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TINA MODOTTI AND IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS

By

Andrea Jeanne Deetsch

B.A. Hanover College, 1998

A Thesis

Submitted to the faculty of the

Fine Arts Department of the University of Louisville

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Fine Arts

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2003

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A Thesis Approved on

April 15, 2003

By the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Velma and Don Saylor,
Who have given me invaluable educational opportunities and supported my every endeavor;
To my sister Bridgette Saylor, for all her support and shared interests in art and art history;
To Steven Worful, Humanities Teacher, who introduced me to Art History;
To Dr. John Martin, Art History Professor, Hanover College,
my mentor then and now: thank you for all your faith, encouragement, and teaching, over
the last nine years; I am indebted to you;
and my husband, Benjamin Jason Deetsch. Words cannot express my gratitude for your
love, support, patience, and advice.

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I would like to thank Dr. Jay Kloner for being my thesis Director and providing an invaluable amount of support and guidance throughout the process. I would also like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Christopher Fulton, Dr. John Martin, Mitch Eckert, and Dr. Julie Bunck, for their comments and assistance. I would like to express thanks to my friend and mentor, Dr. Frances Monteverde, Professor of Education at The University of Texas, Austin, for all her encouragement and love, and for her contacts she provided for this thesis.

ABSTRACT

Tina Modotti and Idols Behind Altars

Andrea J. Deetsch

May, 2003

This thesis is an examination of the transformation Tina Modotti's photography underwent because of the Idols Behind Altars project which she completed on an expedition with Edward Weston in 1926. The thesis begins with an introduction to Modotti's photography from 1923-1926, pre-expedition, exploring the conditions of the Idols Behind Altars trip, the issue of attribution of the Idols Behind Altars images, and Modotti's development of *indigenismo* as a life philosophy. The thesis uses art historical analysis based on research directed at a comparison of images to argue that the trip was the catalyst for Modotti's photographic transformation in late 1926.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter I covers her early work, photographic tendencies, and influences on her work. Chapter II explores the Idols Behind Altars assignment, the political and geographical conditions under which she and Weston traveled, and the issue of attribution of the Idols Behind Altars photographs as discussed by various Modotti and Weston scholars. Chapter III compares the Idols Behind Altars images to Modotti's subsequent work (1926-29), and Modotti's continued involvement in revolutionary politics in Mexico as it related to her photography.

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INTRODUCTION

Tina Modotti (1896-1942) was an influential photographer in post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s. Her life was colorful: born in Udine, Italy, she immigrated to the United States as a teenager, moved to Mexico in 1923, and was deported in 1929 for her alleged role in a plot to assassinate the president of Mexico. Modotti's early photographs (1923-1926) were primarily still-lives and abstractions of flowers and architecture. Her early photographs were made in a studio, were essentially non-political, and focused more on photographic technique than conveying a social message.

This thesis focuses on Modotti's post-1926 photographs. It argues that, as a result of her Idols Behind Altars photographic assignment that she accepted in 1926 to travel through Mexico's countryside and catalogue Mexican arts and crafts, she experienced an awakening. During that trip she witnessed Mexico's contemporary social and political realities. Modotti's lens captured the results of the Mexican Revolution on Mexico's working class, particularly the indigenous peoples. Modotti discovered that Mexico's Liberal Revolution that claimed to bring about broad, sweeping social, economic and political changes for all Mexicans failed to deliver on its promises. Modotti witnessed first-hand the shameful inequalities, widespread discrimination, exploitation of workers, and patron-client social structure that trapped the poor in its miserable living conditions. She saw an exploitative Catholic Church; a small, abusive, upper class; and an intolerant, corrupt, elitist ruling, political party.

In 1926, Anita Brenner, journalist and dear friend to Modotti, commissioned Modotti (and photographer Edward Weston) to take over two hundred photographs for her upcoming book, Idols Behind Altars. The project involved traveling around Mexico photographing Mexican arts and crafts for several months to various Indian villages, cities, and small towns. Modotti and Weston witnessed a flooded and politically unstable Mexico. The Idols Behind Altars trip was pivotal not only for Tina personally, but also photographically. Close contact with the native, close-knit Indian villages throughout rural Mexico affected her deeply. The ‘ancient’ societies she encountered fascinated her, yet the intense poverty the Mexicans endured saddened her. The political and social awakening for Modotti was the catalyst that transformed her photography. Her new approach to photography thereafter focused entirely around *indigenismo*. The *indigenismo* movement argued that Mexico’s culturally and historically valuable indigenous population suffered dramatically from abuse, neglect, and marginalization. Mexican leftists, including Modotti, felt that the future of Mexico resided in its Indians.

This thesis compares Idols Behind Altars images to Modotti’s photographs post-Brenner (1926-29) to prove that the project marked a clear turning point in her work. Many of the Idols Behind Altars photographs are similar compositionally and thematically to Modotti’s later photographs. Her later photographs (1926-29) depicted women and children living in slums, hunger stricken children in dirt laden clothes, Indians at work in canals and refineries, and laborers in a state of exhaustion. Photography became a mechanism for expressing a powerful political ideology and message. Modotti’s work presented a visual reality to strengthen a political message. By 1927 Modotti was a central figure in The Communist Party in Mexico. She served, in many ways, as the Party’s official photographer. Her photography became a tool to deliver the goals of the Party – the failure

of Mexico's so-called "revolution." Brenner's trip transformed her photography into strong, honest, snapshots of Mexican life that conveyed political statements about the revolution and urged reform at the same time.

The revelation that occurred during the trip led her to become a passionate, eventually fanatical Marxist that ultimately destroyed her ability to continue her photography. Modotti and her Communist friends and colleagues, among them the Mexican Muralists, Mexican Nationalists, American ex-patriots, philosophers, and other artists, all advocated a genuine revolution that would bring about sweeping structural and cultural transformation. After 1930 Modotti never photographed again. Her intense commitment to the Communist Party as an undercover spy traveling throughout Europe required, she felt, her full attention so that any activity un-related to the Party was a distraction. In 1940 she returned to Mexico City and died at the young age of 46 in 1942. Modotti's photography became a potent national symbol for the plight of Mexico's indigenous population. As her work had a profound impact, she stands out as one of Mexico's most important twentieth century photographers.

Reference to Idols Behind Altars will be represented as IBA in Chapter III.

Footnote references SFS and DV refer to the two books written by Patricia Albers: Shadows Fire, and Snow and Dear Vocio.

CHAPTER I: EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS (1923-26)

In the early 1920s, Tina Modotti primarily photographed flowers, architecture, industrial images of modern Mexico, and portraits. Her photographs reflected an interest in tones, form, and tactility; and her goal was to achieve studio quality images. The complex patterns of her early works are both contemplative and dramatic. Her photographs of flowers are sensual and often have sexual undertones. Her subject matter was rather simple. Usually she addressed her immediate environment: flowers, staircases, and everyday objects. Only a few were taken on visits to nearby places. In her early work, Modotti's technique was not amateur, yet her ideas on photography were restricted. She apprenticed under Edward's Weston's photographic vision of abstraction, formalism, and visual orientation toward his subjects. Some critics have labeled these works as representing her 'romantic period.'

The home she shared with Weston in Tacubaya (outside of Mexico City) provided a virtual backdrop for work of this period.¹ Tina often photographed indoors in her early period because of the limitations of her camera. She worked primarily with a large, awkward Korona that required a tripod. The equipment was too unwieldy and difficult to transport (later in her career, she shifted to using a Graflex camera that provided her mobility to go into the streets). She was still too distracted working outdoors.²

In her early days in Mexico, Modotti especially liked to photograph flowers. Cacti, lilies, geraniums, and roses, appealed to her. Modotti's flowers had still-life qualities and

¹ Patricia Albers, *Shadows, Fire, and Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti*, Clarkson, Potter Publishers, New York, 1999.

² Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary*, Pandora, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1993, pp. 98-99.

portrayed a struggle underneath their subtle beauty. In *Flor de Manita* (figure 1) and *Geranium* (figure 2), Modotti chose flowers that were often found in the home, with all their imperfections and individuality. They have an emotional quality in their struggle to grow, and evoke empathy. *Flor de Manita*, an unusual flower, strikingly resembles a human hand. The bent *Geranium* grows in a badly chipped pot, and Modotti's *Calla Lily* (figure 3), begins to wilt. Modotti's images capture life's struggles through these everyday, household flowers. Similar to many seventeenth-century still-life painters, the flowers remind the viewer that death and decay are active even in the most beautiful and sensual life forms.³

One of Modotti's most famous photographs, *Roses* (figure 4), provides an example of her more contained, formalist approach. *Roses* was the first photograph where Modotti filled the frame with an abundance of one particular object. In her later work, she used this approach much more often. Sexual connotations have been read into *Roses*, as well as several of her other flower photographs, while others see a self-portrait, alluding to her vulnerabilities, and in retrospect, a metaphor for the tragedy of her life.⁴ Modotti scholar and art historian Sarah Lowe says: "The luminous petals of four white roses animate the surface of the image with their curling edges and infinite variety of shadows. In addition to its visual beauty, the image is both a *momento mori* – the fading flowers symbolizing mortality – and a time-honored message of love."⁵

Modotti's early subjects were not limited just to flowers. Her interest in spatial dimensions and the reflection of light produced striking photographs nearing abstraction. Her architectural photographs explored Mexican themes, while she also began to produce

3 Sarah M. Lowe, *Tina Modotti: Photographs*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Philadelphia Museum of Art, New York, 1995, p. 24.

