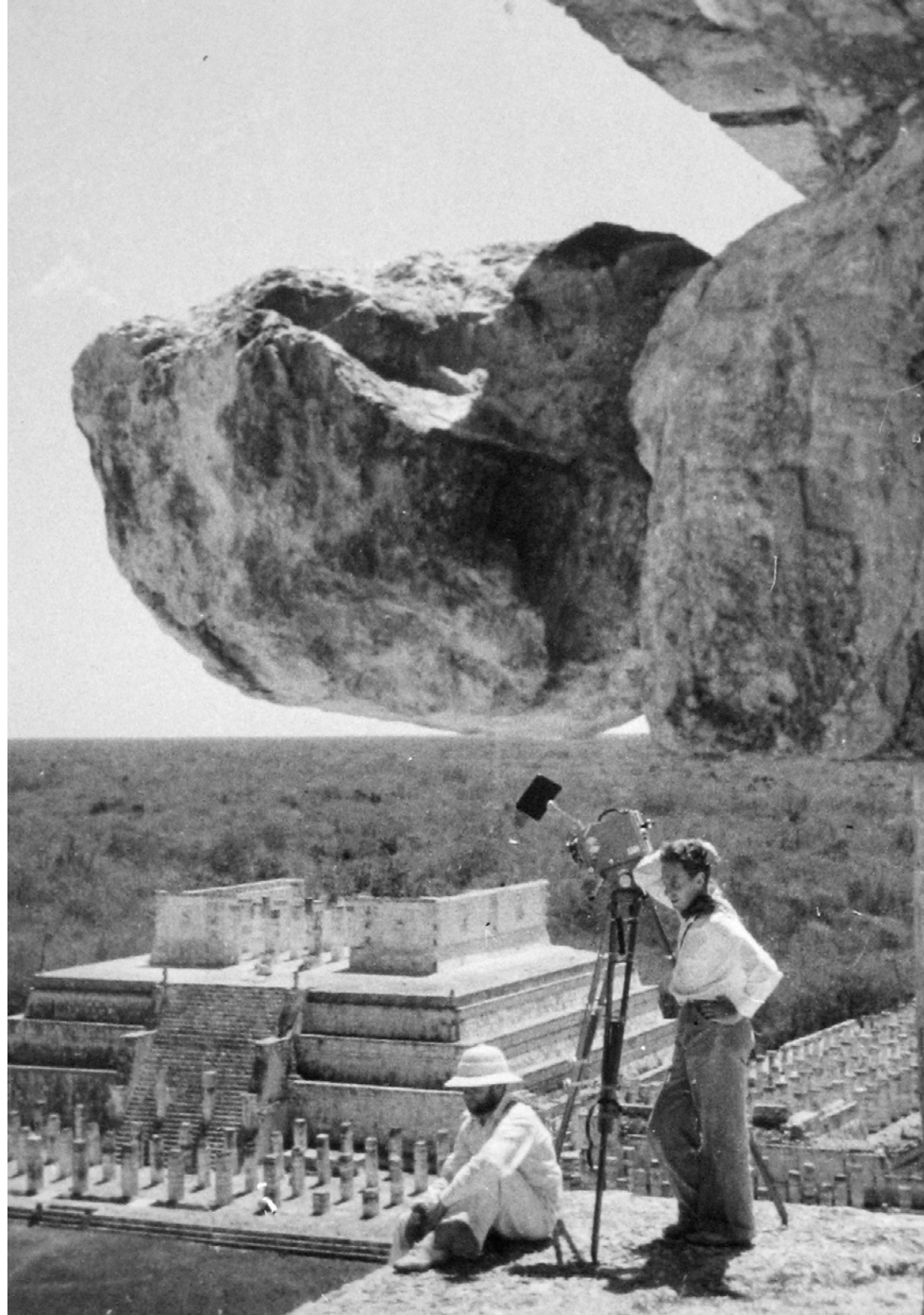


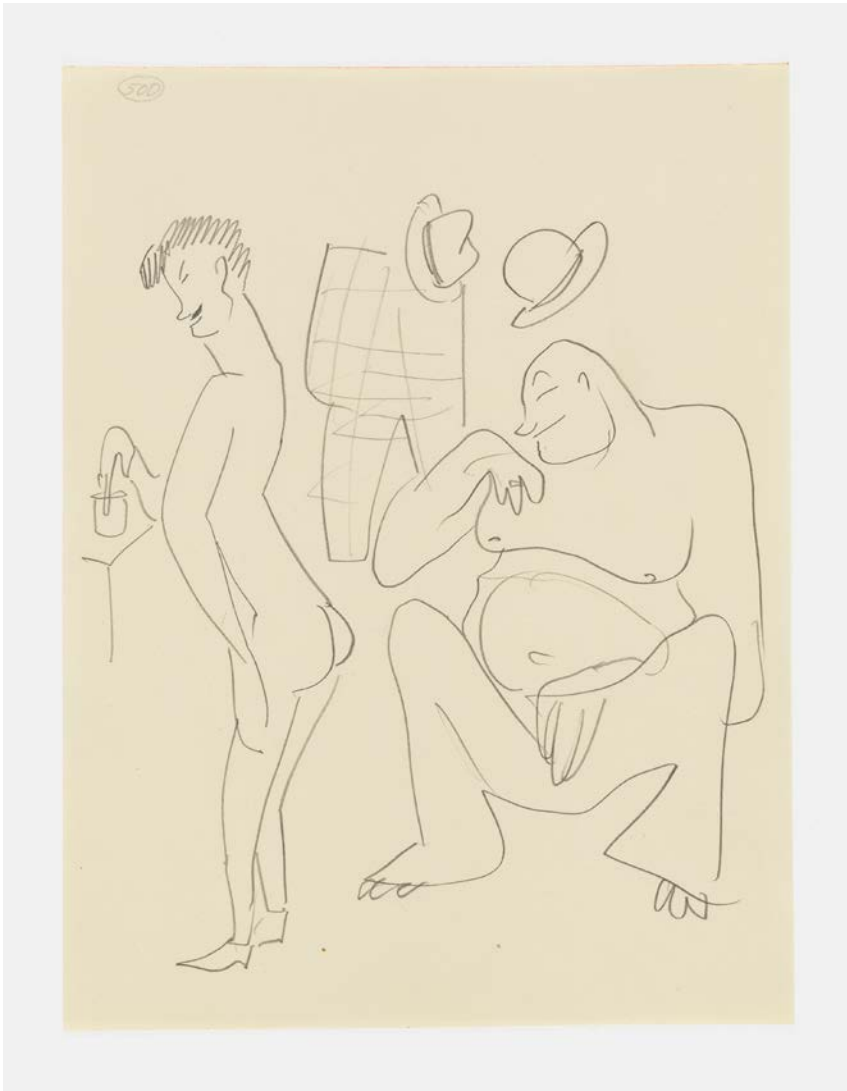
Untitled, n.d., colored pencil on paper, 10.63h x 8.27w in (27h x 21w cm)



Untitled, 1942, colored pencil on paper, 12.68h x 7.91w in (32.20h x 20.10w cm)

Sergei Eisenstein and Gregori Alexandrov, 1932

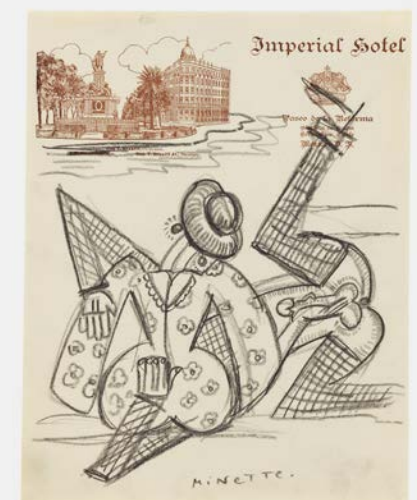




Untitled, n.d., graphite on paper, 10.87h x 8.23w in (27.60h x 20.90w cm)



