

# TINA MODOTTI



# Introduction

Tina Modotti (Udine, 1896–Mexico City, 1942) took part in some of the most relevant historical events of the first half of the 20th century, such as the economic migration of Europeans to America at the turn of the century, the birth of silent film in the West Coast of the United States, post-revolutionary agrarianism in Mexico, political muralism, the vindication of indigenous Mexican culture, the incorporation of women into the public sphere, the battle between Stalinists and Trotskyists after the revolution of 1917, International Red Aid, and the Spanish Civil War. To some degree, despite the abundance of biographies written about her, certain biographical gaps still exist that are slowly being filled. She was one of the pioneers of women's photography during the 1920s and although nearly 400 images can be attributed to Modotti today, the number continues to rise with each new discovery; this exhibition being one example. Likewise, Tina Modotti exerted a great influence on later Mexican photography, from Manuel Álvarez Bravo to Graciela Iturbide.

Modotti took up photography through Edward Weston, although she exceeded the North American artist's formalist teachings through the immediate construction of her own autonomous compositions that possess a unique and personal vision.

Modotti arrived in Mexico after spending her teenage years in San Francisco and Los Angeles and was part of the "Mexican Renaissance"; a time of post-revolutionary cultural splendor. Integrated within the circle of Mexican artists and muralists, her work incorporated a type of embodied photography into Weston's formalism. Her gaze was influenced by her modest upbringing, being an economic immigrant and a woman, and by her sensibility toward social injustice.

A member of the Mexican Communist Party since 1927, she denounced the situation of dispossessed people with her camera, focusing on the construction of a new imaginary for Mexican women.

After being expelled from Mexico in 1930 for being a communist, her photographic militancy soon became full-fledged activism. Apparently, Modotti abandoned photography in the 1930s to dedicate herself to political militancy. Mid-way through the decade, she was sent to Spain by the Communist Party where she would have a key role throughout the Civil War. Taking on the coordination of International Red Aid (MOPR), she organized the escape from Spain of the so-called "children of the war", coordinated the management of military hospitals—where she also worked as a nurse—and carried out propagandistic and political tasks. At the end of the conflict she crossed the Pyrenees along with thousands of political exiles.

She died in Mexico City in 1942.

# Early Years: From Udine to Los Angeles

Tina Modotti was born in 1896 into a modest family from Udine. In 1906 her father migrated to the United States in hopes of reuniting the family later. She arrived to San Francisco on her own in 1913, a city that was home to nearly twenty thousand Italians at the time. She worked in the textile industry, but also took part in the amateur theater scene. In 1915 she met Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey (*Robo*) who she moved to Los Angeles with. There she met Edward Weston, modeling for him from 1920 onward. She also wrote and published her first poems and tried her luck in film, taking part in three movies. In *The Tiger's Coat*, Modotti played the role of a Mexican Woman. Her physical appearance, dark hair, and Mediterranean skin typecast her into the stereotypical roles U.S. audiences associated with the exotic, romantic, and wicked myth of Latina women. Likewise, as can be observed in her family albums, she played with her ability to shift identities through clothing and costume (she posed dressed up as a ballerina in a pair of pants symbolizing the empowerment of modern women and as a character from the *Arabian Nights*).

# Mexico: On the Other Side of the Camera

In 1923 Tina Modotti moved to Mexico City with Edward Weston where they opened a portrait studio. The pair explored and took photographs of the country; this can be observed in *Convent of Tepotzotlán* and in *Zuno's house, the courtyard* (whose exact authorship is unknown, as is the case with other photographs in this exhibition). At the time, the nation was experiencing what became known as the “Mexican Renaissance”. Modotti allowed herself to be influenced by this cultural splendor, soon becoming one of its prominent figures and transforming Mexican photography.

Her work evolved rapidly in Mexico. Modotti incorporated a personal gaze into the formalist perfection she learned from Weston that was influenced by her outlook on life and her attraction to human beings and the denouncement of social injustice (for example, in this section one can compare the photographers' different approaches when depicting the circus tent or portraying the anthropologist Anita Brenner and the champion of the Náhuatl language Luz Jiménez).

During these early years Modotti worked on several still lifes composed mainly of flowers, such as lilies, geraniums, roses, and cacti. Nevertheless, the artist also produced portraits in which she captured the powerful bond between a mother and her daughter (*An aztec baby* or *Luz and baby*) that went beyond the mere commodification of female bodies. Some of these images were later used in illustrated magazines of the time as examples of a Mexican identity whose origin was grounded in indigenous culture.