4 Albers, pp. 125-27

5 Lowe, p. 24

portraits.⁶ Portraiture was generally a way to make ends meet for Modotti, and she became successful in doing so. In a visit to *Tepotzotlan*, (figure 5) near her Tacubaya home, in 1924, Modotti took several photographs in an abandoned convent that are mysterious in their light sources and sculptural qualities. Sarah Lowe says, “Despite their disciplined design, they have a mysterious allure that draws the viewer in: one imagines the previous inhabitants of the convent passing silently through the doors and across the patios, moving from shadowed obscurity to dazzling sunlight and back to shade.”⁷ *Tepotzotlan* distorts the interior space so much, that it would be entirely abstract without its title. Modotti’s choice of perspective gives the illusion of a multi-dimensional space (which also alludes to her Cubist contemporaries’ use of multiple viewpoints). Yet when the image is juxtaposed with the title, the photograph loses its mystery. Modotti scholar Patricia Albers says that it is, “. . . a convergence of walls [sic.] recesses, and arches, defied logic, like clouds, and became a catalyst for free association. It is a sensual dream about light, shadow and form . . .” That was her first published photograph; it appeared in a Mexico City newspaper.⁸

In *Circus Tent, Mexico* (figure 6), Modotti stressed the tent form in the space but she also used people to establish scale and provide some social context.⁹ The translucent canvas of the circus tent flows like water in the wind as natural light pours through its walls. The diagonal convergence is piercing and the camera angle is from below. That Modotti pictured this space with figures was a premonition of what was to come in her later photography. In *Circus Tent*, the Mexicans that appear on the side are merely hints of people, yet, unlike straight abstraction, indicate an interest, or at least acknowledgment of social context. The

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Albers, SFS, p. 131

⁹ Lowe, p. 23

mere presence of everyday Mexicans is noteworthy in light of her later photographic transformation.

As Modotti had a strong interest in tonal qualities, she explored various printing techniques. With certain light and unusual camera angles, her lens transformed everyday objects into beautiful things. *Crumpled Tinfoil* (figure 7) exemplifies her dual interest in abstraction and lighting effects. An object that would otherwise be garbage, the crumpled piece of aluminum foil, becomes a sea of various gradations of light, almost like light dancing on water. Similar to *Roses*, in *Crumpled Tinfoil*, Modotti filled the entire photograph with a mass of a singular object. The extreme close-up of one object en masse is visually powerful and interesting; Modotti employed this technique throughout her career. The everyday object is transformed into a delicate interplay of light and dark through Modotti's eye. The detail and texture of every crinkle moves and seems to crackle. *Texture and Shadow* (figure 8) similarly explores tonalities and abstraction in its fine details of draped fabric.

Modotti's experiments in photography in her earlier works were not without artistic influence. They can be understood as part of an international movement in photography – 'modernist photography', 'new photography', or 'the new vision'. As a photographic practice of the 1920s and 1930s, new vision was an innovative way of looking at the world, due in large part to the introduction of new techniques that pushed the bounds of photography. The use of collage, photomontage, abstraction, and distorted or unusual points of view, including the extreme close-up, characterized the movement in which Modotti played a part. The photographs of other American modernist photographers such

as Weston, Paul Strand, and Alfred Stieglitz were also characterized by their formalism and emphasis on the materiality of the object depicted.¹⁰

A group of individuals, primarily artists, who called themselves the *Estridentistas*, also influenced Modotti's early photographs. Manuel Maples Arce announced the *Movimiento Estridentista* in a 1921 manifesto issued as a broadside by the magazine, *Revista Actual*. Deliberately provocative and outrageous, similar to manifestos published by the Italian Futurists, it denounced bourgeois taste and strict, academic practice. Instead, it proposed a new, radically modern esthetic that stylistically favored the formal dynamism and fractured imagery of the Italian Futurists, with the intent of adapting to a distinctly Mexican esthetic. Modotti was friends with many of the *Estridentistas*: German Cueto, Jean Charlot, and List Arzubide, a writer and radical activist, who participated in the group.¹¹ They stressed urban subjects, the machine and the futuristic. They admired the outrageous, the provocative and being as radical as possible. Some of Modotti's early works were in keeping with their esthetic.¹² *Experiment in Related Form* (figure 9) was the earliest example of her esthetic link with the *Estridentistas*. Similar to the strong geometrical work of the *Estridentistas*, Modotti's other earlier works, *Stadium* (figure 10), *Open Doors* (figure 11), and *Glasses* (figure 12) reveal a modern, geometrical influence.

In the *Estridentista* vein, Modotti's famous print, *Telephone Wires* (figure 13), of hundreds of wires that intersect in the middle of the open sky are like fine strands of hair. The dark lines of technology starkly contrast with the light sky in the background. The print portrays technology as complex, interesting, and even visually compelling. The photograph

¹⁰ Lowe, pp. 24-25

¹¹ Lowe, p. 25

¹² Hooks, p. 182

demonstrates some level of intrigue with these masses of communication lines. Modotti expressed hope that Mexico would modernize.

She transformed the essence of the *Estridentista* movement into her photography. Although many European and American artists celebrated progress through technology in the 1920s, virtually no one but Modotti was making artistic photographs of industrial Mexico.¹³ Her closest friend from the group, German List Arzubide, reproduced several of her photographs in the magazine he founded in April 1925, and reproduced the photograph in a new book on *Estridentismo*.¹⁴ Sarah Lowe wrote: “Modotti’s *Telegraph Wires* . . . conceived a new kind of landscape photography, one that literally bypasses the land, but uses elements springing from the ground that announce the modernization of Mexico. The acute angle from which Modotti’s shot this and a number of other photographs calls to mind the dynamism of Futurism.”¹⁵

By 1925, Modotti’s ideas about photography were changing. During her visit to San Francisco to assist her ailing mother, she faced anonymity as a photographer for the first time. Terribly frustrated that her friends and family did not recognize her as a photographer, she returned to Mexico City. In the United States, Modotti was unknown as an artist. Upon returning to Mexico City, she had a renewed fervor for her work. When Modotti first began photography, it was a hobby, but it had transformed into a full-time passion. By that time, it was her identity. Modotti wrote to Weston that San Francisco, “. . . might be called my hometown – well of all the old friends and acquaintances not one takes me seriously as a photographer – not one has asked me to show my work . . . I am going to work hard when I

¹³ Albers, p. 135

¹⁴ Hooks, p. 125

¹⁵ Lowe, p. 26

return to Mexico and differently . . .”¹⁶ Modotti’s newfound fervor for her photography consumed her life. Her friends in Mexico rarely saw her because she spent most daytime hours taking and developing photographs. Modotti’s immersion in the social circles of revolutionary politics began to affect her feelings about art. The plight of Mexico’s poor became ever present to Modotti. In a July 7, 1925 letter to Weston Modotti explained her conflicted feelings about the relationship between life and art. She wrote:

I cannot – as you once proposed to me “Solve the problem of life by losing myself in the problem of art” – Not only I cannot do that but I even feel that the problem of life hinders my problem of art. Now what is this “my problem of life”? It is chiefly: an effort to detach myself from life so as to be able to devote myself completely to art-. . . This problem of “life” and “art” is my tragic-comedy – the effort I do to dominate life is wasted energy which might be better used if I devoted it to art . . .¹⁷

Modotti was deeply conflicted about how much time she spent photographing and making art in relation to the amount of time she spent experiencing life, which contributed to the quality of her art. She felt compelled to depict through her art the reality of Mexico, yet also felt she was devoting too much time to her art and not enough time to her life. Her letter indicates the problem: the reality of Mexican life was subtly gnawing at her conscience. Modotti’s internal conflict about art and life was so deep that she eventually felt she could no longer do both and in 1930 abandoned photography. Modotti’s time was consumed by her art and her politics, yet she could not seem to combine the two.

The first photograph that clearly illustrates her attempt to unite her art and politics was *Worker’s Parade* (figure 14). She took the photograph on the May Day 1926 march en

16 Amy Stark, “The Letters From Tina Modotti to Edward Weston”, *The Archive*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Research Series, Number 22, January, 1986, p. 41.

17 Stark, pp. 39-40

route to the Zocalo. Modotti looked down upon a column of marching peasants, their large straw hats - powerful symbols of rural Mexico, and the hope of agrarian reform. *Workers Parade* shows solidarity of class and was pivotal because it united her formal and social concerns. It was featured in a late summer issue of *Mexican Folkways*, a bi-lingual magazine that showcased the creative spirit of indigenous Mexico. Frances Toor, an American anthropologist who later became Modotti's best friend, was its editor and creator.¹⁸

Workers Parade marked a radical departure from Modotti's previous photographs. Her photographic revolution had begun. The photograph illustrated her growing interest in and focus on the indigenous peasant class, and finally merged her art and politics. It was the first image in which she used her art to illustrate a political point. Her strong sense of formalism was still present as a sea of sombreros replaced her *Roses* and rims of glasses. Albers says, "This photograph marks the beginning of what was to become the leitmotif of Tina's photography – the melding of the formalism and concern for composition she learned from Weston with her growing interest and involvement in Mexican revolutionary politics." Just two days before that photograph was taken, Tina was presented with the Idols Behind Altars proposition by then unknown author, Anita Brenner.¹⁹ Modotti's work changed drastically following this project.