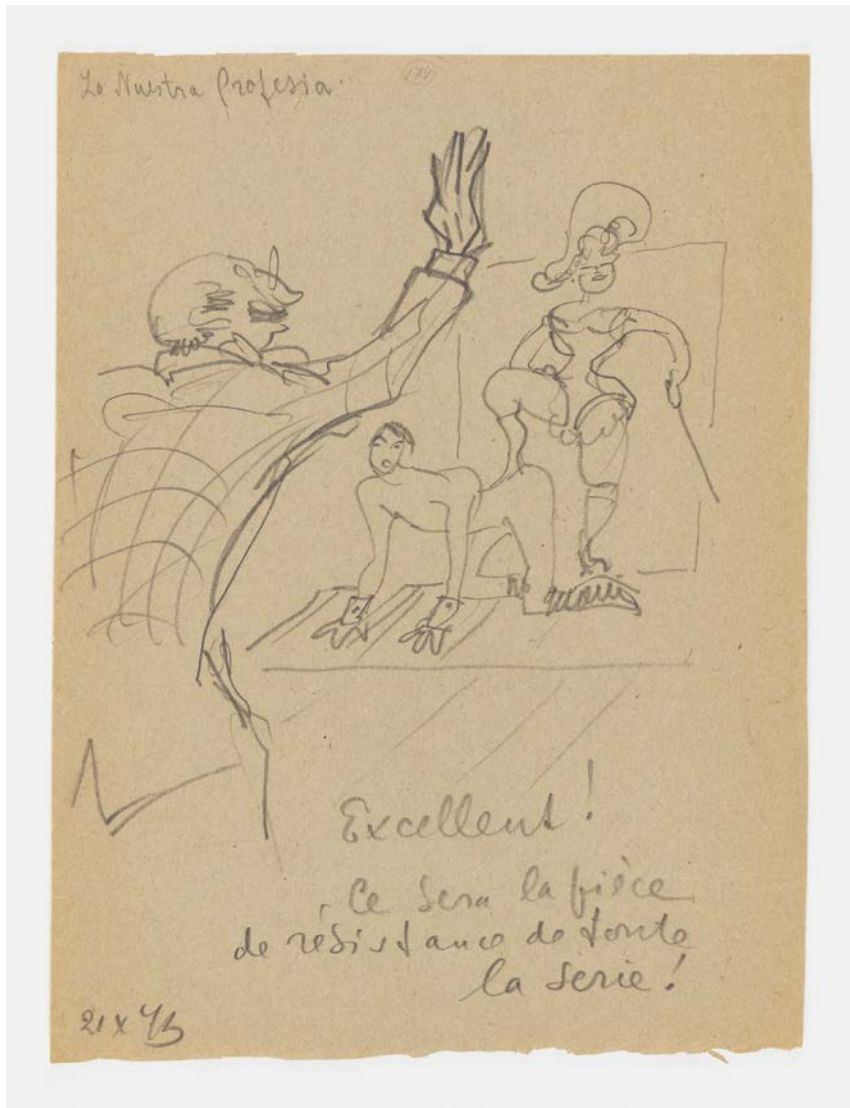
Group: Untitled, n.d., colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



Group: Untitled, c.1931, colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



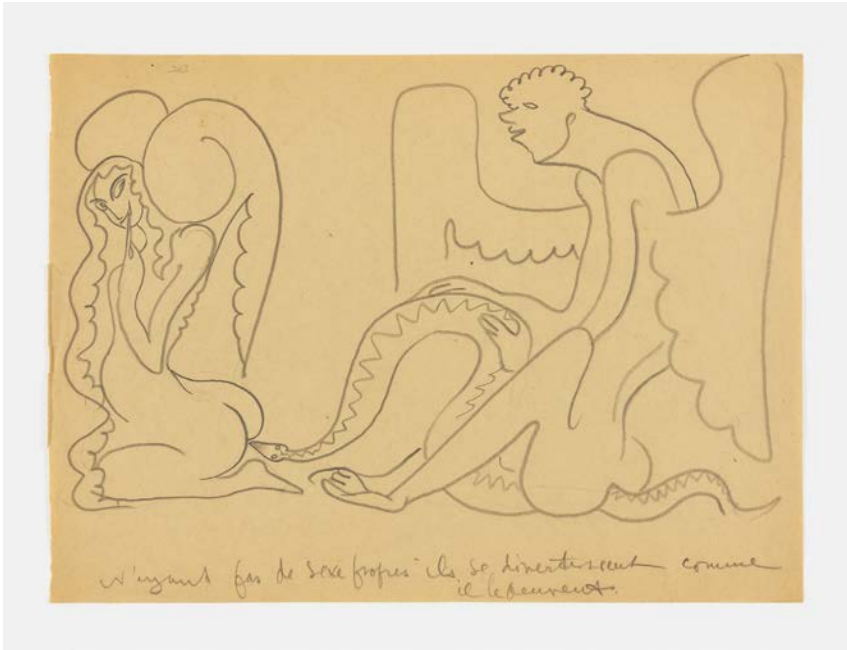
Untitled, c.1931, detail, colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



