

The Museum of Modern Art

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TINA MODOTTI

An exhibition of 40 photographs by Tina Modotti, an Italian-born actress and political activist as well as a photographer, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 10 through April 3. The exhibition, believed to be the most extensive showing of Modotti's work since her death in 1942, includes original prints as well as new prints (in palladium and silver) made from Modotti's negatives by Richard Benson. The exhibition has been selected and installed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography.

Tina Modotti was born in Udine, Italy, in 1896, and emigrated to San Francisco in 1913. After working as a seamstress and acting in silent films (where she usually played the role of the exotic vamp), Modotti in 1921 met Edward Weston, now recognized as one of the masters of modern photography, and became his lover. There is no evidence, however, that Modotti became actively interested in photography until 1923, when she and Weston went to Mexico to live and work together. Many of the photographs included in the exhibition were made during the time Modotti and Weston were in Mexico, a period that ended with Weston's return to his family in California at the end of 1926.

Tina Modotti was not a prolific photographer. Her significant work was done within a six- or seven-year period, and from these years perhaps no more than 100 pictures survive. Although the dating of many of her pictures is problematic, it would seem Modotti's work might be divided into two periods: most of the pictures made during her association with Weston reflect a disinterested pleasure in the exploration of basic photographic form. They are, if anything, rather more abstract, intellectual, and ethereal than Weston's work. After 1926 Modotti became increasingly devoted to Communism, and during the next three years she attempted to combine the rigorous standards of visual

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clarity that she had learned from Weston with her deeply personal political commitments.

Ultimately, Modotti's political activities left her less and less time for photography. In the wake of a still murky cause celebre involving the presumably political assassination in 1929 of her then current lover, the brilliant young Cuban Communist Julio Antonio Mella, Modotti, though cleared of any involvement in the killing was deported from Mexico as an undesirable alien early in 1930. Between 1930 and 1937 she lived and travelled in Germany, the Soviet Union (where she may have trained for undercover work), and France, all the time working for the Communist Party and related organizations. She was in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. Modotti seems to have made almost no photographs during this period. In 1939 she returned to Mexico, where she is said to have again taken up photography, but no work from this time is known to survive. In January of 1942 Modotti died unexpectedly, allegedly from a heart attack, though rumors of a political plot against her life had much currency at the time.

The Museum's exhibition program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

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