ICONOCLAST

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The name Tina Modotti resonates various meanings to all that know of her—artist, model, muse, Communist, femme fatale, freedom fighter, revolutionary—yet, it is difficult to relegate her to any one description. Most importantly, she was an artist, an innovator that was not afraid of pushing the boundaries of photography. One sees her begin her career with a proclivity for the abstract, often photographing still-life and architecture with dynamic compositions and eccentric camera angles. As Modotti became deeply involved with the Communist Party her images became political, revealing the Mexican government’s neglect of its people. As her life changed, so did her view of the world. Through Modotti’s photographs, one sees her life develop, unfold, and bears witness to a spiritual metamorphosis fomented by her Communist ideals, empathy for the oppressed, and psychological struggles.

Modotti was born under her birth name Assunta Adelaide Luigia to Guiseppe and Assunta Modotti on August 16, 1896 in Udine, Italy. Her family was considered working class, and lived during the turn of the century, which was marked with a dearth of employment. This contributed to the moving back and forth the Modottis did during her childhood; they relocated to neighboring Austria, where they remained until Modotti was nine years old. Ultimately, Guiseppe moved his family back to Italy and proceeded to immigrate to America, taking with him the hope that he would one day send for his wife and children. Little is known from this period of Modotti’s life, but it is assumed that she quickly matured to help support her family in her father’s absence.

Modotti was on the verge of seventeen when she ventured to the United States to reunite with her father and sister, Mercedes. She found work as a seamstress and became involved in amateur theatre in San Francisco’s Italian community. During this time in San Francisco, Modotti met her soon-to-be partner, Roubaix de l’Abrie Richey (known as Robo), but the details
about how they actually met are unclear. One story of their union is that they met during the Panama-Pan Pacific Exposition in 1915; another version is that they were introduced by Richey’s sister, Marianne Richey, in 1917.\footnote{Letizia Argenteri, author of Tina Modotti: Between Art and Revolution, comments that Modotti and Richey fabricated a tale of their first encounter to make the story more appealing.\footnote{Ibid.} Nevertheless, they became companions quickly after meeting, and in 1918, Modotti began to sign her name as Modotti de Richey.\footnote{Ibid., 29.}} That same year they moved to Los Angeles and lived with Richey’s mother, grandmother, and sister. Modotti soon took up acting and made her Hollywood debut in the film The Tiger’s Coat (1920), and had supporting roles in Riding With Death (1920) and I Can Explain (1922).

Aside from Modotti’s ties to the silver screen, Richey was connected to the literary and art world, which had a profound effect on Modotti’s sense of culture. They welcomed fellow bohemians, artists, writers, and intellectuals into their home and often hosted gatherings where they shared radical points of view, critiqued the status quo, and discussed art, literature, music, and dance. A frequent guest of Richey and Modotti was Edward Weston, a fellow artist who later helped Modotti find a connection to the world through her camera lens. Modotti and Weston began an affair that led to an apprenticeship, business partnership, and friendship.

During the intellectual rendezvous at Modotti and Richey’s home, myriad guests of assorted creative backgrounds would attend; among them, Ricardo Gomez Robelo, a poet and art critic exiled from Mexico, would regale stories of the uprising and revolution—both in art and war—taking place, enticing the likes of Richey and Modotti. In December 1921, as the result of an invitation from Robelo, Richey traveled to Mexico and encountered the cultural rebirth

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 29.
following the Mexican Revolution (1910-20). He wrote letters to Modotti describing the beauty of Mexico’s striking landscape, architectural relics, and revolution of Mexican art. A short time later, Modotti embarked on a trip to bid farewell to her family before departing to Mexico, and during her journey received two telegrams from Richey—the first announcing his contraction of smallpox and the subsequent one, a request for her to return to California. Modotti ignored his appeal and rushed to Mexico City to meet him, but was denied visitation; Richey succumbed to the disease on February 9, 1922.

After Richey’s death, Modotti found solace in Weston not only as a lover, but as a friend and a mentor. She became interested in photography as a financial and artistic outlet and asked Weston to teach her the craft. They decided to move to Mexico along with Weston’s eldest son, Chandler, in August 1923, to begin a photography business and a new life in an exotic place. Mexico became Modotti’s epoch of inspiration, both in photography and radical politics; she captured photographs that illustrated the complexity of everyday objects, workers’ routines, and the suffering of the poor and marginalized; she also shot portraits for pecuniary means. One of her earliest photographs, *Open Doors* (1925; fig. 1), offers a view of her eye for abstracting camera angles and tonal compositions. Her work from this period was admired by the *Movimiento Estridentista*, an avant-garde art movement who—much like the Futurists—admired the beauty of machinery and a “radically modern esthetic.”