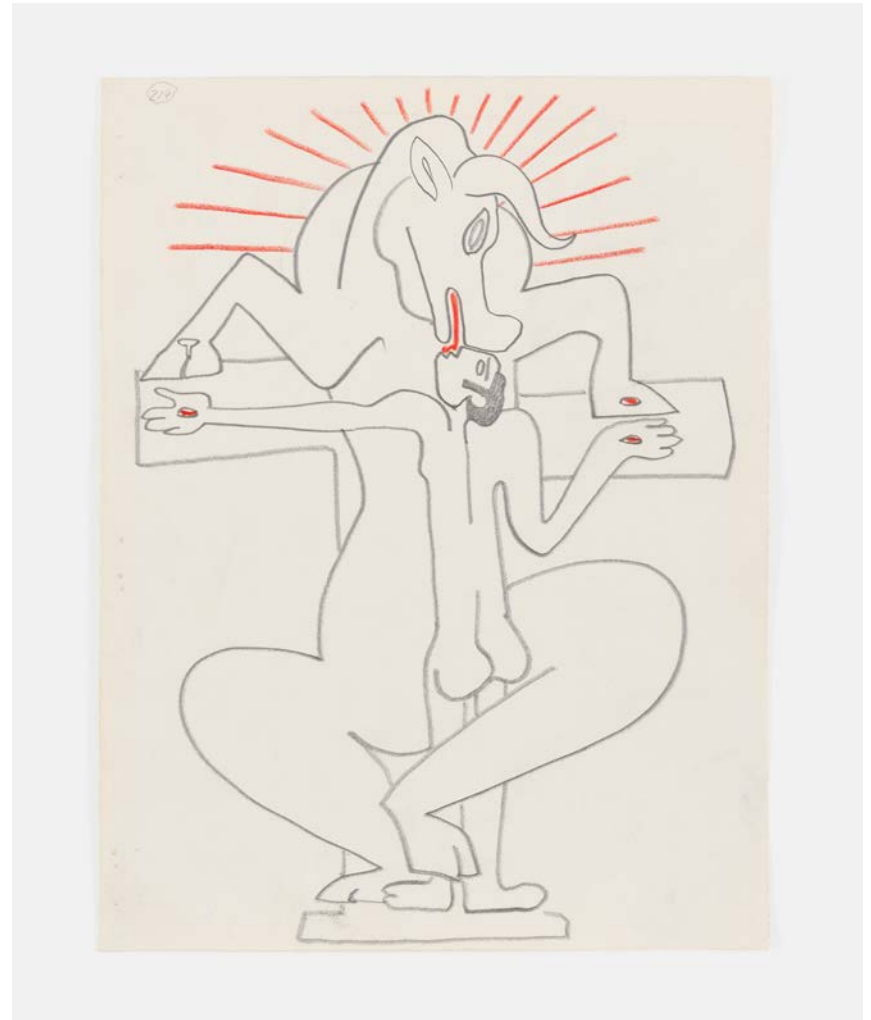
Untitled, 1943, graphite on paper, 11.46h x 8.39w in (29.10h x 21.30w cm)



Group: Untitled, 1942–43, colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



Untitled, n.d., graphite on paper, 10.67h x 14.69w in (27.10h x 37.30w cm)



Untitled, n.d., colored pencil on paper, 11.14h x 8.50w in (28.30h x 21.60w cm)





Untitled, 1942, graphite on paper, 10.08h x 7.48w in (25.60h x 19w cm)



