

Feature



A Chief of the First Born Philip Gust*

When designing the costume for a chief of the Black Pirates from the “John Carter of Mars” books, the author turned to the attire of a Tongan warrior for inspiration.

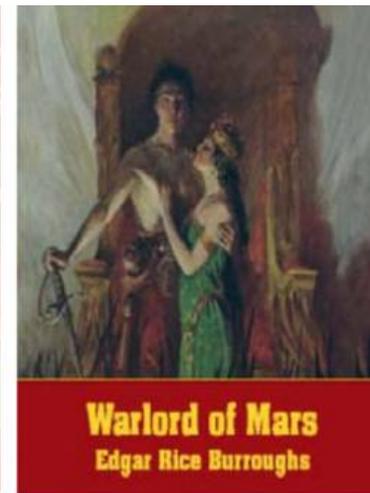
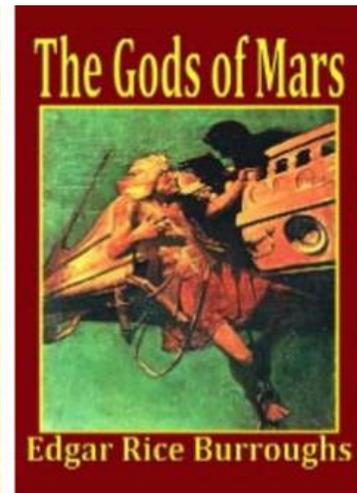
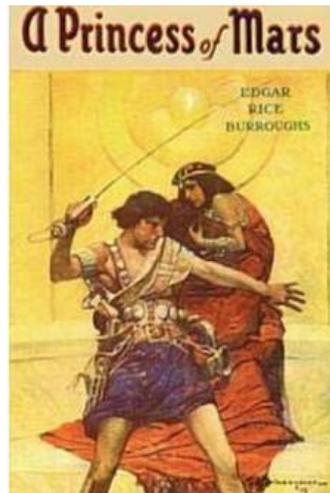
In late 2008, four teams of costumers decided to see what it was like to design costumes for characters, based only on their descriptions in a book. My wife, Kathe, and I were one of the teams. We called our experiment “Costuming by the Book.” Hollywood and television costume designers face this problem whenever they work on a movie or a TV show based on a book. All of us were more used to recreating historical costumes or costumes from sci-fi/fantasy movies or shows.

We decided to take on the Edgar Rice Burroughs epic “John Carter of Mars” series because we had all read the books when we were younger, and thought that they would make a great movie. Since there were many books in the series, we decided to

focus on the first three: *A Princess of Mars* (1917), *The Gods of Mars* (1918), and *Warlord of Mars* (1919). These books introduced most of the principal characters and races of Barsoom (Mars).

Part way into the project, Disney announced that they planned to make a “John Carter of Mars” movie. We were happy that Disney saw the potential, but also a little nervous about how they would handle the characters, and about having our designs compared to the “official” ones from the movie.

We decided to capitalize on the publicity and get a jump on the movie by presenting our designs at the 2009 BayCon, a regional sci-fi/fantasy conference in the San Francisco Bay area where we all lived.



First three books about John Carter of Mars served as inspiration for “Costuming by the Book” project.

We would have a panel where the four teams present their designs. Our cover story was that a major studio was planning a *John Carter* movie and invited four teams of designers to “pitch” their concepts. The winner would land the coveted job of designing the costumes for the movie and forever define the look of Barsoom for the public. The teams actually worked cooperatively throughout the process, and used social media to discuss issues, preview designs, and solicit feedback.

As luck would have it, the director of the BayCon art show was a costumer, and offered the teams space to exhibit our design drawings in the art show as well.

We were surprised by the level of interest in both the exhibit, and the panel.

From the opening, there were always crowds around the art show exhibit, looking at the drawings and commenting on the different approaches of the four teams. Teams took turns at the exhibit to answer questions. The large room where the panel was held on the last day of the conference was packed, and the questions at the end of the presentations benefitted from the audience having a chance to study the drawings in advance.

A special “[Visions of Barsoom](#)” issue of *The Virtual Costumer* in August 2009 (below) featured the designs, a report of the panel and art show, and highlights of the discussion at the end of the panel. A follow-up article, “[Return to Barsoom](#)” in the May 2012 issue featured several members of the original teams discussing their own designs, and *John Carter* costume designer Mayes Rubeo commenting on her versions and design process.



"Visions of Barsoom" issue of *The Virtual Costumer*.

Each team was asked to design a costume for each the three principal characters: John Carter, Tars Tarkas, and “the incomparable” Dejah Thoris. They could also choose several other characters to help illustrate their vision for the movie. Kathe and I decided to do at least one design for each of the five races on Barsoom.