¹⁸ Albers, SFS, p. 157

¹⁹ Albers, SFS, p. 120

CHAPTER II: ANITA BRENNER'S IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS ASSIGNMENT

In late spring of 1926, the National Autonomous University of Mexico offered Modotti's friend and (soon-to-be-famous) author, Anita Brenner, a contract for a book entitled Mexican Decorative Arts. Brenner was an integral figure in Modotti's artist and bohemian group in Mexico City in the 1920s. A Mexican born, Texas-educated journalist, she returned to Mexico and became a key member of the *indigenismo* movement in the 1920s, as well as a leftist radical.²⁰ She immediately recruited Edward Weston as the project photographer for the book. Weston insisted that Brenner assign Modotti to the project as his partner. In the book, Brenner sought to provide American readers an accessible look (she wrote the book in English) at the realities of the Mexican Revolution. It was to have three sections: the syncretism of pre-Hispanic and Catholic beliefs and practices, popular arts and religion of the Mexican Colonial period, and the Mexican Renaissance artists: the *tres grandes*, Muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as Francisco Goitia, and Jean Charlot, all of whom were friends or acquaintances of Weston and Modotti. Brenner also planned a second book, The Mexican Renaissance. She eventually consolidated the two books into Idols Behind Altars, The Story of the Mexican Spirit, published in 1929.²¹

Brenner hired Modotti and Weston to produce 200 photographs of objects and architecture around Mexico, at sites specified by Brenner. To Brenner the project provided a

²⁰ Albers, *S.P.S.*, p. 127

²¹ Patricia Albers, Exhibition Curator, *Dear Vocio: Photographs by Tina Modotti*, University Art Gallery, San Diego, 1997, p. 31.

spiritual inventory of what Mexican life was and is. Some of the arts and crafts Brenner proposed to be photographed comprised carved polychrome Madonnas, colonial era ex-votos, painted calabashes, Catholic altars, Jalisco pottery, petate-lined huts, saddlery, carved chairs, and reproductions of paintings by the Renaissance artists.²² The photographers' expedition involved a months travel in the states of Puebla and Oaxaca, and a second month in Michoacan, Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Queretaro. They left for Puebla on June 3, 1926. Weston's son, Brett, accompanied them on the trip.

On the first leg of their journey they traveled from Puebla to the rugged southern state of Oaxaca, where Hispanic Catholicism intermingled with the rich culture of the Zapotec Indians. They traveled to mountain villages to photograph sixteenth century churches, and visited the ancient pyramids at Etlá where a hostile local police chief nearly arrested them. In Oaxaca City they were enchanted with the local black pottery, and spent hours bartering in the craft markets for goods. Modotti used her Italian identity to foil vendors' anti-American feelings. After returning to Mexico City to make prints, they set out again for a month of travel through Western Mexico – to Michoacan and Patzcuaro.²³ The trip provided numerous adventures, but Modotti and Weston felt the pressure of the immense job they had agreed to perform. They often deviated from Brenner's specified course to seek out sites or villages not on the itinerary. They made a habit of heading for the markets of every town they visited in hopes of discovering authentic folk art. The enormous burden of their project weighed down their excitement at times, and the trip became taxing and arduous.²⁴

²² Albers, SFS, p. 158

²³ Hooks, p. 123

²⁴ Lowe, p. 31

During the summer of 1926 Mexico was experiencing natural disasters and civil unrest. The country endured intense flooding throughout much of its central core, and the rural areas in which Modotti and Weston were traveling were hit the hardest. Braving the floods and downpours, they traveled often by tortuously slow and inevitably late trains and buses, sometimes even attempting mud-laden roads on mule-back.

Meanwhile, Mexico's Cristero Revolts were gaining momentum throughout the countryside. In 1926, the government of Plutarco Calles, implemented anti-clerical laws that stemmed from the constitution of 1917 in a direct response to challenges from Mexico's Catholic Churches (a long growing tension between church and state that had emerged since the Revolution, when liberal leaders viewed the Catholic Church as reactionary and status quo). This bold move reflected the conflict between church and state and prompted the state to close churches, cancel masses, destroy religious possessions, and priests were required to officially register before they could exercise ministry (this was a sore spot to many mayors who had previously been individually appointing their own priests within their districts). When the Catholic Church refused to obey Calles' new laws, he sent federal troops out to crush what he thought would be a minor rebellion. Much to his surprise, Guerilla factions banded together from all over "Old Mexico" and took to the streets fighting the federales. To President Calles, the Cristero Revolt became a war against religion; a crusade for his version of secular enlightenment as held up as central liberal ideas of the revolution. The guerrillas called themselves the *Cristeros*, and consisted mainly of peasants who had been accustomed to the heavy hand of Catholicism and looked to the Church as the great patron, protector, and provider. To them, the government was taking back the one

thing they owned: the security of the 'patron.' As a result, fighting ensued all over the country. Three years later, 80,000 Mexicans had lost their lives.²⁵

It was under these tense and violent conditions that Modotti and Weston traveled throughout Mexico's rural countryside, most often to churches in search of folk art. As Patricia Albers wrote, "It was hardly the ideal moment for foreigners to roam the countryside taking pictures in churches. Edward and Brett doffed their hats at every shrine, while Tina kissed "the greasy hands of lecherous priests" and demonstrated such "tact and sympathy for the Indians" that the threesome escaped with nothing more than tongue-lashings and threats."²⁶

They began their journey in Puebla, a devout city tightly packed with overwrought cathedrals and austere convents. One morning, they explored nearby villages of San Francisco Acatepec and Tonantzintla, whose churches were full of brightly colored putti, fat cheeked martyrs, birds, flowers, and vegetables. The imagery was nominally Catholic but hardly familiar to the Vatican. The photographs explored a church that reflected a complex syncretism. As Brenner said, "Mexican culture was syncretic; with an Indian idol lurking behind every Catholic altar, a mother goddess inside every Madonna."²⁷ As Modotti and Weston were producing images that revealed a seemingly peaceful intersection of Indian and Hispanic cultures, the same combination was at war in Mexico's Cristero Revolts. Culturally, the mix of Hispanic and native Mexican components were harmonious. Politically, they were not. Ultimately, the resentment from the Hispanic conquests of the sixteenth centuries superseded any cultural marriage. The Cristero Revolt was a war between the Mexicans who

25 Enrique Krauze, Translated by Hank Heifetz, *Mexico: Biography of Power, A History of Modern Mexico 1810-1996*, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., New York, 1997, pp. 419-25.

26 Nancy Newhall, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston, Volume I Mexico*, George Eastman House, New York, 1989, pp. 174-5.

27 Albers, SFS, p. 159

had grown accustomed to the Hispanic culture, and those who resented any ties to their Hispanic heritage.

The mood of unrest throughout the countryside made Weston especially nervous. It created complications for them. They were eyed mistrustfully at every church door they approached and were often suspected of being government spies. The government had sealed many sacristies to which Modotti and Weston had anticipated access.²⁸ Weston kept journals throughout most of the Idols Behind Altars journey which explicitly reveal the perils and arduous nature of their trip. Regarding the dangers of the trip he wrote:

I was possessed by a great uneasiness while in Patzcuaro, in view of the government order to officially end Mass in the Catholic Church. One felt the tenseness of the situation affecting the whole community. The severity of the ruling might result in civil war. I recall one morning – 4:30 it was and pitch dark. I was awakened by a delirious clangor of bells, - more than protest, I thought, - an insinuated rebellion. Then came Sunday, August 1st- when no bells rang – a heavy silence, more alarming than the foreboding bells, threatened the city. . . for now the attitude towards strangers, - possible government spies, or at least unsympathetic aliens, - made our situation precarious. We were marked. . . A source of importance to our work, the sacristy, was closed, locked and sealed by the government. With the going of the padres, permission to work in a church was not easy to obtain, for no one cared to – or would not – assume responsibility, - so often we went around in maddening circles.²⁹

Weston also said of the conditions in Guadalajara,

Guadalajara was not gay. What city could be during that crisis! Black prevailed, - the Catholics in mourning. A boycott of all luxuries, all pleasures, emptied the streets and stores. Street fighting between soldiers and Catholics, - the majority women, armed with bricks, clubs, machetes, - resulted in bloodshed and death. To work in such a belligerent atmosphere was embarrassing. Every movement out of the ordinary was noted. Setting up my camera in front

²⁸ Lowe, p. 31

²⁹ Weston, p. 174

of a church was next to training a gun upon it. I wished that instead of puttees and leather breeches, I had the most conventional suit. Two Mexican engineers (suspected of being Government spies) – had been lynched in Acambaro shortly after our visit...this recalls a story from Aguas Calientes. A general said he would have no black-dressed women mourning for the church in his town. He arrested a number, had them stripped and sent home in their underwear.³⁰

Modotti and Weston were viewed so suspiciously that they were spied upon, according to Weston. He claimed that spies followed them nearly every time they entered a church.³¹ The violence of the Cristero Revolts affected nearly every aspect of their trip. At one point they called upon a local priest to whom Brenner had referred them and discovered that he had been kidnapped by the military the night before their arrival.³² That was, unfortunately, the case for many priests at that time.

Once, Modotti and Weston were leaving a church when the mayor and his cabinet stopped them. He questioned the letters and credentials that Modotti and Weston carried and chastised them publicly to set an example for the rest of the village. Modotti and Weston were forced to leave the town immediately.³³ A similar incident occurred in Cholula when Weston and his son Brett were questioned for climbing a wall to reach a closed church.³⁴ The Cristero Revolts were a constant threat to the traveling threesome.