Group: Untitled, n.d., colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



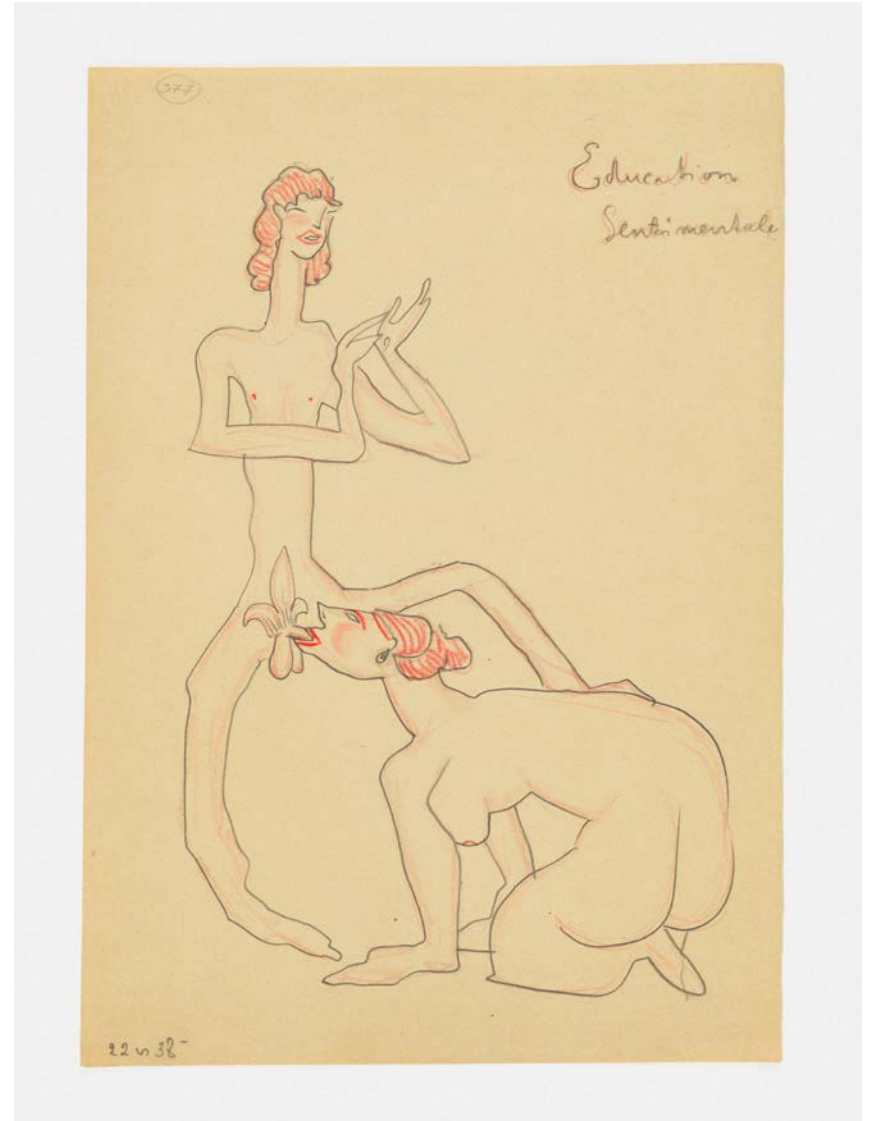
Untitled, n.d., colored pencil on paper, 13h x 8.46w in (33h x 21.5w cm)



Group: Untitled, n.d., colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable

