

WAR and EROTICISM



IN SERGEI EISENSTEIN'S DRAWINGS
1941–1948



By Marianna Roshal-Stroeva

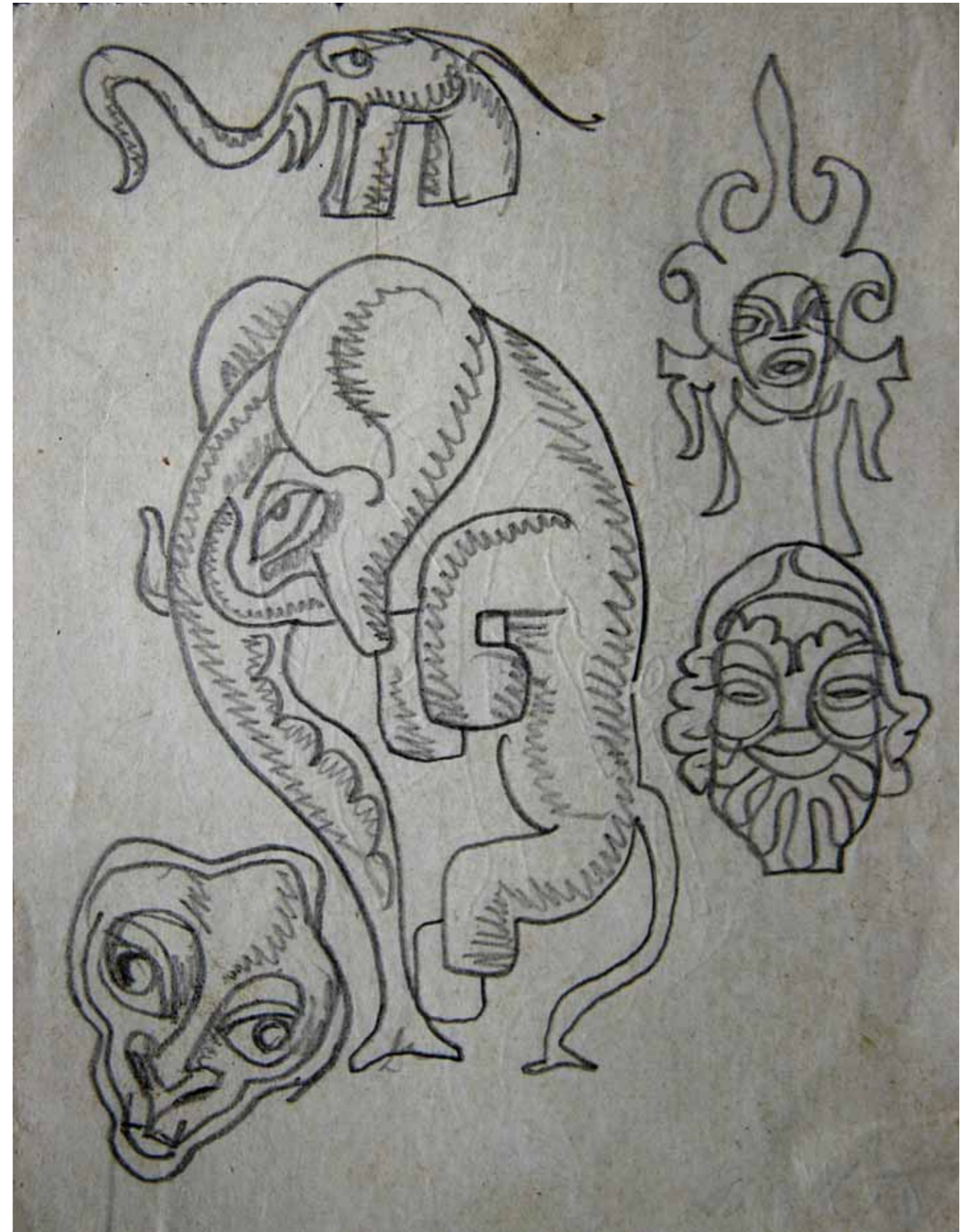
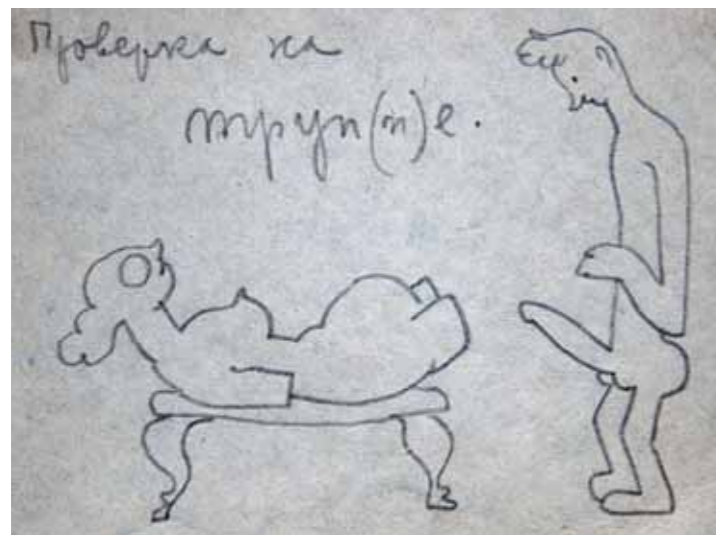
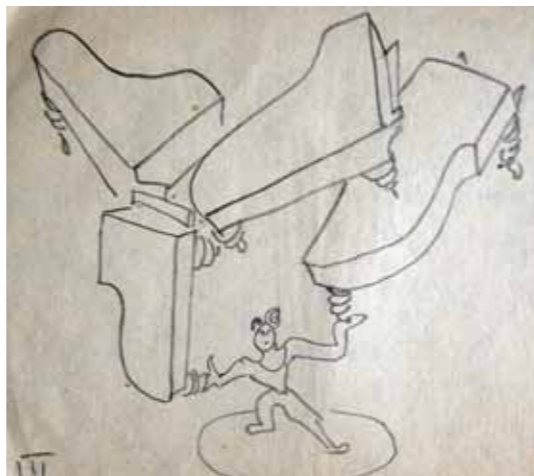
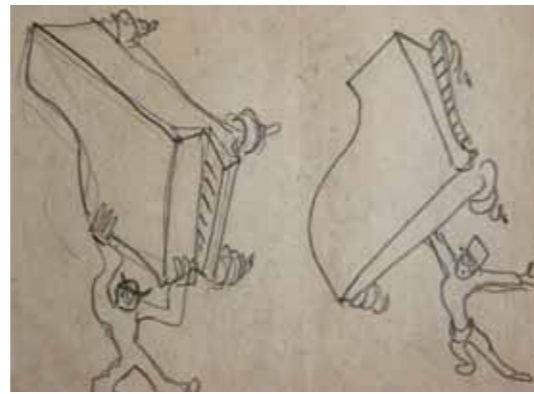
Sergei Eisenstein gave the first drawing to my father, Grigori Roshal, back in 1923. At that time, they were studying and working together at Meyerhold's. They regarded Meyerhold as the greatest genius of stage directing. Later on, both of them left Meyerhold and threw in their lot with the theatre and, shortly afterwards, with cinema.