Their itinerary was demanding. They were required to visit many places in a short amount of time. They were often hurried and felt the need to press on to the next village in search for more idols. In his journals, Weston wrote: "Lacking time and money for roaming the country at leisure, we have had to carefully calculate our itinerary, - attempt to plan

³⁰ Weston, p. 183

³¹ Weston, pp. 185-6

³² Weston, p. 168

³³ Weston, p. 170

³⁴ Weston, p. 164

activities ahead, sometimes too suggestive of a forced march. But if we cannot travel as might a carefree globe-trotter, the very nature of our work has made us keenly observant, open to impression.”³⁵ To make matters worse, the horrible flooding conditions, and their small budget made for many sleepless nights and difficult travel. Weston discussed a crash in Oaxaca that occurred because of the rain:

Torrents of rain had fallen for days before our departure from Oaxaca, - flooding the country, washing out tracks. There was some doubt as to whether we could make the trip, but we found an antiquated engine waiting to take us to the worst washout where we transferred ourselves and luggage to the regular train, a quarter mile away. The cars lurched along as though at any moment they might leave the track. Finally they did, - with a shocking crash, grinding and plunging over the ties, amidst crashing glass and screaming voices. A moment of panic, -then we faced each other on terra firma with white faces and knocking knees. The engine had not jumped the track and with some maneuvering the cars were shunted back in place. Proceeding cautiously, - the cars now creaking and groaning in protest, - a few miles later, around a curve, the engine struck rock. The cow-catcher doubled-up, but on we went. Any pretext to feel one’s feet on solid ground; so the toilsome pilgrimage over washout was a relief.³⁶

Modotti and Weston had been accustomed to a more leisurely lifestyle than what they experienced during Brenner’s trip. Poor living conditions of the Indians made a deep, but profoundly different impression on both of them. It was as if they experienced two different Mexicos: Weston frustrated, Modotti moved. They often slept in cheap hotels to save money, and in those places they experienced infestations of bugs and uncomfortable beds. Weston wrote of these conditions:

So preparing for the worst, I wet my face with melisa for mosquitoes and powdered the bed for fleas. The room had

³⁵ Weston, p. 168

³⁶ Weston, pp. 170-1

no windows – there are few fresh air fiends in Mexico, to leave the door open would have been financial suicide. I erected a barricade of table and chairs, coyly viewed my bed, crossed myself – and – awakened next morning remembering a sanguine, night-long battle with fleas, - battalions of them. The dead lay strewn between the spiteful little hillocks of my mattress, between which I had found vale of rest.³⁷

Developing their negatives was even an ordeal. Weston's sleeveless raincoat served as a hypo-tray, and coats and they used blankets to create makeshift darkrooms.³⁸

The natives' suspicions of the traveling trio were at times unsettling and at other times humorous. Sometimes the Indians poked fun at their gringo ways, other times the trio was luckily mistaken for Italians and spared the lashings of anti-American sentiment. Weston wrote: "Bargaining with a group of Indians in the market, we talked on varied subjects. Thinking that like Tina, Brett and I were also Italian, they gave us a rather distressing idea of their attitude toward Americans. 'The gringos? – we kill them and eat them!' It is unpleasant to feel this antagonism, - I admit justified on their part."³⁹ Tina alleviated potential clashes between suspicious Indians and local officials. Weston said of the advantage, "... if a woman had not been in our party, especially Tina, with her tact and sympathy for the Indians, a woman which made the group seem less aggressive, Brett and I would never have finished the work."⁴⁰ Modotti's kindness and empathy for the conditions of the Indians carried over into her photography after the trip.

The trio hunted for Indian arts and crafts in every village. Weston said in his Daybooks, "Would we care to dig for idols in the morning?" We would! And did. I made

³⁷ Weston, p. 181

³⁸ Weston, p. 163

³⁹ Weston, p. 166

⁴⁰ Weston, p. 175

the first find – a tiny clay torso lying in the furrowed ground,” wrote Weston.⁴¹ They felt great joy and excitement when they found things in unexpected places.⁴² They felt enthusiasm in the exploratory nature of the trip. Weston’s descriptions about the discoveries they literally unearthed reveal their deep praise of the Indian craftspeople. Weston described that when Modotti discovered a stone angel bearing a cross, it, “. . . made such an impression that every curve and cut I recall without reference to my negative. It was modern, we were told, - done last year by an albanil – a brick layer who recently died. The world lost an artist! I count this real discovery, - not the digging up of primordial ruins. Here was something done in the grand manner, - with tenderness and love and power, - done by someone who felt stone and cut it with decisive command.”⁴³ Weston and Modotti developed a real reverence for Indian arts and crafts. The different styles of pottery they found at the local markets impressed them. Weston said of the potters : “A race of born sculptors!”⁴⁴ Even more impressive was the market. Weston described the sensual pleasures of the market, “Besides this visual feast, the nostrils were gratified by the scent of pungent herbs, of spicy fruits, or the bouquet of flowers, - fresh clean smells, - none of the filth of La Merced in Mexico. Nor was the sense of hearing neglected, a busy hum rose to complete a sensory feast, - the buzz of conversation, - gay repartee, - sing-song of vendors.”⁴⁵ The market scene later became a favorite subject for Modotti’s photographs.

The trip affected Weston and Modotti in very different ways. Weston became annoyed and nauseated by the end; Modotti was inspired and felt a call to action. The life of the Indian and working poor became increasingly important to Modotti. She took a keen

41 Weston, p. 177

42 Weston, p. 164

43 Weston, p.169

44 Weston, p. 165

45 Weston, p. 166

interest in how indigenous Mexico dressed and worked, what it created and how it lived.⁴⁶

On November 6, 1926, after both legs of the trip, Weston and Modotti completed the project.⁴⁷

Modotti's experiences with indigenous Mexico on the Idols Behind Altars trip were the catalyst for the consequent change in her photography in 1926-27. Modotti permanently dedicated her energies and photography to justice for Mexico's Indians and working poor. Her interest in *indigenismo* and *Mexicanidad* already existed, but the trip reinforced them. The active, strong, indigenous communities intrigued her.⁴⁸ Her new approach to photography was motivated primarily by *indigenismo*, defined as a "willingness to see the Indian as...a rock upon which the future civilization and culture of Mexico has to be built." Many other artists and intellectuals at that time in Mexico shared the idea that indigenous peoples were the quintessential Mexicans. Modotti and Rivera shared similar artistic representation of the Indians: inevitably, their imagery intersected.⁴⁹

After the Idols Behind Altars trip, *indigenismo* became Tina's life philosophy and permeated her photography from 1926-30. Mexicans looked inward to find the Indian in all of them, and the role of the Indian changed – rhetorically and in reality.⁵⁰ The newly created bilingual magazine, *Mexican Folkways*, a bilingual magazine dedicated to Mexican culture, founded in 1925 by Frances Toor, a friend of Modotti's (eventually Modotti became co-editor of the publication), and Modotti's contact with the 'Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors', both reinforced her ideas about *indigenismo*. The magazine featured articles, images, and reproductions of artwork (ancient through modern) throughout Mexico.

46 Albers, SFS p. 163

47 Albers, SFS, p. 161

48 Albers, SFS, p. 162

49 Albers, SFS, p. 160

51 Andrea Noble, *Tina Modotti: Image, Texture, Photography*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2000, pp. 110-11.

Toor was a leftist revolutionary who shared hopes for Mexico as Modotti. Toor said of her beliefs,

. . . the Revolution has not yet made good in an economic sense all its promises to the people. It has been perhaps unnecessarily slow in its reconstruction work, and the Indian is still poor and illiterate. But at least he has been recognized as a human being. The new governing classes have discovered the value of the Indian just as the Industrial Revolution has discovered the value of the man on the street. They have realized that if Mexico is to progress, the masses of Indians, forming two-thirds of the population, must be taken into account.⁵¹

Their ideas about indigenismo were rooted in the idea that the post-revolutionary reform promised by the government had failed miserably, and they called for a new revolution.

In 1922, The Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors formulated under the leadership of Mexican Muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. The group promoted Mexico's indigenous peoples as the source for artistic inspiration. They promoted the potential of the public art programs in Mexico at that time under the Minister of Education, Jose Vasconcelos. They rallied behind a manifesto, published in the first issue of *El Machete*, a newspaper dedicated to workers and peasants. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Carlos Merida were some of the co-signers and committee members. The group was composed of the country's most influential artists. The proposition advanced by the syndicate was a call to reclaim Mexico – specifically its pre-Columbian culture and contemporary art by indigenous peoples – as a resource for artistic inspiration. The manifesto said, “The art of the Mexican people is the most important and vital spiritual manifestation in the world today, and its Indian traditions lie at its very heart.”⁵²

51 Noble, p. 114

52 Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars: The Story of the Mexican Spirit*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1929, pp. 254-55.

The Syndicate's relationship with the Mexican government was initially positive, due in major part to Jose Vasconcelos' ambitious reform plan, designed with the illiterate and rural populace of Mexico in mind. Under the banner of the Revolution, and incorporating his own philosophies, Vasconcelos fostered programs that relied heavily upon the visual arts to improve the lives of Mexico's poor. After all, Vasconcelos enlisted artists to paint the walls of public buildings throughout the country.⁵³ The group consisted of the most revolutionary and powerful leftists in Mexico City at the time. Modotti was not only familiar with the Syndicate and its ideals, but also participated in it with her friends to promote values important to her.

Modotti's involvement with organizations and publications that promoted *indigenismo* contributed to the change that took place in her work in 1926-27. Her involvement with contemporary Mexican artists who shared her same political ideas directly affected her artistic path. Most of her contemporaries were not only artists but also revolutionaries who were dedicated to social change through art. Modotti and her contemporaries' were motivated solely by Mexico's indigenous population, its culture, its social conditions, and the huge population of poor and working Mexicans whose material conditions the Revolution was intended to improve.⁵⁴

Modotti and Weston were both commissioned to produce images for Brenner's book. However, it is still not certain how many photographs Modotti took on the trip, if any. Some scholars give more credit to Modotti; others attribute the entire project to Weston. In the acknowledgment page of Idols Behind Altars, in which she thanks all who participated in the book, Anita Brenner says, "The two photographers who shared this

⁵³ Lowe, p. 26

⁵⁴ Lowe, p. 27

commission, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, are too well known and respected as masers of their craft to expect in Idols Behind Altars any acknowledgment less than deeply grateful.”⁵⁵ Brenner’s acknowledgment indicates that Modotti and Weston equally contributed to the photographs in the book.