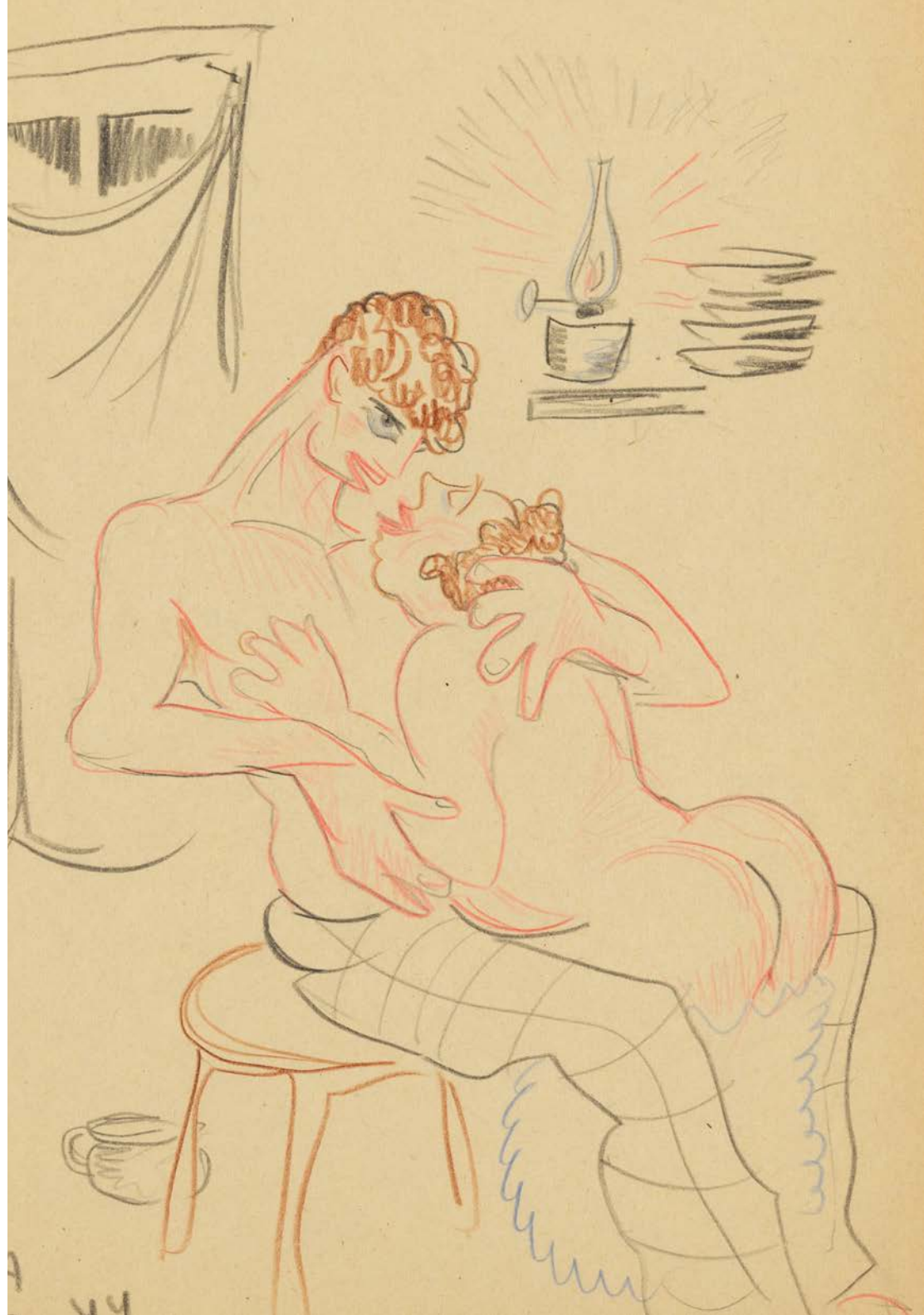


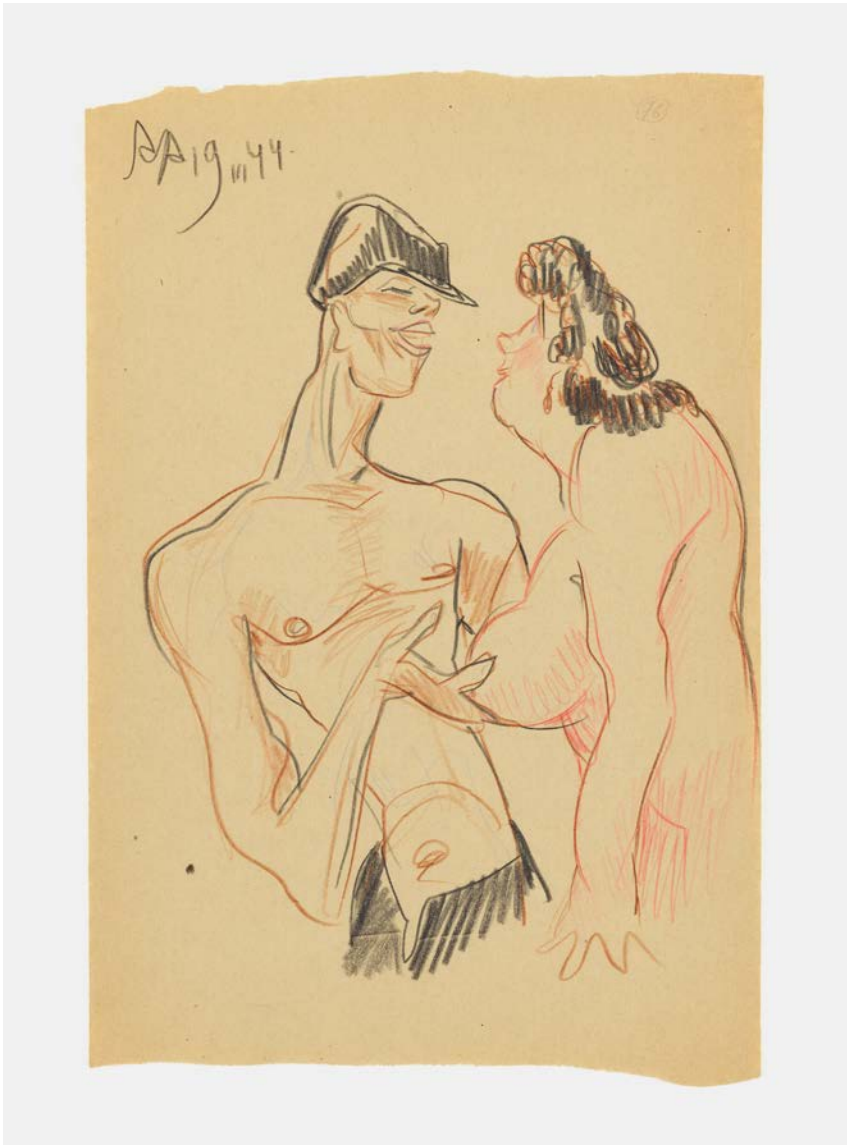
Untitled, c.1931, colored pencil on paper, 8.27h x 10.63w in (21h x 27w cm)



