Contributor: Deborah Caplow

**Modotti**, **Tina**

(Born Assunta Adelaide Luigia Modotti Mondini: 1895—Udine, Friuli, Italy; Died: 1942—Mexico City)

Tina Modotti, an Italian-born photographer who lived much of her life in the United States, worked as a photographer in Mexico from 1923 to 1930; her photographic career there, though brief, was highly influential. She was an actress in silent movies in Hollywood, and in Los Angeles joined a Bohemian circle that included photographer **Edward Weston**. Together they moved to Mexico, where Modotti created most of her photographic work. They acquainted themselves with artists and writers of Mexico City, presented exhibitions, made portraits and photographed the works of the muralists. Her early photographs, such as her 1924 *Roses*, were influenced by Weston, but she combined his formalism with her leftist inclinations, creating images such as *Worker Reading El Machete* (1925), or *Campesinos Reading El Machete* of 1929, which use contrasts of light and shadow and geometric design to deliver political messages. In 1929 Modotti’s companion, Julio Antonio Mella, was murdered and she was accused of complicity in the crime. Although exonerated, she was charged with the attempted assassination of President-Elect Pascual Ortiz Rubio and deported in 1930. She lived in Moscow from 1930 to 1936, and worked as a nurse in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. After the war, she returned to Mexico and lived quietly until her death in 1942.

Modotti was born in a working-class family in Udine, Italy and worked in a factory as a child. Her father immigrated to San Francisco, and the family followed him there. Modotti acted in the Italian community’s amateur theater, then moved to Los Angeles, where she had roles in several silent films and worked as an artists’ model. She lived with the aspiring poet Roubaix "Robo" de l'Abrie Richey as a married couple, and they became involved in the local arts community; Modotti illustrated handmade books of Richey’s poetry and made batik clothing, as well as her own costumes for the films she acted in. Richey went to Mexico at the invitation of his friend Ricardo Gómez Robelo, at the end of 1921. This was at the beginning of the Mexican artistic renaissance of the 1920s, when North Americans were flocking to Mexico drawn by the artistic activity there. Although Modotti had already begun an affair with Weston, she went to Mexico to join Richey, who died, presumably of smallpox, while she was on her way. She went back to California, but was determined to return to Mexico. In 1923 she and Weston, along with his son Chandler, moved to Mexico City and established a home and studio, with the agreement that Modotti would act as Weston’s darkroom assistant and business manager in return for photographic instruction. They soon immersed themselves in Mexico City’s dynamic arts scene, and photographed people and places nearby. Modotti modeled for Weston in portraits and nude studies, and she posed for **Diego** **Rivera**, appearing in two of his murals. They received commissions to document murals by Diego Rivera and **José Clemente Orozco**, among others, and were asked to provide illustrations for the book *Idols Behind Altars* by Anita Brenner, for which they traveled throughout Central Mexico, photographing people, churches, ruins, and folk art. Modotti began to photograph women and children, in such intimate images as *Baby Nursing*, of 1926-27.

Gradually, however, Weston and Modotti grew apart, and she became more involved in Mexican politics; they parted in 1926 when Weston returned to California. Modotti stayed in Mexico City, and began to work for the Communist newspaper *El Machete*. During this time, she was also involved with the avant-garde **Stridentist Movement**, contributing images to their publications. Many of her photographs from 1926 to 1930 symbolize her political values. Her 1927 series of still-life photographs are especially striking; she photographed groups of objects to represent the Mexican Revolution and the concept of revolution in general. *Bandolier, Corn, Guitar*, for example, combines three essential elements of Mexican culture that also symbolize the “Revolutionary Trinity” that Rivera and others used to represent the Mexican Revolution.



http://www.masters-of-photography.com/M/modotti/modotti\_bandolier\_full.html

She was involved with muralist Xavier Guerrero until his departure for the Soviet Union, and then fell in love with the Cuban Communist activist Julio Antonio Mella, who also worked for *El Machete*. Her 1928 portrait of Mella presents him as a heroic figure; her *Mella’s Typewriter* of 1928 is a metaphoric portrait, alluding to the absent Mella, and emphasizing the technological modernism of the machine and the importance of revolutionary texts.

In 1929, Mella was gunned down by Modotti’s side while they walked home together; she was arrested and interrogated and the press attacked her mercilessly. She was released and continued to work, traveling to Tehuantepec and photographing women and children there. In 1929 she held a retrospective exhibition at the National Library. She wrote a manifesto about her work for the show, in which she upheld the political uses of photography as “social production.”

However, in 1930 Modotti was deported from Mexico on trumped up charges. Giving up photography, she went to the Soviet Union, and worked for the Russian Red Aid (equivalent to the Red Cross) and in 1936 she traveled to Spain, where she was a nurse during the Spanish Civil War. She returned to Mexico in 1939, but did not resume an active photographic career there and died suddenly in 1942.

**Further Reading**

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**List of Works:**

Tina Modotti, *Bandolier, Corn, Guitar*, 1927, black and white photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Baby Nursing*, 1926-27, black and white photograph.

Modotti, Tina, *Campesinos Reading El Machete*, 1929, black and white photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Hands Resting on Tool*, 1927, black and white photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Mella’s Typewriter*, 1929, black and white photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Worker Reading El Machete*, 1925, black and white photograph.

Tina Modotti, *Workers’ Parade*, 1926, black and white photograph.