As Modotti became more comfortable with her camera, she and Weston’s styles diverged. Weston, not having experienced poverty as Modotti had, did not share her concern for the injustices experienced by second class citizens of Mexico. Modotti, knowing first-hand of the realities of class struggles, delved passionately into Communism and the fight for social

6. Ibid., 25.
equality. In December of 1924, Weston and Chandler returned to California, leaving Modotti in charge of the business they built together. During Weston’s absence, Modotti grew closer to the members of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors, a group of radical artists and writers, who published their manifesto in June 1924 in El Machete, a journal dedicated to workers and peasants; the Communist Party adopted it as its official voice in Mexico.⁷ Modotti’s ties to the Mexican Communist Party became stronger and so did her affiliation with El Machete’s board of editors David Alfaro Siqueiros and Xavier Guerrero.⁸ She eventually joined the Partido Comunista Mexicano in 1927, officially cementing her life-long commitment to radical politics.

To be an artist in 1920s Mexico involved not only art production, but an interest in politics—the politics of the day was Communism.⁹ The party provided Modotti with a family and an identity, and she was no stranger to the social inequalities the party fought against: she experienced poverty as a child in Udine and Austria, witnessed it in California, and even more so in Mexico, where thousands were starved, homeless, and seeking shelter on the streets.¹⁰ El Machete became a vessel that Modotti used to communicate the shortcomings of Mexico—the poor distribution of wealth, the dire situation of its citizens, and the state of instability following the revolution. Her responsibilities at the newspaper included translating, clerical work, and capturing photographs. At this time, Modotti took her camera to the streets, photographing the laborers and the unfortunate in Mexico. In Misery (1928; fig. 2), Modotti captures an image of two peasants resting on a Mexican sidewalk in the blazing sun. This an example of one of the

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⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid.
first street photographs Modotti captured that exposed the harsh reality of the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution.

The subjects in *Misery* are two peasant women, one of which is the focal point of the photograph, who lie unconscious in front of a building with an entrance. Her position on the ground suggests that she may have possibly keeled over, as her right arm is extended on the pavement and the other rests on her side. The second woman sits on a doorstep, shielding her face from the sun and onlookers, perhaps in shame. When considering the formal elements of the photograph, Modotti used natural lighting which comes across harsh and flat. The subjects are casting very little shadow, which possibly means that the image was captured at or around noon. Modotti confronts the viewer with an engagement of patterns and textures: the jaggedness of the building’s wall, the unconscious woman’s corduroy skirt, and the plaid and stripes the woman with the rebozo wears. Moreover, Modotti frames the image in such a way that we are struck with the sadness that consumes the subjects. She captured the picture from a distance, documenting their anguish, as a way to educate one of the miseries the oppressed endure in Mexico. The viewer also gets a sense of Modotti’s empathy with the lower echelons of society, because her position is aligned with the subjects, rather than shot from above, looking down on their sorrow.

After her affair with Weston concluded, Modotti took on several other lovers affiliated with the Communist Party--Xavier Guerrero, Vitorrio Vidali, and the most scandalous being Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban political activist who belonged to various Communist organizations with which Modotti was involved. Modotti, being attracted to Mella’s passion and political fervor, fell in love, and impetuously entered yet another relationship. During an evening walk home with Modotti, Mella was murdered by an assassin for the Cuban government.
The Mexican government arrested Modotti and put her on trial, but she was eventually acquitted. The press tarnished her reputation by revealing her unconventional relationships and Communist ideology to a conservative Mexico; the government labeled her an enemy of the state.\textsuperscript{11} As a way to escape the chaos and humiliation she experienced in Mexico City, Modotti traveled to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to photograph the indigenous women and children of the Zapotec culture. *Woman from Tehuantepec* (1929; fig. 3), portrays a Zapotec woman from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, dressed in traditional *Tehuana* dress, and supporting a gourd on her head. Modotti’s sojourn in Tehuantepec functioned as a soul-searching journey that helped her redefine her life amid the tumultuous ordeal she had just endured.