Untitled, 1938, colored pencil on paper, 11.69h x 8.15w in (29.70h x 20.70w cm)

Untitled, 1942-44, detail





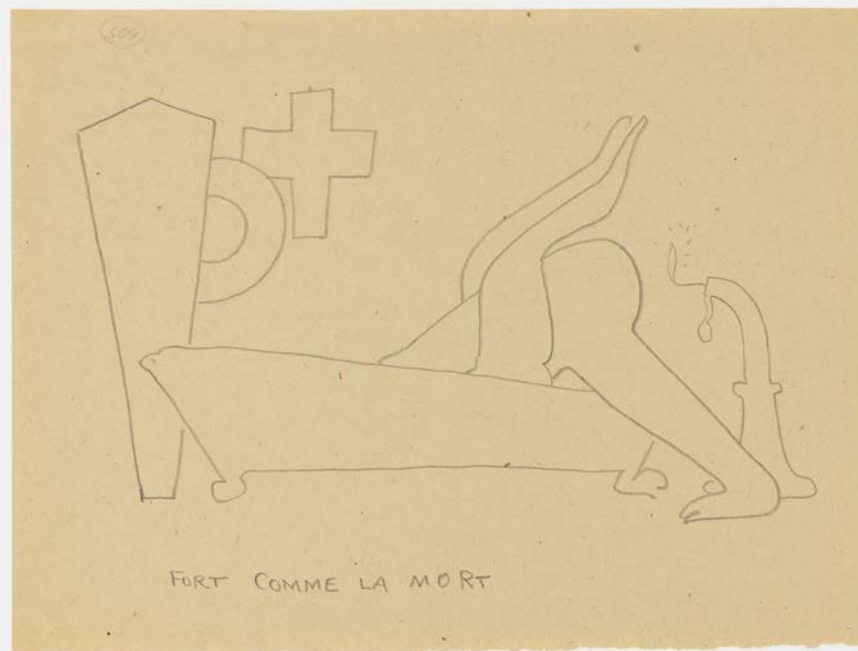
Untitled, 1944, color pencil on paper, 12.64h x 8.46w in (32.1h x 21.5w cm)



Group: Untitled, 1942–44, colored pencil and graphite on paper, dimensions variable



Untitled, n.d., graphite on paper, 8.54h x 11.38w in (21.7h x 28.9w cm)



Untitled, n.d., graphite on paper, 8.5h x 11.42w in (21.6h x 29w cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

**About Frieze Masters**

Frieze Masters is a fair which presents a contemporary perspective on historical art. The fair features leading galleries showcasing art made before the year 2000, ranging from the ancient era and old masters to the late 20th century. Frieze Masters' Spotlight is a section of the fair dedicated to 20th century art made all over the world, from Latin America to the Middle East.

Alexander Gray Associates

510 West 26 Street

New York NY 10001

United States

Tel: +1 212 399 2636

[www.alexandergray.com](http://www.alexandergray.com)