Our design approach was to map our Martians onto various Earth cultures, and we began looking for design elements to carry over, in much the same way that traditional Japanese clothing provided elements for the



A Barbary pirate, Pier Francesco Mola 1650.

Star Wars films Although we did not strictly follow traditional ethnic garment designs, we used pieces that made sense within the confines of the story.

The green Tharks were based on nomadic Eurasian cultures like the Huns. For the yellow Okarians, we chose the tribal cultures of of East Africa. The white Therns were inspired by the Sem priests of ancient Egypt. Our red Martians came from East India and Indonesia. That left us with the race of black Martians, known as the “First Born.”

The black Martians were the most difficult to place. They were the only sea-

farer people, and were feared as pirates. According to one of their leaders, Dator Xodar, in *The Gods of Mars* (1918), “The First Born of Barsoom... are the race of black men of which I am a Dator, or as the lesser Barsoomians would say, Prince.” They use the title “First Born” because they claim to be the oldest race on the planet.

We knew that we did not want the obvious pirates of the Caribbean, so we considered several alternatives. The next most obvious are the Barbary Pirates (left), who operated from North Africa from the 16th to 19th centuries. The area was known as the Barbary Coast, a term derived from the name of its Berber inhabitants. They plundered much of Europe and England before being subdued by the European powers following the Napoleonic wars and the French conquest of Algiers in 1830.

We also considered modern-day Somali pirates (below) who were much in the news at the time. These pirates were



A Somali pirate with weapons aboard a vessel. Photo: [Jan van Rijn / Digital Journal](#).

driven by economic hardship caused by foreign boats taking advantage of the Somali civil war, which caused lost fishing income to local communities

However, neither of these groups nor any of the others we considered fit the social structure or the extreme pride of lineage of the black Martians. According to Dator Xodar in Burroughs's third book, *Warlord of Mars*, "There is but one race of true and immortal humans on Barsoom. It is the race of black men."

We finally gave up on pirates and decided instead to focus on seafaring cultures who prided themselves in their history and traditions, and whose clothing somehow reflected their lineage.

One day, I ran across a photo (right) that made everything click into place. It was of a Tongan warrior chief that was taken at the Polynesian Cultural Center on the island of Oahu, Hawai'i. The chief is in ceremonial attire that includes a *tupenu* (skirt) and a *ta'ovala* (mat) worn around the waist and kept in place by a belt of coconut fiber. (Prestigious old belts made of human hair were also used.) On his ankles and upper arms are feather leis, and around his neck is a crescent necklace made of boar's teeth. His face shows either painted or tattooed symbols.

It was a powerful image that also fit in well with the physicality and overall appearance of a chief of the "First Born." Armed with this photo, I set off to adapt the



Tongan warrior chief in ceremonial attire. Photo: Polynesian Cultural Center.

costume to the physical conditions and the culture of the black men of Barsoom.

I decided to carry over certain elements of the costume directly, starting with the skirt. The Tongan warrior wears a skirt of *tapa* cloth, made from the *tutu* (inner bark) of the *hiapo* (paper mulberry tree). There are forests of giant trees in several areas on Barsoom, but based on the [Barsoom Glossary](#), the most suitable source for plant material to make something similar to *tapa* seems to be the *mantalia*, a thick-foliaged tree found in groves on the dead sea bottoms. It is easy enough to harvest, and the bark would be discarded in any case since it is the inner pulp that is used as a food source.

The Tongan skirt in the photo is printed with designs that appeared to represent ideas and concepts in the Tongan culture. I confirmed this by consulting several reference sources, including *Pacific Symbols and the Stories They Share*, published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and was even able to identify a few of them.

To come up with designs for Dator Xodar's skirt, I looked for clues in the books about ideas and concepts that were significant to the people of Barsoom and the race of the "First Born." The first one came from a passage in *The Warlords of Mars* (1919):

"In the shadows of the forest that flanks the *crimson plain by the side of the lost sea of Korus in the valley Dor*,

Designs for Dator Xodar



River Iss



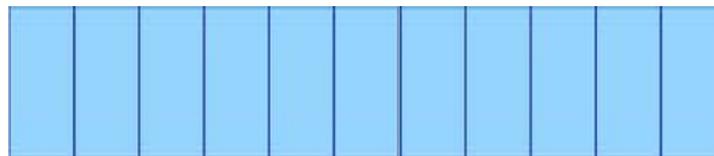
Tree of Life in the valley of Dor



Crimson plain in the valley of Dor beneath the hurtling moons of Mars



Buds from the Tree of Life



Lost sea of Korus

beneath the hurtling moons of Mars, speeding their meteoric way close above the bosom of the dying planet, I crept stealthily along..." (*emphasis added*)

In *The Gods of Mars* (1918), John Carter's friend, Tars Tarkas says:

