Tina Modotti (Italian, 1896 - 1942)
Diego Rivera, Agricultural School- Chapingo, Mexico
Gelatin silver print
7 1/8 x 9 5/8 inches
#1596

Tina Modotti

Tina Modotti was born in Udine, Italy in 1896 and by the age of 14 she was supporting her entire family by working in a local silk factory. Modotti's father emigrated to San Francisco, sending for his family in 1913. Modotti was hired in the sewing room at the I. Magnin department store, but her great beauty attracted the attention of her superiors who then employed her to model the store's fashions.

In 1915, Modotti attended San Francisco's Pan-Pacific Exposition, where she got her first look at Modern art and photography. She also met her first husband at the Exposition, painter and poet Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey. At this time Modotti began acting in local Italian theatre and was discovered by a talent scout for the new silent film industry in Hollywood. She arrived in Los Angeles in 1918 and was cast in "The Tiger's Coat" and "I Can Explain". Through her Hollywood connections, Modotti met the married photographer Edward Weston, with whom she began an affair. Modotti was a favorite subject of Weston's photographs, but moreover he taught her the art of photography. She actually ran Weston's studio in exchange for photography lessons.

Due to the on-going affair between Modotti and Weston, Modotti's husband moved to Mexico where he died of smallpox. This tragedy and the death of her father made Modotti dissatisfied with Hollywood. Modotti and Weston arrived in Mexico in 1923 at a time when the country was in the midst of a social, political and cultural revolution. She photographed the Mexican revolutionary culture and these are among her best known works. Modotti became friends with Diego Rivera and other artists, writers and radicals within his circle and was greatly influenced by their Communist ideologies. Rivera, Clemente Orozco and other muralists asked her to photograph their works. The photographs in this collection are from these series. Modotti's fascination with Communism drove she and Weston apart and they separated in 1926.

In 1928 Modotti began living with a Cuban revolutionary in-exile, Julio Antonio Mella. Just a few months into their relationship, Modotti was at Mella's side when he was gunned-down on a Mexico City street by his political opponents. The Mexican government tried to implicate Modotti in Mella's death and although she was acquitted, her reputation was ruined. Mella's death and the subsequent trial pushed Modotti further into a revolutionary Communist zeal. Modotti became preoccupied with producing revolutionary art and in 1929 opened her first solo show called the "First Revolutionary Photography Exhibit". The secret police kept watch over her house and in 1930 she was arrested an deported to Europe. On the boat to Europe she became re-acquainted with a Soviet agent, Vittorio Vidali who wanted her to accompany him to Moscow. She instead decided to go to Berlin, but her six months in Berlin proved unhappy and she eventually joined Vidali in Moscow. Once in Moscow, she realized that her photography did not comply with Stalin's concept of "revolutionary" art, so she gave up photography completely and devoted herself to combating fascism by working for International Red Aid. Modotti basically became a spy and entered fascist controlled countries undercover to assist families of political prisoners.

In 1940, she quietly retuned to Mexico and was living under the name Dr. Carmen Sanchez. By 1941, she began to contact some old friends such as Clemente Orozco and was attempting to purchase a camera to once again begin her photography. Unfortunately, her life ended as dramatically as it began On the way home from a dinner party on the night of January 6, 1942, 46 year old Modotti died of a heart attack in the back seat of a Mexico City taxicab. Though it has never been proven, it is said that due to her covert activities, she was poisoned by the Russians.