

#63 July/August 2021
Cameraderie
Tina Modotti (1896-1942)



Tina Modotti reciting, by Edward Weston, 1924.

Tina Modotti emigrated to the United States from Italy when she was 16 and spent the rest of her life in the western USA and Mexico. Here is a brief list of her fames:

1. Edward Weston's student, model, assistant, and collaborator.
2. Photographer.
3. Actress.
4. Political activist.
5. Modeled for two of Diego Rivera's murals.
6. Friends with all the bright lights of artistic and political activity at the time: Diego Rivera, Frieda Kahlo, Pablo Neruda, José Clemente Orozco, and many others.

Here is Modotti's Wikipedia link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tina_Modotti

According to the Wikipedia article:

Between 1924 and 1928, Modotti took hundreds of photographs of [Diego] Rivera's murals at the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico City. Modotti's visual vocabulary matured during this

period, such as her formal experiments with architectural interiors, blooming flowers, urban landscapes, and especially in her many beautiful images of peasants and workers during the depression.

In this article, I am going to treat Modotti as 1) photographer, 2) model for Weston, 3) model for Diego Rivera, 4) political activist, and 5) subject of poetry. My emphasis is on her as a photographer, but I can't neglect the other categories because she crosses all over several artistic disciplines.

Modotti modeled for Weston, both clothed and nude. See her portrait above for this article by Weston. Here is a link to the J. Paul Getty Museum, showing Weston's best-known nude photograph of her. Please read the Getty Museum commentary at this link for a fine discussion of this photograph.

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/54962/edward-weston-nude-tina-modotti-american-1924/>

Below is a selection of Modotti's photographs that I like.

Workers Parade, 1926.



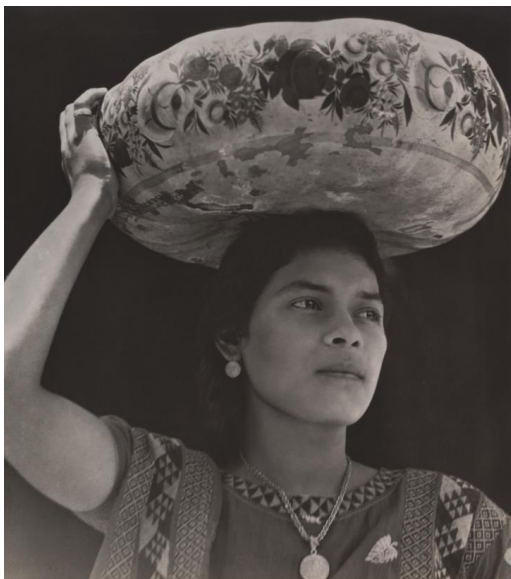
I like this for the pattern, and for the social comment about worker solidarity.

Hands of Marionette Player, 1929.



I am very fond of photographs like this of workers' hands, telling the story of their work. The veins and strings are fascinating highlights. While this line of work requires sleeves rolled up, that also symbolizes membership in the social class of workers.

Tehuantepec Type, c. 1929.



Modotti photographed the peoples of Mexico. Her work predates that of Graciela Iturbide, whom I covered in article no. 59 in March of this year. But I think I see a sensitive continuity of interest by a woman, about women, in both their photographs of women.

Stadium, Mexico City, c. 1927.



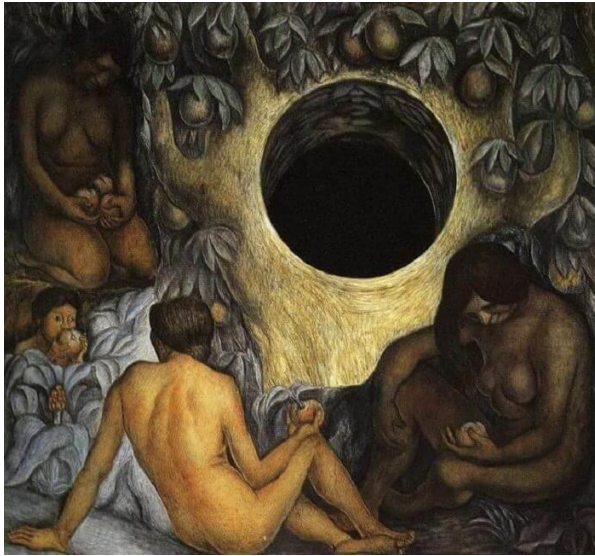
I wish I had shot something like this when I traveled to the antique stadia of Asia Minor, but although I tried, I never got the light so good as in this image. Note the light on the sides of the steps—Modotti had to shoot this at just the right time of day.

As I said at the beginning, Modotti crosses into other arts. Here are a few notes about that.

In her acting career Modotti appeared in several plays, operas, and silent films in the San Francisco Bay area in the late 1910s and early 1920s. She starred in the film *The Tiger's Coat*, 1920.

Below are two Diego Rivera murals for which she was a model.

The Abundant Earth, Mural, Diego Rivera, 1926.



Modotti modeled for the back-facing nude. Even her customary hairstyle is captured.

The Arsenal, Mural, Diego Rivera, 1928.



Modotti appears on the right, and Frieda Kahlo in the center, both quite recognizable. It is not accidental that they are wearing red shirts.

Modotti died unexpectedly at age 45 of congestive heart failure. Poet Pablo Neruda composed Modotti's epitaph, part of which can also be found on her tombstone, which also includes a relief portrait of Modotti by engraver Leopoldo Méndez:

*Pure your gentle name, pure your fragile life,
bees, shadows, fire, snow, silence and foam,
combined with steel and wire and
pollen to make up your firm
and delicate being.*