The Zapotec culture is a matriarchal society that is progressive in their views of gender roles and stereotypes, although living within a predominantly patriarchal country. In *Woman from Tehuantepec*, Modotti uses a large depth of field, and focuses on the Tehuana’s proud face as she gazes off in the distance. Modotti uses natural light in this image; the sunlight is reflected on her arm, and the gourd casts a shadow over the woman’s face. The image is of low contrast, as there are many shades of grey and hardly any areas of extreme light and dark. Modotti tightly cropped the image, accentuating the woman’s piercing eyes. This is one of many images from this series that depicts women and children during their daily routines, and may possibly symbolize Modotti’s yearning for new life and fertility.

When comparing *Misery* and *Woman from Tehuantepec*, one sees similar yet distinct characteristics in both works. In *Misery*, Modotti photographs a street scene, highlighting the women’s desolation, and choosing to document the dismal condition of the Mexican state. Inversely, she takes a personal approach in *Woman from Tehuantepec*, by capturing the Tehuana’s portrait, making her the sole focus of the viewer’s attention. *Misery*’s vantage point is

\textsuperscript{11} Lowe, *Photographs*, 41.
centrally aligned, placing the viewer in the reality of the subjects’ everyday struggle. In contrast, Modotti chose a low vantage point to photograph the woman from Tehuantepec, as if she was revering her and glorifying womanhood. Furthermore, both images capture humanity—specifically, women—albeit in different ways; *Misery* personifies the hardships experienced by the poor in Mexico, and forces the viewer to see the horror and repercussions of war; *Woman from Tehuantepec* exemplifies existence and renewal emanating from the source of life—woman. Tehuantepec was Modotti’s last photographic project in Mexico. Following an assassination attempt to Mexico’s newly elected president, Pascual Ortiz Rubio in 1930, Modotti was falsely accused of participation, arrested, and imprisoned for two weeks. Upon her release, the Mexican government allowed her two days to gather her belongings and placed her on the SS *Edam*, a cargo ship destined for its home in the Netherlands; Modotti, however, disembarked in Berlin. Life in Berlin was difficult for Modotti; she missed the tropical weather and sunlight of Mexico, which she heavily relied on when capturing images. She did, however, manage to capture a few photographs during her time in Germany; an example of these images is *Couple at the Zoo, Berlin* (1930; fig. 4), and portrays a bourgeois couple peering into an immense cage while holding hands. This photograph may offer a window into Modotti’s psyche, perhaps demonstrating the longing she experienced for a human connection, something she rarely lived without.

Feeling unhappy and lonely in Berlin, Modotti decided to give up photography in order to dedicate her life to the Communist cause. The only way to carry out her wish was to move to Moscow where she could, once again, submerge herself in politics. Upon arriving in Moscow,

13. Ibid., 45.
Modotti reunited with Vittorio Vidali, an ardent Stalinist who Modotti had known from her involvement with the Communist Party in Mexico. Modotti also became involved with the organization, International Red Aid, who provided moral and material help to political prisoners. By 1933, she had climbed the ranks of the Red Aid Executive Committee, and was later assigned a position to run a Red Aid center in Paris with Vidali. Amid her assignment in Paris, Modotti was sent by the Stalinists to Spain, in order to dedicate her service to the Spanish Civil War. She assumed the alias Maria del Carmen Ruiz and worked on the Spanish Red Aid Newspaper *Ayuda* as a political prisoner information gatherer; Modotti also worked in a tuberculosis clinic in Madrid. Just before the conclusion of the war, she returned to Mexico because the president extended hospitality to dislocated Spaniards and war exiles. Soon thereafter, Modotti, with help from friends, succeeded in getting the Mexican deportation decree annulled by President Lázaro Cárdenas. She remained in Mexico until her death on January 6, 1942, where she died—alone—of a heart attack in the back seat of a taxi.

Tina Modotti’s photographic career was short-lived, but nevertheless powerful and revolutionary; she and Weston helped transform Mexican photography from a style of portraiture and documentation into a Modernist aesthetic that experimented with “abstracting qualities of photography.”

Modotti also opened the eyes of her bourgeoisie and upper class patrons with her haunting images of the poor and oppressed. She shattered gender stereotypes and conventional norms with her lifestyle choice, and was not ashamed of being a sexually liberated woman in a man’s world. During a time when women stayed at home, she was out in the world living, loving, creating art, and fighting for her radical beliefs. For all these reasons, one last word can be added to the array of descriptions of Modotti—iconoclast.

Bibliography


Figure 1. *Open Doors*. c. 1925. Platinum print, 9 1/2 x 5 3/8.
Figure 2. *Misery*. 1928. Gelatin silver print, 6 7/8 x 9 3/8.
Figure 4. *Couple at the Zoo, Berlin.* 1930. Gelatin silver print, 8 15/16 x 6 3/4.