In 1994 Patricia Albers discovered a cache of Modotti’s documents, which included hundreds of letters and photographs, many of which had not been seen or published since Modotti’s death. The materials discovered by Albers were from trunks that once belonged to Modotti’s companion, Roubaix (Robo) de L’Abrie Richey. After his death in 1922, Richey’s trunk was sent to the Los Angeles home of his mother, Rose Richey (called “Vocio”) to whom Modotti remained very close even after Richey’s death. When Modotti moved to Mexico City in 1923, she began sending letters and photographs to Vocio until 1929.⁵⁶ Patricia Albers claims that evidence from the trunks proves Modotti took some of the photographs on the Idols Behind Altars trip. Most were intended for personal viewing, like family pictures to send home. Among these are *Fishermen Mending Nets* (figure 15), and *Campeño with Hay* (figure 16), well-known Modotti photographs not previously associated with the expedition.⁵⁷ In 1996, in an attempt to uncover more details about over 100 prints found in the trunks, Albers traveled to Mexico and hired Professor Otto G. Schumann of the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropologías of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and Mexico City - based textile conservator Irmgard W. Johnson to examine clothing, objects, and the situations depicted in the photographs. Schumann and Johnson were able to assign, to some, locations corresponding to stops on the Idols Behind Altars

⁵⁵ Brenner, Acknowledgment page

⁵⁶ Albers, DV, pp. 6-7

⁵⁷ Albers, DV, p. 31

itinerary. Albers claims that at least fifteen of Modotti's photographs can be linked to the expedition.⁵⁸

Ultimately, admits Albers, it remains unclear how many photographs were produced by Modotti on the trip. Some can be definitively attributed to Weston. Other straightforward photographs of objects are difficult to attribute without additional documentation. Some of Modotti's photographs may represent her individual interpretation, which was strikingly different from Weston's, of Anita Brenner's required images. Very few of Weston's images include people because he was uncomfortable photographing strangers; he was not a street photographer like Modotti had become. She enjoyed photographing everyday Mexicans on the streets and in the markets. They spent most of their time on the trip traveling through the countryside and its predominantly Indian villages doing just that. Modotti had never traveled so extensively in rural Mexico previously. Albers claims that Modotti's material contact with the indigenous societies so frequently cited in Mexico City political and social debates must have helped to synthesize her ideas about the role of Indians in Mexico's past, present, and future. The captions written on some of her photographs to Vocio indicate that she was thinking in terms of ethnicity: "*Indian raincoat*

58 Albers, DV, p. 35 (Albers cites unpublished letters/documents written by Modotti to Vocio from July 1926 from Mexico City in the two-week layover between the first and second IBA exhibition. Modotti noted their arduous travels in Puebla and Oaxaca due to flooding. She also wrote that she included snapshots in the letter to Vocio, "I am sending you a few snapshots of things I took here and there." There are three images (snapshots) in the trunk which can definitely be assigned to those areas: *Church of Santa Maria in Tonantzintla*, about ten miles outside of Puebla, and two others that depict the tiles and stone facades of nearby church of *San Francisco Acatepec*. Modotti captioned these two photographs. There is another print of similar imagery of that same church attributed to Weston. *Therefore, one imagines the two photographers working side by side. July 18 Modotti and Weston left for Michoacan. Albers suggests that the images produced by Modotti on the second leg of the expedition are more numerous and more personal. Modotti could have shifted her photography as a result of the first expedition, or similar images from the first part of the trip were not preserved. Albers notes that Weston's Daybooks are captions to Modotti's photographs, in detail. It is as if Weston provides a written account, and Tina a visual account through her photographs (see *Market day in Patzcuaro*). Albers claims that the popular image *Fishermen Mending Nets* was also made in Patzcuaro, according to Schumann and Johnson's research. Weston's Daybooks captions that image exactly. The image of a Michoacan woman also resonates with Weston's Daybooks in the way they dress (sashes, pleated skirts, fajas). From Patzcuaro, they traveled on to Uruapan, Tonalá, Guadalajara, and Guanajuato. Weston remarked that he did not remove his camera while in Guanajuato. Modotti did not pass up the opportunity, however. *Street Scene in Guanajuato*, and *View of Guanajuato* were both taken there.

made of straw", "*The way Indian women dress in the state of Michoacan*", and "*Young musicians of a village band-mostly all Indians-barefooted but oh how they can play!*"

Weston scholar Amy Conger attributes nearly all of the images from the trip to Weston. She researched the images extensively and struggled with the issue of attribution as well. Her conclusion that Modotti did few to none of the photographs on the trip are based largely on a 1980 interview with Brett Weston. Brett claimed that neither he nor Modotti photographed during their travels. Yet there are many references to Modotti in correspondences with Brenner and the contract. Conger does acknowledge that Modotti had her camera during her travels. In a 1983 catalogue, Conger asserts that Modotti did not contribute to the project. Then in a 1986 essay, she said, "Modotti made virtually no photographs on the trip they took to make these pictures." She goes on to say, "Of those eventually published, a few were made by Modotti in Mexico City."⁵⁹

Sarah Lowe suggests that Weston's strong ego, and that fact that he and Modotti grew apart romantically, contributed to the lack of references to Modotti as photographer. Modotti perhaps had no strong feelings about authorship, whereas Weston did. Some of the photographs from the trip for Brenner that Weston claimed as his own were signed prints, and some were photographs published in his lifetime. However, Lowe asserts that the project was " . . . collaborative on all accounts, from gaining entrance to a collection, arranging the 'still life' or choosing an angle in architectural sites, setting up the camera, and so forth, all tasks at which Modotti was proficient."⁶⁰ Weston, however, signs none of the pictures from the trip that remain in Brenner's estate, but several dozen bear descriptive captions on the back in Modotti's hand. Lowe claims that it is possible that Modotti took

59 Albers, DV, p. 32. See Conger's essay for more details regarding attribution.

60 Lowe, p. 31

some of the images actually published in Idols Behind Altars. She cites the fact that none of the photographs were credited individually in Brenner's acknowledgment. It seems that even Brenner did not know which photographer took which image. In an interview in 1966 Brenner said, "Tina did a good deal of this work interchangeably with Edward, so that it would be impossible to say whose photographs are which . . ." ⁶¹

Modotti scholar Andrea Noble does not waste much time on the issue because ". . . it is speculative and ultimately futile activity." She says, "Depending on the political agenda of the critic in question, this series is alternately attributed wholly to Weston and his son Brett or is viewed as a collaborative project carried out by Weston and Modotti. Weston himself fuels the debate in his journals where he suggests that Modotti's role was that of an assistant to himself and Brett. He wrote: ". . . if a woman had not been in our party, especially Tina, with her tact and sympathy for the Indians, a woman which made the group seem less aggressive, Brett and I would never have finished the work . . ." ⁶²

Margaret Hooks attributes most of the photographs to Weston. She says,

Clearly it was Edward who had signed the contract and took the vast majority of photographs, but Tina's participation in both practical and aesthetic terms was integral to the project's success. She served both as translator and fixer – kissing the 'greasy hands of lecherous priests' in order to photograph churches and religious statues at a time of extremely high church-state tensions. Her fluent Spanish allowed her to pose as a Mexican to bail them out of tight spots and enabled her to bargain for better prices on just about everything. She also discovered art objects to photograph which Weston had overlooked. In fact, in Weston's opinion the assignment could never have been completed without Tina's vital help. She also took many photographs for the project and several of them appear in Anita Brenner's book. The individual

⁶¹ Lowe, p. 32

⁶² Noble, p. 62

photographs carry no credits, making it hard to detect precisely which photographs are hers...⁶³

Regardless how many, if any, of the Idols Behind Altars photographs Modotti took herself, it was her *experience* of the trip, the exposure to contemporary Mexican artists, and the Indian communities of Mexico that in combination, prompted the change in her photography after the trip. It seems likely that Modotti took many of the photographs. Weston respected and admired her work greatly and the two constantly exchanged photographic advice and insight—that trip would have been no different. Modotti had her camera with her on the trip, and some of Modotti's most famous images happen to be from the specific areas they traveled to for Idols Behind Altars. Finally, Modotti was commissioned *with* Weston for the project – not as his assistant. Ultimately, attribution to specific images cannot be determined. What can be determined is the affect the Idols Behind Altars trip had on her and her work. Before the Idols Behind Altars commission, Tina Modotti was thinking about Mexico's social and political struggles. Her eyes were just beginning to see a different Mexico. The fact that she took *Workers Parade* roughly one month before she left for Brenner's assignment indicates the beginning of Modotti's change; Brenner's assignment essentially made it permanent. Her photography made a dramatic shift in late 1926-27. The Idols Behind Altars journey was not just geographic, but also spiritual. For her it was a journey that unveiled the meaning and purpose in her life and art.

⁶³ Hooks, p. 123

CHAPTER III: IMAGES FROM IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS (1926) COMPARED TO MODOTTI'S SUBSEQUENT WORK (1926-29)

That Modotti was familiar with the images produced in Idols Behind Altars is without doubt. She more than likely was with Edward Weston when they were photographed, and it is quite possible that Modotti actually took some of the photographs. Her strong familiarity with, and being influenced later by those images, can be seen in comparing Idols Behind Altars images to Modotti's photographs produced after the expedition. Many of the photographs have a close compositional similarity; others are similar thematically and conceptually. The comparisons speak volumes about the pivotal nature of the trip to Modotti's later work. The comparisons are linked thematically by pictures of: women and children, everyday life, labor, and political/propagandist images.

Women and Children

Modotti's interest in motherhood, womanhood, and fortitude, are present in her occasional series of mother and child. In 1929, Tina traveled briefly to Tehuantepec, a southern region known for its strong matriarchal values. The women of Tehuantepec captivated her, as is evident in the photographs she produced on her visit. Margaret Hooks says of this trip,

In the towns of Juchitan and Tehuantepec, where there still remained the vestiges of a matriarchal enclave, she made what she herself considered to be mainly 'snapshots' of the Tehuanas, the tall, proud and independent women of the Tehuantepec Isthmus. With their long flowing hair and multi-colored flowered skirts, their mid-riff length blouses exposing their warm, smooth flesh, the Tehuanas, a true feast

for the eyes, exuded fecundity. Tina photographed these latter-day fertility goddesses with their plump naked children grafted to their bodies as they bathed in the river and walked to market with their brightly painted yecapixtle gourds on their heads. She marveled at how quickly and gracefully they moved, carrying everything from a box of pills to live iguanas in this manner.⁶⁴

Emotional and physical connectedness unites Modotti's mother and child images:

Mother and Child, Tehuantepec, 1929 (figure 17), *An Aztec Mother*, 1926-27 (figure 18), *Baby Nursing*, 1926-27 (figure 19), and Jean Charlot's lithograph *Mother and Child* (IBA, figure 20). All represent the undying bond between mother and child. Charlot's larger than life *mother* figure bends over and seemingly consumes her child with her gargantuan arms, to pick her up. Modotti's *Mother and Child, Tehuantepec* is cropped so severely that only the torso of the pregnant mother and the infant on her hip are visible. The close cropping technique (similar to *Roses*) reinforces the physical bond. Sarah Lowe says of *Baby Nursing*, "Modotti's approach here recalls her still lifes, and presages future photographic series that use human elements."⁶⁵ Charlot's and Modotti's images of mother and child convey the same message: that the love between a mother and her child is eternal.