She also documented the work of Mexican muralists, such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, among others. Modotti's photographs were featured in some of the most important publications of the time, including *Idols Behind Altars* by Anita Brenner and the monograph by Ernestine Evans on muralism in *Mexican Folkways* magazine.

In late 1926 Weston returned to the United States. Earlier that year Modotti had acquired a new Graflex camera in San Francisco that was lighter than the Corona she previously used. With renewed energy, she set off to photograph Mexico, which for her was embodied in its people.

# Photography and Political Commitment. Mexico Is Its People

After becoming affiliated to the Communist Party in 1927, Modotti's political commitment became more accentuated. She was part of International Red Aid and also collaborated as a translator and a photographer with the newspaper *El Machete*, whose audience was mainly peasants. Similarly, she attended and photographed demonstrations and participated in political associations such as *Manos Fuera de Nicaragua* (Hands Off Nicaragua).

She avoided poses and portrayed individuals in real situations, both in the city and in countryside villages; a line of citizens at Monte de Piedad Nacional to pawn their belongings, peasants at agrarian schools, tortilla, cabbage, and hat sellers, corn porters, washerwomen, mothers carrying their children, children at Colonia de la Bolsa living in poverty, popular festivities, etc. Some of them were published in newspapers, such as *El Machete*, and subsequently in foreign magazines, such as *AIZ*, *Der Arbeiter-fotograf*, *New Masses*, and *Put' Mopr*.

Modotti contemplated the dilemma of representation. How to find a visual language that was accessible to the people without betraying her aesthetic principles? She found a formula in symbolic photography. For example, *Woman with flag* is not merely an image about communism; instead, it expresses the ability of human beings to become empowered through willpower and political ideals. Modotti also produced still lifes whose juxtaposed elements represent basic abstract concepts that speak of the people as an emancipated entity and of a communist vision of the future born from the land itself (*Sickle, canana and corn cob* and *Guitar neck, canana and corn cob*). In her photographic manifesto of 1929, coinciding with her solo exhibition at the Biblioteca Nacional, Modotti declared that she did not consider herself an "artist", but rather a "photographer"; a trade she conceived as any other, in consonance with her proletariat ideas.

# Toward Political Action: Spain at War

In 1930 Tina Modotti was expelled from Mexico and returned to Europe after having been falsely accused of taking part in an attack against Mexican president Pascual Ortiz Rubio. She spent a short time in Berlin, trying to continue her photographic pursuit unsuccessfully. However, Modotti would soon move to the Soviet Union where she focused on her activities as a member of International Red Aid (MOPR).

The Communist Party sent Modotti to Spain during the Spanish Republic. When the Civil War broke out, she coordinated MOPR under different aliases, reorganizing the Cuatro Caminos Worker's Hospital (whose purpose was tending to injured militants), supervising, reporting, and writing articles under the names *María*, *Carmen Ruiz*, and *Vera Martini* for MOPR's newspaper *Ayuda. Semanario de la solidaridad* [*Help. Weekly of Solidarity*], and supervising propaganda (in other words, the dissemination of the organization's activities). Politically dependent on the Communist Party, MOPR played a major role in humanitarian aid during the war, becoming the main organization geared toward helping and aiding political detainees and their families, as well as being an important part of the Republican military health system.

In 1937 Modotti participated in the organization of the Second International Congress for the Defense of Culture in Madrid, Valencia, and Barcelona. Among the participants were André Malraux, Anna Seghers, Ernest Hemingway, Aleksey Tolstoy, Octavio Paz, Elena Garro, Rafael Alberti, María Teresa León, Robert Capa, and Gerda Taro.

There is no trace of the photographs Modotti produced in Spain, although some authors suspect that three of the 17 images found in *Viento del pueblo, poesía en la guerra* [*Wind of the People, Poetry in War*] by Miguel Hernández might be hers. What seems to be clear is that the publication of the book of poems as a photobook was Modotti's idea.

She returned to Mexico with Vittorio Vidali, her partner at the time, and died prematurely in 1942 due to a heart attack. After Modotti's passing, her Mexican friends and Spanish republican exiles honored her in Mexico City. The last photograph she produced, which will be on display for the first time in this exhibition, was of her dog Suzi.

Her work was progressively forgotten until the 1970s when it began to be exhibited and studied.