

## The photographic eye, concerns, and life of Tina Modotti

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### THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE, CONCERNS, AND LIFE OF TINA MODOTTI

In a letter to photographer Edward Weston, Tina Modotti described photography as la work that I have come to love with real passion and that offers such possibilities of expression. Her images, virtually all done in Mexico during the period 1923-1930, demonstrate that passion as well as an innovative vision and deep affection for the country and its people.

Modotti's oeuvre includes still lifes, architectural studies and insightful portraits. Many photographs convey her commitment to social justice. They depict masses of marching workers, the hands of washerwomen or campesinos (peasants), and bandoliers, ears of corn and other icons of the Mexican Revolution. They fuse an often-elegant formalism with incisive political content. Modotti documented the work of the Mexican muralists including her friends Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

It was during the 1920s that Modotti's reputation as a photographer was first established. She exhibited in Mexico and was published in numerous periodicals ranging from the Mexican Community Party newspaper *El Machete* to the avant-garde French publication *transition*.

Most of the photographs in *Dear Vocio...Photographs by Tina Modotti* are street scenes and landscapes. The images are among those which Modotti scholar and exhibition curator Patricia Albers discovered in trunks which once belonged to Modotti's companion Roubaix de L'Abrie Richey. After his death from smallpox in Mexico City in 1922, Richey's trunk was sent to the Los Angeles home of his mother Rose Richey, affectionately nicknamed Vocio (mumbler in Italian). After Modotti herself moved to Mexico City in 1923, she began sending images to Vocio. As Albers writes in her catalog essay, 'Rob() Richey had been enamored of Mexico, and Modotti, in her choice of photographs, seemed to say to his mother, 'Here are some of the people and place Robo would have loved.'" Vocio added the photographs to her son's trunk, which later overflowed into a second wooden box.

During a brief visit with Vocio in 1926, Modotti wrote to Edward Weston, 'I have been all morning looking over old things of mine here in trunks -- destroyed much -- it is painful at times but: 'Blessed be nothing.' From now on all my possessions are to be just in relation to photography, the rest, even things I love, concrete things, I shall lead through a metamorphosis, from the concrete turn them into abstract things, as far as I am concerned, and thus I can go on owning them in my heart forever .

In casting off much of what remained of her former life writes Albers, she affirmed her new identity as Tina Modotti, photographer.<sup>1</sup>

What Modotti did not destroy in 1926, Vocio cherished. Modotti continued to send photographs to Vocio until 1929. These photographs comprise the exhibition *Dear Vocio...Photographs by Tina Modotti*. Many have not been published or exhibited since Modotti's lifetime.

The works in the exhibition include several made during the summer of 1926 as Modotti traveled with Edward Weston in southern and western Mexico. Weston at the time had a contract to make photographs for Idols Behind Altars writer and anthropologist Anita Brenner's book on the Mexican Renaissance. Scholars have debated whether or not Modotti photographed during this journey. Albers establishes that she did, making a series of photographs which demonstrate her empathy for the Indians of Mexico.

Other photographs in Dear Vocio... were taken in Mexico City, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and in the town of Xochimilco, site of Mexico's famous floating gardens .<sup>1</sup> They include a series of portraits of Vocio, who visited Modotti in 1927, photographs of political demonstrations, and what may be Modotti's only self-portrait. Some are captioned in Modotti's own hand.

Tina Modotti's accomplishments as an artist have often been overshadowed by her unconventional life and relationships with well-known artists and political figures. Born in Italy in 1896, Modotti emigrated in 1913 to San Francisco where she joined her father and sister. She worked as a seamstress and became a beloved star of the Italian-American theatre. In 1918, with painter and writer Robo Richey, Modotti moved to Los Angeles where she had a brief Hollywood career. There she met Edward Weston, who became her lover and photography teacher. In 1923, after Robo Richey's death, Modotti and Weston moved to Mexico. After Weston's departure in 1926, Modotti continued to photograph as she became increasingly involved in political causes, soon joining the Community Party. In 1929, Modotti was falsely arrested for the murder of her companion, Cuban Communist Julio Antonio Mella; in 1930, she was expelled from the country as a 'pernicious foreigner.' Modotti lived briefly in Berlin, where she produced few photographs, before moving to Moscow. Around 1930, she abandoned photography and began working full-time for International Red Aid, a Communist relief agency. During the Spanish Civil War, she served the Republican cause. In 1939, Modotti returned to Mexico, where she died in 1942.

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