"There was but one conclusion to reach when all efforts to locate you had failed, and that, that you had taken the *long, last pilgrimage down the mysterious River Iss, to await in the Valley Dor upon the shores of the Lost Sea of Korus* the beautiful Dejah Thoris, your princess." (*emphasis added*)

Later, in the same book, Dator Xodar explains the origin of the race of black men to John Carter:

"We trace our lineage unbroken, direct to the *Tree of Life, which flourished in the centre of the Valley of Dor* twenty-three million years ago." (*emphasis added*)

Finally, Dator Xodar explains their creation myth and the Tree of Life:

"*The buds from which the plant men blossomed resembled large nuts about a foot in diameter, divided by double partition walls into four sections... and in the fourth the primeval black man of Barsoom.*" (*emphasis added*)

Armed with these clues, I created the designs (left) for use on the skirt and elsewhere on Dator Xodar's costume.

The drawing at right shows how I laid out the designs on the skirt in a similar way to those on the Tongan skirt that I used as my model. I decided to make the skirt somewhat shorter than the Tongan *tupenu* seen in the photo, and also omitted the ta'ovala mat beneath, to facilitate greater freedom of movement for the character during combat or while onboard his ship. I also replaced the feather leis of the Tongan chief with arm bands and boot cuffs that incorporate several of the designs originally created for the skirt.

Finally, the costume includes boots, and a leather harness and belt that are commonly worn on Barsoom, but not present in the Tongan costume. I'll have more to say about the harness shortly. Although footwear is not often described in the books, I wanted to include an element of traditional pirate wear. The boots with the top cuffs seemed practical and also served the purpose.

I selected the particular color scheme because it is slightly alien to modern eyes, and decidedly different to the colors used in traditional attire from Tonga or any of the other Pacific Islands. Although Burroughs occasionally mentions colors in the stories, he does not identify colors specifically associated with the "First Born." In addition to its alien appearance, I chose this blue and red color scheme for the designs because the colors appear prominently elsewhere in the books as the principal colors of John Carter's adopted city of Helium.



Dator Xodar. Design and illustration by Philip Gust.

In addition to designs representing the mythology of Barsoom, I also wanted to include ones specific to Dator Xodar. Once again, I went back to the books to find clues. While reading through *The Gods of Mars*, I ran across a passage where Burroughs has this to say about the race of black men:

“(E)ach was clothed in the wondrously wrought harness of his station and his house.”

This told me that the attire of the “First Born” included devices that are associated with both their family lineage and their rank, and that the harness is one of the articles of clothing that include them.

When designing the harness, I incorporated the distinctive crescent-shaped necklace of the Tongan warrior from the original photo. It occurred to me that the inverted crescent is similar in shape to the buds on the Tree of Life that gave rise to the race of black men, and are so revered by their culture. I decided that the crescent would be the symbol that identified Xodar's station as a Dator (chief) of the “First Born.”

At that point, I began to incorporate the inverted crescent shape into other parts of the design, including a row of them on the skirt representing buds that fell from the Tree of Life. I also incorporated the crescent on the pommel of his sword, the shape of his knife worn on his belt, and even his crescent shaped earring.

For a mark of his house, I decided that a badge depicting the “the crimson plain ...



Philip's and Kathe's costume drawings in BayCon 2009 art show.

in the Valley of Dor beneath the hurtling moons of Mars” would be used by members of his house, and gave it a prominent place on the skirt. The square design in the same position on the Tongan warrior's skirt is strangely similar to the one that I designed based on the passage in the book.

Kathe and I started with standard body outlines called “croquis” for our drawings. There are a number of websites that offer collections of them that can be printed, and there are also books of croquis that can be photocopied. We used a standard figure for each of the principal characters to make them easily identifiable, and chose different ones for other characters like Dator Xodar.

We drew in colored pencil on heavy 8-1/2” x 11” paper. Once I had sketched Dator Xodar's costume on his croquis in regular hard pencil and noted the colors, Kathe and I worked together to finish him since she is a much better colorist than I am. She first colored in the skin and hair. Then we chose versions of the other colors that worked best. After coloring, she added shading.

Finally, we took the finished drawings to Michaels Crafts and tried them out on different 12” x 12” backing papers until we found ones that we both liked. We mounted the drawings for display in the the art show (left), put on labels, and added quotes from the book and descriptions to explain the characters and costumes.

All of the costumers who worked on the “Costuming by the Book” project agreed that designing from these books was much more difficult than we expected. Detailed costume descriptions are rare throughout Burroughs's entire eleven volume series. It required careful reading and re-reading to find the hidden clues about the various garments. The approach of using Earth cultures as a starting point worked well for the designs that Kathe and I did, and I felt lucky to have found one that worked so well as an inspiration for Dator Xodar.

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.