Modotti's *mothers* exemplify the 'true Mexican', as identified by revolutionaries at the time who believed that the true Mexican heritage was a combination of Indian and Hispanic influence. Modotti's mother figures, in their strong, dark-skinned bodies, are reminiscent of the Mexican Madonna, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Guadalupe was a mixture of Indian and Hispanic idolatry; the combination of her dark Indian skin and traits with her Madonna-like imagery was a recognizable symbol with which many Mexicans could identify. Brenner wrote of Guadalupe: "Guadalupe's Mexico is the real nation. . . She is the proof of the

⁶⁴ Hooks, p. 178

⁶⁵ Lowe, p. 31

fundamental Mexican unity; and a definite, permanent, created value.”⁶⁶ Modotti’s *mother* figures reflect the strength and authenticity of Guadalupe, and the commonly held belief at that time that a Mexican was a mixture of Indian and Hispanic cultures.

Modotti’s *Autorretrato 1929* (figure 21), and Abraham Angel’s, *Young Woman* (IBA figure 22), both depict women of Tehuantepec. Modotti took this self-portrait in 1929 during her visit. The traditional dress that inspired so many of her contemporaries (such as Frida Kahlo) to emulate, was also compelling to Modotti, as is evident in the fact that she posed as a Tehuana in the photograph. Tehuantepec affected Modotti so much, that she changed her usual simple skirt and blouse to a much more exotic garb. Modotti was known for her very conservative, almost militant type of dress. She often wore neckties to demonstrate her values as a militant revolutionary. This *Autorretrato* is not an accurate portrayal of Modotti’s usual dress. It is for this reason that the photograph is striking, as this is the only record of any self-portrait of Modotti. The self-portrait is similar to Angels’ *Young Woman*. The two women, seen full length, stand frontally, in a flat composition, and portray young Tehuanas in traditional dress. The women even smile slightly. The physical attributes of both women are also similar: the jaw line, nose, and even the hairstyle. The images are not exact replicas, but suggest that Modotti was thinking of Angels’ work when she took her self-portrait.

Modotti portrayed the children of Mexico in many conditions in her photography. In Modotti’s *Untitled (two boys with baskets)*, 1926, (figure 23), and *A Stall in the Alameda selling Indian Wares*, 1926-29 (figure 24), the children appear more like little adults. In Juan Hernandez’ *Children of the Revolution* (IBA figure 25), the children are loaded with bandoliers and stand atop a mountain as if they have conquered it. Bearing the Communist flag, they

⁶⁶ Brenner, p. 152

stand tall and face forward; the future is theirs. The children are depicted as a revolutionary force participating in the fight for freedom. In Modotti's *Untitled* and *Alameda*, the Indian children look almost daringly at Modotti's lens. The two boys with baskets, in their overalls, with dirt and rags, bare feet, and hats are posed side by side in a somewhat similar way to the woodcut. Unlike other Modotti images of children, (refer to trip to Colonia de la Bolsa) these little boys have toys in their hands as if they have been playing; a pastime not often enjoyed by Mexico's poor.⁶⁷

In *Alameda*, the boy and girl look at the camera suspiciously and boldly. The way the little boy leans against the wooden post with his hat tilted to the side, and the way the head of the girl is tilted downwards as she looks up at Modotti, portrays a sense of uneasiness. These children are not sheltered, naïve individuals. On the contrary, these images are of children who have seen the world, and have been hardened by it. Modotti's children appear to be little fighters, much like Hernandez' "*Children of the Revolution*."

Modotti photographed women who had strength – with or without children. Modotti's *Woman with Flag*, 1928, (figure 26) a strong, poised Indian flag bearer conjures up images of marching soldiers. Jose Clemente Orozco's lithograph, *The Flag* (IBA figure 27), of slouching peasant type figures gives a feeling of lethargy as the mass of people move towards their destination. Compositionally, the two works are similar in that in both, figures relate to the flat, horizontal picture plane, are viewed from the side, and have a strong diagonal like the one that intersects the image with the flagpole. Orozco's flag carriers are faceless and overcome by the weight of the flags they bear. Modotti's *Woman with Flag*, however, stands upright, confident, strong, and stares straight ahead. Both images are set

⁶⁷ Modotti took a series of photographs in late 1926 in a shantytown Colonia de la Bolsa. They are among her most piercing images of poverty-stricken children. The images are pathetic, profound, and wretched. See Patricia Albers, *Shadows, Fire, and Snow*, pp. 172-174 about the trip and the impact it had on Modotti.

against rather stark backgrounds, although the Orozco image conveys a more spatially complex area. Modotti's flag bearer appears to be elevated on a rooftop with a faint distant environment in the background. *Woman with Flag* reflects strength and pride; Orozco's *The Flag*, more of struggle.

Images of poverty-stricken children had a profound effect on Modotti, and she documented their impoverished existence. Modotti's *Untitled*, 1926 (figure 28), and Rufino Tamayo's *Children* (IBA figure 29) are striking in their strong comparisons. Each depicts a set of two barefoot children side by side as the central image (the positioning of the arms is exactly similar). It is how they accept or reject their surroundings that is different. In *Untitled*, the Indian boys stare into the camera with the eyes of adults. Tamayo's children gaze out at the viewer with rather disturbed, almost contorted expressions. The background is uneasy with only a small, stark room, a bed, and the children appear to be backed into a corner. They appear threatened or afraid. Modotti's young boys are confident in their bare feet and dirty clothes. They have been working and the large baskets behind them suggest some sort of labor.

Everyday Life

Witnessing the everyday lives of Mexicans on the trip intrigued Modotti. Three images from *Idols behind Altars* of street musicians echo in one of Modotti's later photographs. Modotti's *Young Musicians of a Village Band...*, 1926 (figure 30), Francisco Goitia's *Village Orchestra* (IBA figure 31), Paul Higgins' *Street Singers* (IBA figure 32), and Manuel Rodriguez Lozano's *Street Singers* (IBA figure 33), convey the vitality, spirit, and energy that street performers provide to their audiences (though Lozano's to a lesser degree). The way that Goitia's orchestra leans back and Higgins' children look up admirably to the musicians, show how much entertainment street performers bring. The close grouping of

the figures in each of these images, the strong horizontal emphasis, and the overall tone of the works connect them. The traditional dress of the figures in all four images implies that they are Indians. Modotti's title suggests how impressed she was by this particular scene: *Young musicians of a village band – mostly all Indians – barefooted but oh how they can play!* Modotti rarely portrayed Mexicans at leisure; this is one of very few.

The textures and earthen qualities of the two humble Indian dwellings shown in Modotti's *Casa de Amado Galvan – an Indian hut made of adobe*, 1926 (figure 34), and *Interior of Native House in Xochimilco* (IBA figure 35) are similar. The *Xochimilco* interior is filled with straw, interwoven to make shelter (this photograph was used in *Idols Behind Altars* in a chapter dedicated to the importance of petate, a woven Mexican material that has many uses in the Indians' everyday lives). Smaller objects are present that suggest a lived in dwelling. The conditions under which the natives lived is what interested the photographer. What is striking about the *Xochimilco* interior is its reflection of a simple, humble existence. Similarly, Modotti's later photograph of *Amado Galvan's* home makes the same impression. Galvan was a fairly well known Indian potter, yet Modotti's photograph does not depict Galvan's pottery, rather, the setting in which it was produced. His small adobe "hut" that he stands in front of portrays the connectedness the Mexican Indians have to the Earth. In his *Daybooks* Weston said, "The house of the poor grew from solid rock, - out of the hillsides. . ." ⁶⁸

Modotti's *Campeño with Hay*, 1927-29 (figure 36), *Elegance and Poverty* (figure 37), 1928, and Francisco Goitia's *The Sad Indian* (IBA figure 38), all utilize the image of a slouched Mexican to make a social statement. This image has been used repeatedly since the Revolution in Mexican art. Modotti's *Campeño with Hay* and *Elegance and Poverty* both portray

⁶⁸ Weston, p. 184

the Mexican peasant in a state of exhaustion. The *Campesino* bears the enormous weight of a haystack tied to his back as he crosses his arms and lowers his head for a moment of rest. That he seems to be standing in front of a loading truck indicates that he is taking a break. The strategically placed sombrero on his haystack reinforces the essence of *indigenismo* – that the strength of Mexico lay in the untapped workforce of the native Indians and peasants. The *campesino* symbolizes Mexico's rural Indians. *Elegance and Poverty*, however, is a city dwelling Mexican, probably on the streets of Mexico City. The image is a photomontage created out of various Modotti photographs that have been assembled together to create the appearance of one image.⁶⁹ The image of the slouched, rejected Mexican, contrasts with the billboard for a men's clothing store that reads, "From head to toe, we have everything that a gentleman need to dress elegantly." Modotti ironically juxtaposes two radically different worlds; the apparent dismal position of the exhausted Indian on the street contrasts greatly from the world of "elegance" in the billboard. *Elegance and Poverty* makes a strong statement about the reality of Mexico's poor while at the same time almost poking fun at the rich.⁷⁰ The blank, stark wall behind the worker isolates him and suggests his inability to rise above his situation.⁷¹ Modotti's photographs and Francisco Goitia's *Sad Indian* attempt to expose the tragic condition of Mexico's poor. Goitia's slouched Mexican has the same positioning of arms and hands as Modotti's *Elegance and Poverty*. His hand wipes his brow as the opposite arm rests. The sombrero, huarache sandals, white pants and shirt all suggest that he is a *campesino*. All three images address the situation of Mexico's poor. With their sombreros, they symbolize the despair of their poverty-stricken condition.