The friendship between my father and Sergei Eisenstein lasted for many years. This acquaintance grew closer after my father married my mother, Vera Stroeva, who later also became a famous film director. Sergei Mikhailovich (Eisenstein) preferred to celebrate his birthday at my parents' house, and not only together with their mutual friends, but also with me and my classmates, as he and I were born on the same day.

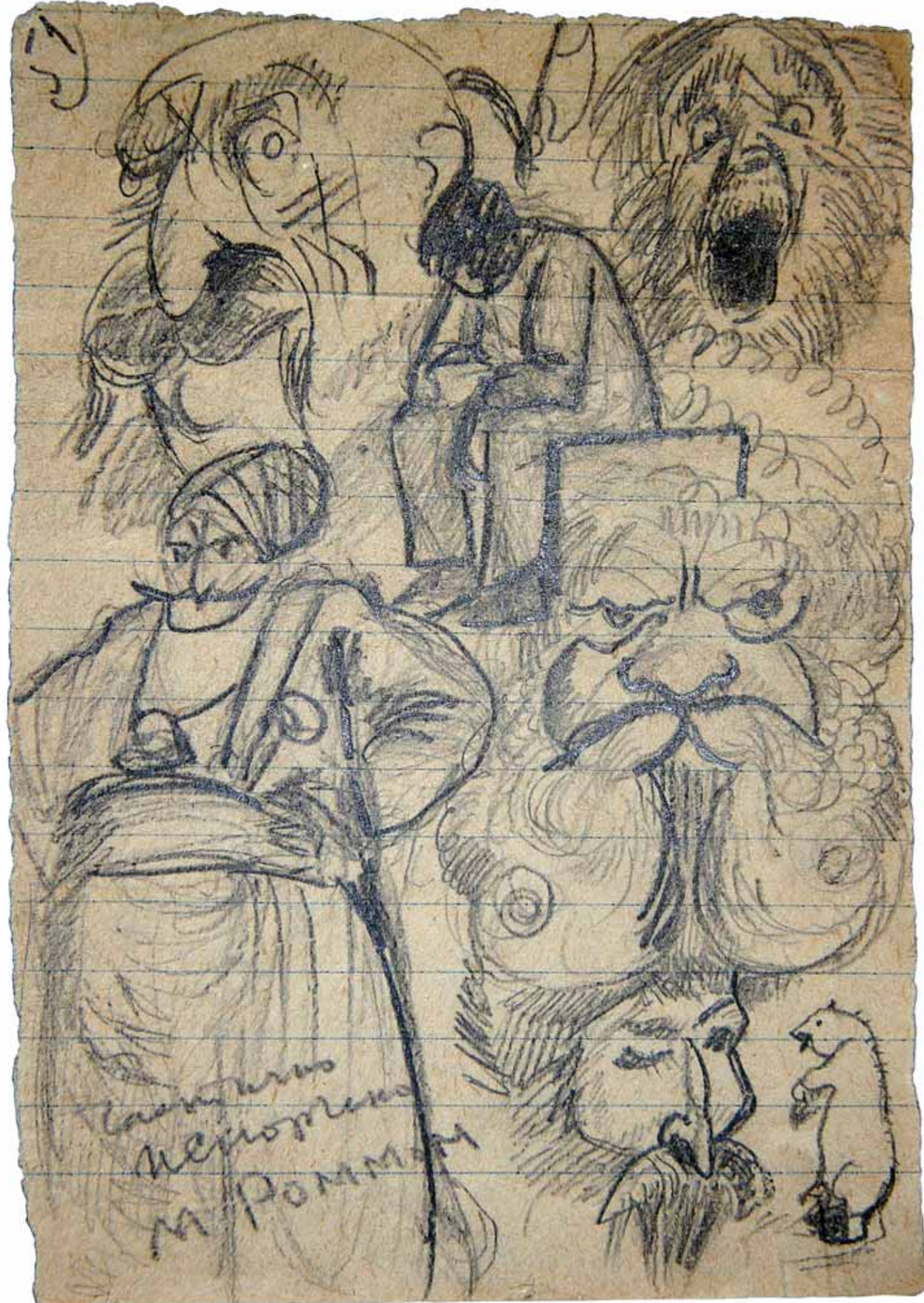
He signed one of his presents to me "On our mutual birthday" despite our vast, 27 years, difference in age. Right away, Eisenstein won me over by his irresistible charm, wit and intelligence. My feelings towards him never changed right up to his death, neither while I was working on editing "Ivan the Terrible", nor when he was the professor during my studies at the production faculty in VGIK (All-Soviet State Institute of Cinematography). Sergei Mikhailovich amazed me on every visit with a dazzling performance of some ultra-fashionable dance he had learnt in America. The last time was on the 23rd of November 1941, several months before the Soviet Union entered the Second World War.

