

UCSD to present Tina Modotti photographic exhibition; recently discovered, never before seen works included

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Tina Modotti has been called the best-known unknown photographer of the 20th century--an artist whose infamous lifestyle of glamorous professions, unconventional romances, dedication to radical politics, and love/work relationship with photographer Edward Weston has all but overshadowed her art.

Until recently.

The University Art Gallery of the University of California, San Diego is presenting an exhibition of 130 photographs by Tina Modotti, including 80 recently discovered works which have never been shown before. The exhibition opens Oct. 26, 1996, and coincides with the 100th anniversary of the year of the artist's birth.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the University Art Gallery and the UCSD Department of Literature are sponsoring a three-day conference on Tina Modotti, Nov. 7-9, featuring scholars, museum and gallery professionals, critics, and interested patrons from around the world. Included will be lectures, panel discussions and films, all pertaining to the life and art of Tina Modotti.

The new body of work, recently discovered by a scholar after it had been stored by Modotti's relatives in an old steamer trunk for more than 60 years, will be the focus of the exhibition. The photographs were retrieved in excellent condition and are fully documented.

Organized by University Art Gallery Director Kathleen Stoughton, the Modotti exhibition, in addition to the photographs, will include portraits of Modotti by Edward Weston, as well as recently discovered letters written by the artist and other documentary materials never before exhibited or published.

'These photographs and documents/ Stoughton said, constitute an exciting and significant discovery in the world history of photography and change forever our understanding of Modotti's contribution to that history.

The Modotti exhibition will continue on view at UCSD through January, 1997. Following the UCSD showing, the exhibition will travel to other venues internationally during a one-year period. An illustrated catalog will accompany the exhibition.

Known as a photographer of Mexico, the Italian-born Modotti's distinction rests on her photographic output from 1923 to 1930 when she lived in Mexico and was an integral part of the artistic world of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco, to name a few.

Modotti's oeuvre includes dramatic architecture as seen from extreme points of view; scenes of everyday doors, steps, and church interiors with intense play of light and shadow; still lifes of flowers, such as calla lilies and roses with emphasis on textured curvature and tonal variations; portraits of friends, both whimsical and eerily compelling, and political compositions espousing her allegiance to the working class.

Whatever Modotti did, reports Modotti essayist and biographer Sarah M. Lowe, she did with passion--photographer, actress, model, linguist, translator, seamstress, inspiration/companion/lover to five men, celebrated bohemian hostess, homemaker when called upon, quick study in the visual, verbal and performing arts, documenter of the Mexican mural movement, and staunch political activist. She ran the gamut from femme fatale to persona non grata.

Her attraction to men of ambition challenged her to forge a position for herself/ writes Lowe. Photography provided her with personal satisfaction and an individual identity/ In an early letter to Weston, Modotti described her photography as a work that I have come to love with real passion and that offers such possibilities of expression.

Throughout her stormy period of political activities and creative photography in Mexico and shortly thereafter, Modotti was able to show her works in a number of exhibitions in Mexico and the United States. Her photographs appeared internationally in the journals, magazines, and periodicals that flourished during that time.

Born in northern Italy in 1896, Modotti had an aptitude for languages. She spoke at least four: Italian, German, Spanish, and English--skills which later served her as a translator for the Communist Party, where Lowe speculates she is likely to have learned Russian as well. She emigrated to San Francisco in 1913 and made her living as a seamstress, utilizing skills she had learned from her Italian mother. Soon she began modeling and acting and became popular in San Francisco's Italian Community Theater Productions, where she came to be celebrated as a femme fatale. Her acting career placed her in contact with people in the arts and she began soaking up the bohemian environment, honing herself in the visual and verbal, as well as performing arts. Through acting she met Oregon-born Ruby Richey, who had changed his name to Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey to suit his talents in poetry, prose, drawing, illustration, cartoon, and batik and his love of the world of art. The couple married in 1918, and moved to Los Angeles where Modotti pursued a short-lived film career, excelling in such silent films as *The Tiger's Coat*, yet cast in minor roles in other productions.

Richey was the only one of Modotti's loves whom she married. He died of smallpox in 1922, but prior to Richey's death, photographer Edward Weston had become a part of their circle of friends in the arts. Modotti became Weston's model, soon his lover and after Richey died, Modotti and Weston moved to Mexico, arriving in 1923. Modotti had decided to forsake her acting career and become a photographer. She began as Weston's apprentice, but soon she was following her own instincts and photographing the Mexico she saw and experienced and increasingly becoming involved in political activities. Their home was a gathering place for artists, writers, and political activists, including Rivera and Kahlo. Modotti was as comfortable running the photography office, her home, and entertaining, as she was in the political arena.

It was during these years, 1923 to 1930, that Modotti's reputation as a photographer was established. She experimented with abstract designs such as crumpled tinfoil and depicted the symbols of Mexican folk art in masks and pinatas. Drawing from her political passion, she focused on masses of marching workers symbolizing class unity and the struggle for social change, as well as on the political symbols of hammer and sickle. She drew from the *Movimiento Estridentista*, the Mexican version of the Italian Futurist movement favoring the modern beauty of the machine, formal dynamism and fractured imagery, and from modernist or new visions photography of the 1920s and 1930s which stressed innovative ways to look at the world.

In all of her work, writes Lowe, Modotti's 'photographs realize a transformation of the mundane into the realm of the symbolic.' They have an emotional pull, stirring empathy in the viewer. Unlike mentor Edward Weston, who professed that his images had no meaning beyond their formal beauty, Modotti's images were chosen for their connotations, and when depicting people and their surroundings, she felt a compulsion to identify with those less fortunate than herself.

In addition to her artistic photographic compositions and those she did for publications, Modotti was widely commissioned for photographs, including portraits. She documented the Mexican mural movement by photographing the works of such artists as Rivera and Orozco, and her work increasingly became more political, championing the working class. Following ideological disagreements with Weston, she became romantically

involved with two passionate political figures--one who was called to Moscow in the name of the Communist Party, and another who was assassinated for his political beliefs and deeds. Meanwhile, Modotti's political beliefs--horrendous interrogations and brief prison stints aside--continued to strengthen. She had joined the Communist Party in 1927. By 1930, the politically notorious Modotti was deported from Mexico.

The remainder of her life was spent serving The Party in Moscow, Germany, France, and Spain, finally returning to Mexico.

Her facility with languages and familiarity with the organization made her invaluable writes Lowe.

Modotti had given up photography. She became romantically involved with another charismatic, passionate Party leader, Vittorio Vidali, and she devoted herself to the International Red Aid which existed to give material and moral aid to victims of political oppression. Her final duties included those during the Spanish Civil War where she organized evacuations and was active as a nurse, among other duties. After the fall of Madrid, she escaped to the United States, was refused entry and landed once again in Mexico, arriving as a persona non grata. Though she received a pardon in 1941 and was granted political asylum, she never associated with her previous friends in Mexico. She died in 1942 in a taxi in Mexico City. The death certificate said congestive heart disease. It also listed her occupation as housewife. She was 45.

Biographer Lowe speculates that several factors--Modotti's commitment to the Communist Party and its reflection in her photographs, her association with Weston which placed her in a secondary role, her careers as actress and model, and the views of her as femme fatale and as muse and helpmate to her lovers-- help account for the delay in the recognition of her achievements as an artist.

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