⁶⁹ Lowe, p. 38

⁷⁰ see Diego Rivera's *Night of the Poor* and *Night of the Rich* for a similar theme.

⁷¹ Lowe, p. 39

In Modotti's *Three Ways to wear a Sarape* (figure 39), Carmen Fonserrada's *Peasant Boy* (IBA figure 40), and David Alfaro Siqueiros' *The Peasant, The Soldier, and The Worker* (IBA figure 41), the sarape represents rural, indigenous Mexico and is a symbol of the countryside (it is not as present in urban Mexico as it is in rural villages). Modotti and Weston were interested in serapes. Weston said in his Daybooks,

It was a sarape day. We were besieged to buy even at the hotel door. Gringos pay well for sarapes which an Indian would not be seen with . . . we bought such serapes as they with good taste wear, - black with a flaring red center, a few stylized flowers or whimsically fierce tigers. One questions how long they will keep their fine colour, for aniline dyes are universally used, - another sad result of commerce."⁷²
"The old sarapes, even when in rags, held brilliant color, - were simple and dignified; the new ones often hideous. . . One man with a rare old sarape, continually crossed our path, until Tina approached him to buy. Yes, he had worn it about eight years, - he would sell for three pesos. For once Tina did not bargain! Later that day we saw the same Indian proudly strutting through the plaza wearing a brand new sarape, - an ugly modern one. He surely thought, what a stupid gringa to buy that dirty old rag from me!"⁷³

In Modotti's *Three Ways to Wear a Sarape*, three Indians demonstrate the various ways serapes can be worn. Unlike Modotti's snapshots, the placement of the three men standing in a straight line, looking directly into the camera, suggests that they have posed. Although there is an underlying comical tone, the facial expressions of the three men are serious and somewhat intense. The central figure in Modotti's image is very similar to Fonserrada's *Peasant Boy*; the sombrero, solid dark sarape, and white pants are identical. Although Fonserrada's *Peasant Boy* stands amidst his field, the figures are identical. Siqueiros' *The Peasant, The Soldier, and The Worker*, is compositionally identical to Modotti's photograph.

⁷² Weston, p. 66

⁷³ Weston, p. 173

The three men are connected, as they link arms and face fully frontal with a serious gaze, they all wear hats, and have strong central figures, similar to Modotti's photograph. Modotti and Siquieros' images suggest the strength of the working class.

Modotti was intrigued by pulquerias in Mexico and took several photographs that made strong social commentary on the little bars frequented by the poor. Modotti's *Exterior of Pulqueria*, 1926 (figure 42), *Misery*, 1928 (figure 43), *Pulqueria Marionette* (figure 44), and two images from *Idols Behind Altars*, *The Loves of Cupid*, detail of mural on pulqueria in Mexico City (IBA figure 45), and *El Charrito*, façade of pulqueria in Mexico City (IBA figure 46), all portray some variation of a pulqueria scene. Modotti's *Misery* makes the strongest social statement, however. The drunken, collapsed woman who lies in front of the pulqueria leads a life unfulfilled; the title and the image marry the feelings of poverty and hopelessness. Modotti's *Pulqueria Marionette* makes the same statement as *Misery*; the exterior scenes of a pulqueria and a drunken, collapsed individual are similar. Modotti had an interest in the signage of these pulquerias, too; the playfulness of the larger than life signs of the pulquerias starkly contrast with the real-life hardship that occurs as a result of what goes on inside those colorful little buildings (*El Charrito*). Generally considered a place to have a good time, the pulqueria is transformed by Modotti. Her photographs reveal its darker side - the loneliness and helplessness of the individuals who drink themselves to oblivion in an effort to escape the dismal reality of their poverty-stricken everyday lives.

Anita Brenner devoted an entire chapter to the history of the pulqueria and the negative effect it has had on Mexican peasants in *Idols Behind Altars*. She says,

The streets of Mexico are painted galleries . . . In every block, focus to the eye, the ear, the nose, the memory. An insistent place, with an air of ritual about it, and a genial waywardness . . . At the entrance (of the pulqueria) women sell piquant rich meats and sauces appropriate to the milky, acrid, pungent intoxicant. Somebody plays the guitar. Sandaled feet grow

heavy here; quick bodies drop in trance. Ribald and sorrowful, violent and whimsical, the drinkers sing . . . Pulque the religious institution and conscientiously administered native possession was affected by the conquest because it became a source of gold and a means of double-exploitation of the peasants . . . Fortunes out of pulque bought aristocracy for many immigrants. The drink was soon adulterated before, en route, and in pulquerias; was vulgarized. The quantity each man might drink was made unlimited, if his pocket and his stomach corresponded. "Peons are machines that run on pulque," hacendados have often said; contemptuously, but not regretfully. To the peon it is still a boon; at least the boon of escape in stupor . . . As a place of catharsis and solution of problems, of emotional and mental gymnastics, it is native. Fundamentally, as an institution, it is an artistic clearing house . . . The small town pulqueria artist copies his metropolitan fellow craftsman; but the metropolitan takes his theme and his imagery from the peasant.⁷⁴

During the Idols Behind Altars trip, Modotti and Weston were allured by the retablos and ex-votos they found in different villages. They often sought them out immediately upon their arrival. Weston said,

Hunting retablos: - the votive offerings to this or that virgin who has miraculously cured or saved the donor - has been one of our joys. They range in execution from the crudest expression of simple minds to exquisite and sophisticated paintings. Almost our first thought on entering a church was - are there retablos? Not less interesting are the dedications. For instance, a child fell head first into a pot of hot soup, but through the intervention of so and so escaped serious injury. Another, - a woman in the throes of childbirth feared the deliverance of twins. She implored divine help and as a result but one child was born!⁷⁵

Brenner devoted a chapter to these "painted miracles". She said,

The habit of making miracles having been common to every day and every class, it was easily transferred to new theological dogma, and expressed in a new art. . . These very

⁷⁴ Brenner, p. 173

⁷⁵ Weston, p.165

important documents are generally painted on ten-cent metal, usually tin. Canvas, being more expensive, is for very special miracles, or for particularly prosperous people. . . Hair, a bit of a garment, or a beloved rosary, may be supplied as further illustration. . . The drama in painted miracles is not ballet Mexico, not the picturesque candy-colored scene naively supposed to be Mexican. . . by an attitude rationalistically absurd, the purest truth is sifted.⁷⁶

In Modotti's *Rene d'Harnoncourt Marionette*, 1929 (figure 47), d'Harnoncourt points at two large retablos that hang on the left side, indicating Modotti's strong interest in the subject. Often ex-voto imagery is curious, and the two ex-votos that were photographed for *Idols Behind Altars*, *Accident in a Power Plant*, 1883 (IBA figure 48), and *Miraculous cure of Senora Carmen Escobar*, 1893 (IBA figure 49), were no exception. Both depict scenes where the person was saved. Modotti was continually drawn to retablos and ex-votos.

Modotti's *Untitled*, 1927, (figure 50), and an anonymous *Plaza, Mexico City*, in the Colonial Period (IBA figure 51), are compositionally parallel. The angle from above makes the scene more visually encompassing. Both scenes take place in Mexico City's main plaza, the Zocalo, with masses of people. Yet Modotti's photograph portrays a modern Mexico, the *Plaza* portrays Colonial Mexico evident in the wagons and dress of the figures. The raised, diagonal angle is stronger in the painting, but Modotti's photograph uses the same unique angle to convey extent of scale. Modotti photographed processions, protests, and demonstrations from this same elevated angle, which made it possible to photograph many people at once.

At Work

Mexicans at work was a common theme in Modotti's photography from 1926-29. *Indians getting fertilizer from the bottom of the canal at Xochimilco*, 1927 (figure 52), and the fresco

⁷⁶ Brenner, pp. 163-70

panel by Diego Rivera, *Refinery* (IBA figure 53), both portray Indians actively engaged in hard labor. *Xochimilco* in 1920s Mexico was an oasis immediately outside Mexico City. Its water canals, lush vegetation, and leisurely boat tours provided lazy Sunday afternoons for upper class Mexicans to “get away”, but was conveniently located near their urban dwellings. Modotti’s *Xochimilco*, however, shows nothing of the sort. Surrounded by water and vegetation, the two Indians work in the hot sun collecting fertilizer from the bottom of the canal. There are no leisurely boat rides in Modotti’s photograph, only Indians at work. To Modotti’s eye, everywhere she looked she saw everyday people working hard. This was enchanting to Tina – impressive almost. The way the two Indians move together with their long poles, the majestic quality of their sombreros, the way the light dances in the water in front of them, and the paradise that surrounds them, suggests an underlying serenity – a peaceful moment. Rivera’s *Refinery* depicts a similar image of Mexicans at work. Like Modotti’s *Xochimilco*, Rivera’s two central figures are faceless, crouched over their melting pots with long poles as they move in synchronicity. Rivera’s *Refinery* is not peaceful or majestic. The dark, crowded, interior depicts humans working like machines. The rhythm of their repetitive motions mirrors an industrial factory. Rivera’s *Refinery* is a more modern depiction of industrial Mexico. Modotti’s *Xochimilco* portrays Mexico at its finest: through the work of the Indians.