My father was completing the filming of "Delo Artamonov" ("The Artamonovs' Case") based on Maxim Gorky's novel, when the war started. German pilots even tried to bomb the bridge, a prop which had been built on the film set. Eisenstein, or Eisen as we called him, watched the film. His imagination was seized by the scene where drunken merchants were inflamed when a local diva, brought to them on top of a grand piano, removed her clothes. The local diva was played by the star of Soviet cinema, Lubov Orlova. Inspired by this, Eisenstein drew a series of sketches on the subject of the grand piano. In one of the sketches, the legs of the grand piano were turning into jet engines; in another a female body was sprawled on top of a grand piano. The sketch recalls the line from Balmont's poem: — "The grand piano was open and the strings inside vibrated." He wittily rephrased this as: — "Roshal was open and the strings inside vibrated" ("*grand piano*" in Russian is called "*royal*" which rhymes with "*Roshal*"). That totally conformed to my father's impetuous temperament.

During the war all of us were evacuated to Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan and, at the start, even lived in the same house, nicknamed "The Laureates", because so many of Stalin's Prize laureates resided there. Like us, Eisenstein was living in a communal flat together with Boris Chirkov, the famous actor, and his ballerina wife. Sergei Mikhailovich's room resembled a monastic cell. It was narrow, and painted white, with nothing but black prayer beads hanging on the wall. The room was like his black and white drawings.



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At that time, Eisenstein continued the filming of his greatest and most contentious picture "Ivan the Terrible". Images of Tsar Ivan haunted him. In one of the drawings in our collection Ivan is depicted in the centre surrounded by very many disparate figures. The effect produced is of an original but nonetheless coherent work of art.

Eisenstein wrote in his diary that filming "Ivan the Terrible" was similar to committing slow suicide. He understood that Ivan's image in his version would inevitably be associated with the All Peoples Leader (*Stalin*). He was not mistaken. The second part of the film was banned by Stalin, with orders to destroy the negative. However, as it is known, "manuscripts do not burn", and, miraculously, the film was saved.

Drawings of the war period are obviously filled with double bitterness. Take, for example, the drawing where parts of the male body are floating in the air. It sub-consciously recalls one of Mayakovsky's lines "And in the west it is snowing, red snow of juicy human meat". Eisenstein's work, however, is not that gloomy; it is more in the nature of black humour type. In similar style is the drawing depicting a sexually deprived man's necrophiliac affection for a female stump lying on an operating table.

Other drawings from the same period are full of Eastern themes. Some relate to the flora and fauna of Kazakhstan but his subject matter is wide-ranging - India with its elephants and snakes, as well as theatrical and cinematic subjects.



Eisenstein was a brilliant graphic artist. His sketches were first published when he was not yet 14 years old. Often he created his drawings in one go, without taking the pencil off the paper. His art is always monumental, even the smallest of his works. During the war Eisenstein gave my father more than 100 drawings, some of them drawn on lined paper from school note books. They include sketches recalling Mexico, as well as angels, devils and other fantastical creatures. All these drawings share an element of hidden erotic tension.

His return to Moscow brought one blow after another. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein was forced to confess publicly that his film was a perversion of history and the showing of the second part of "Ivan the Terrible" was banned. (Even the negative was destined for destruction but one of the film editors, Fira Tabak, in a desperate act of bravery, helped to save one copy which she hid at her house). As a further punishment he was no longer allowed to lecture at the VGIK. All this brought on Eisenstein's first heart attack.

On his birthday, the 23rd of January 1948, Eisenstein was not feeling very well. My mother and I visited him at home. Sergei Mikhailovich had prepared a present for me in advance. It was a little antique beaded bag. A small ribbon tied his American business card to the bag. On the card he wrote "Dear Contemporary, unlike your teacher never cast pearls..." I have strictly observed his ordinance and never "cast pearls before swine".

Eisenstein passed away on the 11th of February 1948. He was 50 years old.