Mexicans at work was a theme used by many Mexican artists at the time Modotti photographed in Mexico. Modotti’s *Workers Mexico*, 1926-29 (figure 54), *Untitled*, 1926-29 (figure 55), *Man with a Beam*, 1928 (figure 56), and Jean Charlot’s woodcut *Pyramid Builders* (IBA figure 57), all glorify the hard labor endured by the Mexican working class. Charlot’s figures are stylized; their elongated form emphasizes their movements. The motion of the pyramid builders is like a domino effect in that they all depend on one another, emphasized

by the strong diagonals of the ladders and ramps, and the way certain figures are bent in a diagonal direction. That same diagonal emphasis is present in Modotti's photographs of workers. In *Workers, Mexico*, the diagonal of the wooden scaffolding intersects the photograph from the bottom of the right hand corner, to the top left, as the workers ascend the beam carrying their loads. In *Untitled*, the strong diagonal from the boxes and frame tied together, cuts through the middle of the photograph from right to left. *Man with a Beam* is angled looking upwards so that the beam appears longer and the weight of the beam intensified. All four images depict the arduous work of Mexico's working poor.

Political/Propagandist

The two portrait heads, Modotti's *Julio Antonio Mella*, (figure 58) and the Study for *The Revolution* by David Alfaro Siqueiros (IBA figure 59), are emblematic of the Mexican Revolution. *Mella*, Modotti's lover at the time the photograph was taken, was a Cuban revolutionary who had fled Machado's dictatorial regime and went to Mexico City. He was a Communist who spoke out against Machado and other regimes (he was gunned down in Mexico City at Tina's side by an assassin sent by Machado). After his assassination, he became a martyr to many revolutionaries. His face became a constant reminder of what other revolutionaries should emulate. Modotti's remarkable snapshot of *Mella* shows a pensive, visionary individual. The camera looks up to him as he looks away. In his face there is a fierce sense of pride and confidence. Siqueiros' stylized representation of the face of *The Revolution* has a similar facial structure to *Mella*. Although Siqueiros's profile is frontal, and Modotti's is from the side, the facial characteristics communicate the same message: intelligence and strength are cornerstones of the Revolution. Siqueiros' *Revolution* conveys a more solemn, inward effect. The figure looks down and the brow is furrowed as if disgruntled. *Mella* appears more of a visionary as he faces the future head-on.

El Machete was designated the official publication of the Mexican Communist Party in 1927. Modotti published many photographs in *El Machete* and translated articles for the paper. She was heavily involved in its production. Its primary goal was to educate the public about current events all over the world as well as in Mexico. It was a vehicle to spread Communism. Modotti's *Campesinos Reading El Machete*, 1929 (figure 60), *Worker Reading El Machete*, 1927 (figure 61), and Francisco Goitia's etching *News from the Battlefield* (IBA figure 62), all have strong revolutionary undertones. Goitia's *News from the Battlefield* and Modotti's *Reading El Machete* photographs depict the common person reading about revolution. The close-up, snapshot style of Modotti's photographs reflects the same closeness and composition as Goitia's etching. Modotti was also promoting the publication itself in these photographs. She also promoted the education of the poor by showing these campesinos reading when most of them had little to no education. The message: education was the best weapon in the Revolution. The lower classes reading *El Machete* indicates the way the Communist Party spread their message to the Mexican masses.

Modotti achieved a perfect synthesis of art and politics in her strikingly emblematic images of the components of the revolution. Her *Bandolier, Corn, Sickle*, 1927 (figure 63), *Sombrero with Hammer and Sickle*, 1927 (figure 64), *Bandolier, Corn, Guitar*, 1927 (figure 65), and Xavier Guerrero's woodcut *Emiliano Zapata* (IBA figure 66), are like posters for the Revolution. Guerrero's *Zapata*, the revolutionary leader from the earlier days of revolt (1910 marked the beginning of the Revolution), is surrounded by the revolutionary symbols that Modotti artfully arranges in her series: hammer, sickle, bandoliers, and sombreros. The addition of the corn in Modotti's photographs represents agrarian reform as well as the cornerstone of the Mexican revolution. The unity and placement of these common objects transformed them into symbols. Sarah Lowe says of this series, "The photographs' impact

relies on the powerful associations of the objects depicted as well as on Modotti's effective formal composition. By uniting implements of agriculture, music, and war, Modotti evokes the Mexican Revolution, and the images function as "revolutionary icons". Modotti achieves an eloquent synthesis of the formal and the political."⁷⁷ Modotti's symbols are like elegant still lifes that forge an immediate connection to the complex circumstances of 1920s Mexican radicalism."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Lowe, p. 32

⁷⁸ Albers, SFS, p. 181

CONCLUSION

Tina Modotti's life and art were deeply affected by the Idols Behind Altars journey she took with Edward Weston in the summer of 1926. Her art thereafter revolved entirely around social issues that pervaded Mexican life; mainly poverty and injustice. She became whole-heartedly dedicated to improving the lives of Mexico's poor. Her revolutionary ideas were also strengthened after the trip. After that, Modotti immersed herself, almost obsessively, in producing images for various leftist publications in Mexico City and throughout the world. She eventually spent less time with her bohemian friends with whom she associated so closely when she first arrived in Mexico. Modotti became, according to those who knew her best, a slave to the party.⁷⁹ The party ultimately dictated all her life's decisions.

Modotti was involved in many revolutionary committees, organizations, and syndicates. She edited, translated, wrote, and produced images for several revolutionary publications in Mexico City and abroad. She surrounded herself with leftist radicals in the late 1920s Mexico. She was socially and professionally immersed in the revolution; so was her art. In a review of Modotti's work from the magazine *30/30*, critic Marti Casanovas said, "Tina Modotti's virtue is in her great honesty. Her photography is free of artifice and trickery. Tina Modotti has made of photography a genuine art, and has placed this wonderful tool, which is in her hands, in the service of the revolution. This is perhaps her

⁷⁹ Albers, *SFS*, pp. 177-180

greatest achievement and glory.”⁸⁰ Although Modotti’s photographs were simple in their rather straightforward imagery, she always forced social commentary.

Modotti’s photographs all carry a message of revolution: the past, present, and future revolution of Mexico. Although the armed revolution was over, she and her contemporaries focused their art on continuing the policies, philosophies, and equalities of the revolution. In Idols Behind Altars, Anita Brenner described the essence of the Mexican Revolution and its long lasting effects on Mexico. She said,

When a Mexican speaks of ‘the revolution’ he refers to this period (1910-1921), but more often, unless he is speaking of a particular event, to the ideology developed during and after this. . . Revolution in Mexico now means loyalty to native values; means an attitude of facing mucky political and social messes and cleaning them radically; means mental honesty; and the highest respect for work. The cornerstone and yardstick of national value is the native: the peasant, the laborer. Your true revolutionary is likely to clasp more fervently than necessary, the heretofore “degenerate and ridiculous” peasant to his heart; and to kick spectacularly, foreign art, foreign systems, and foreign images, into the Gulf or the muddy Rio Grande. . . The new social religion is a burning anxiety in Mexico to be true to herself. . . The artistic expression of this national feeling occurred before, after, and simultaneously with, the armed expression.⁸¹

Modotti’s strong belief in *indigenismo* was the guiding force in her revolutionary ideas, eventually linking her art with the Communist Party. To Modotti, active indigenous communities exemplified the untapped power of the revolution that could be found in Mexico’s native peoples. Rarely did she portray people at leisure. She focused instead on grinding, scrubbing, and hauling wage earners. She became involved in anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, founded the “Hands off Nicaragua Committee,” helped organize protests, and

80 Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, Trustees of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Great Britain, 1982, p. 33.

81 Brenner, pp. 185-6

worked for The Red Aid beginning in 1925. She began translating articles for *El Machete*, the designated Communist organ. Tina befriended Ella and Bertram Wolfe. Ella was Russian born – they became stalwarts of the United States Communist Party, which Tina joined officially in 1927. Tina threw herself into those causes.⁸² She felt strongly about class solidarity and became much more radical and politically oriented. At one point, Tina's home was deemed the 'Salon of the Communist Party'.⁸³ Her address was the only one delegates of foreign organizations carried in their pockets when they come to Mexico. Modotti's life was devoted to continuing the Revolution in Mexico, and by the late 1920s, her art was the chief vehicle used to deliver her message. Many of Modotti's photographs appeared in publications by leftist radicals. Some had more forthright political imagery than others; but all had social significance.⁸⁴

In 1929, Modotti was deported from Mexico and sent to Germany by the Mexican government. She was accused of being involved in an attempt to assassinate the President, although she was innocent. In 1930, Modotti gave up photography entirely. She devoted the remainder of her life to the Party, working as a spy traveling throughout Europe during the Spanish Civil War.

Modotti's life was colorful: she transformed herself from a naïve, beautiful model, to a militant revolutionary and photographer. She photographed while she was in Mexico (with the exception a very few prints she took while in Germany until 1930), and eventually gave up everything, her photography, and seemingly her spirit, to the Communist Party. Her problem of life and art succumbed to the demands of the Party. Her photographic legacy is one of sympathy, understanding, and a search for justice to the Mexican people. She was an

82 Albers, SFS, pp. 144-46

83 Albers, SFS, p. 180

84 Albers, SFS, p. 182

artist who became so immersed in her politics, she felt she could no longer continue doing her art. Ultimately, her life ended tragically in 1942 when she died in the back seat of a Mexico City taxicab, of an unknown heart condition. She died at the premature age of 46.

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Tina Modotti, *Flor de Manita*, 1925
(figure 1)

Tina Modotti, *Geranium*, 1924-25
(figure 2)

Tina Modotti, *Calla Lily*, 1925
(figure 3)

Tina Modotti, *Roses*, 1924
(figure 4)

Tina Modotti, *Tepotzotlan, Interior of a Church*, 1924
(figure 5)

Tina Modotti, *Circus Tent, Mexico*, 1924
(figure 6)

Tina Modotti, *Crumpled Tinfoil*, 1926
(figure 7)

Tina Modotti, *Texture and Shadow*, 1924
(figure 8)

Tina Modotti, *Experiment in Related Form*, 1924
(figure 9)

Tina Modotti, *Stadium*, 1926
(figure 10)

Tina Modotti, *Open Doors*, 1925
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REZ

MASSSES

A Photograph by Tina Modotti

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Did God Make Bedbugs? | Awake, Negro Poets!
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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